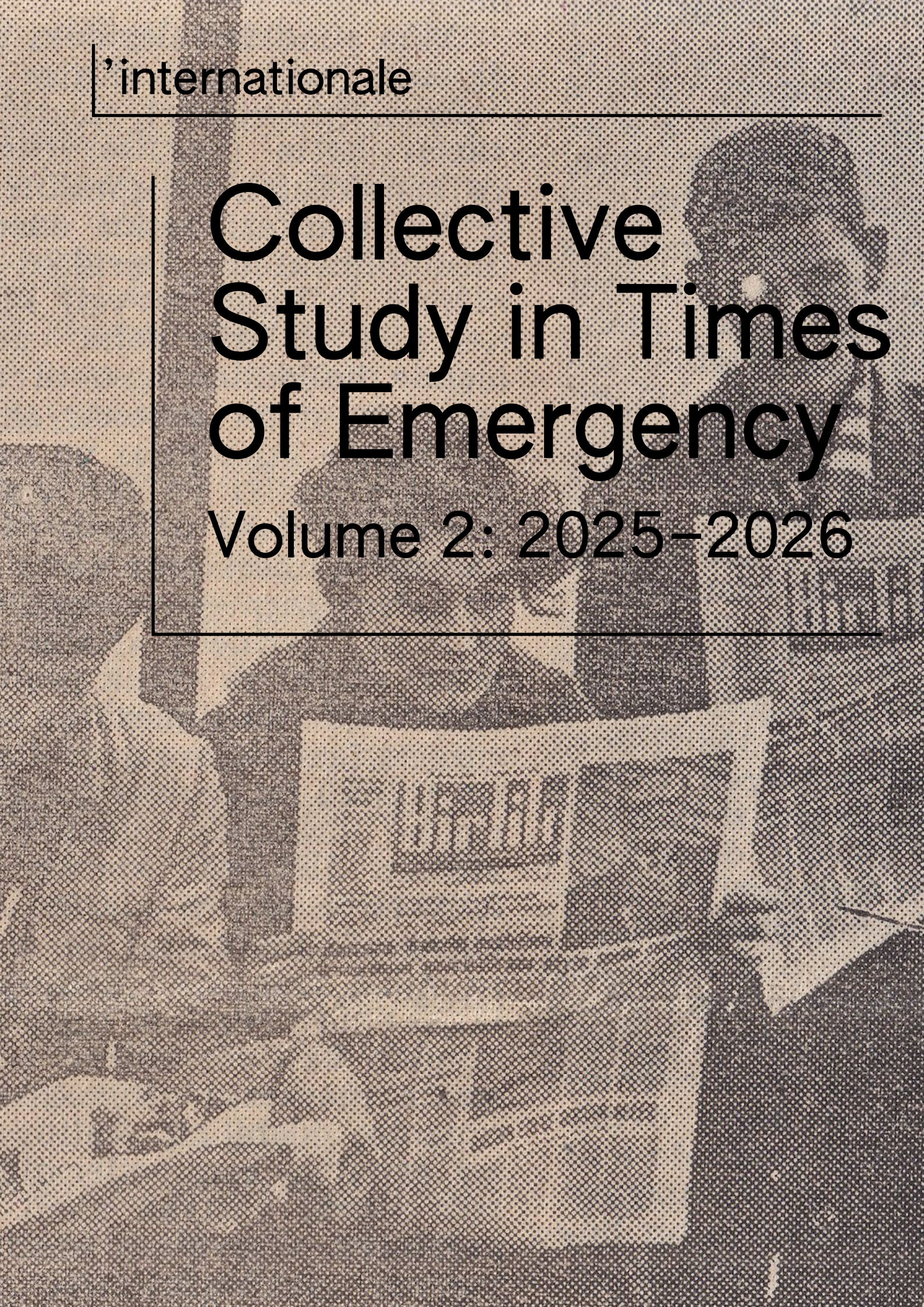
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Collective Study in Times of Emergency

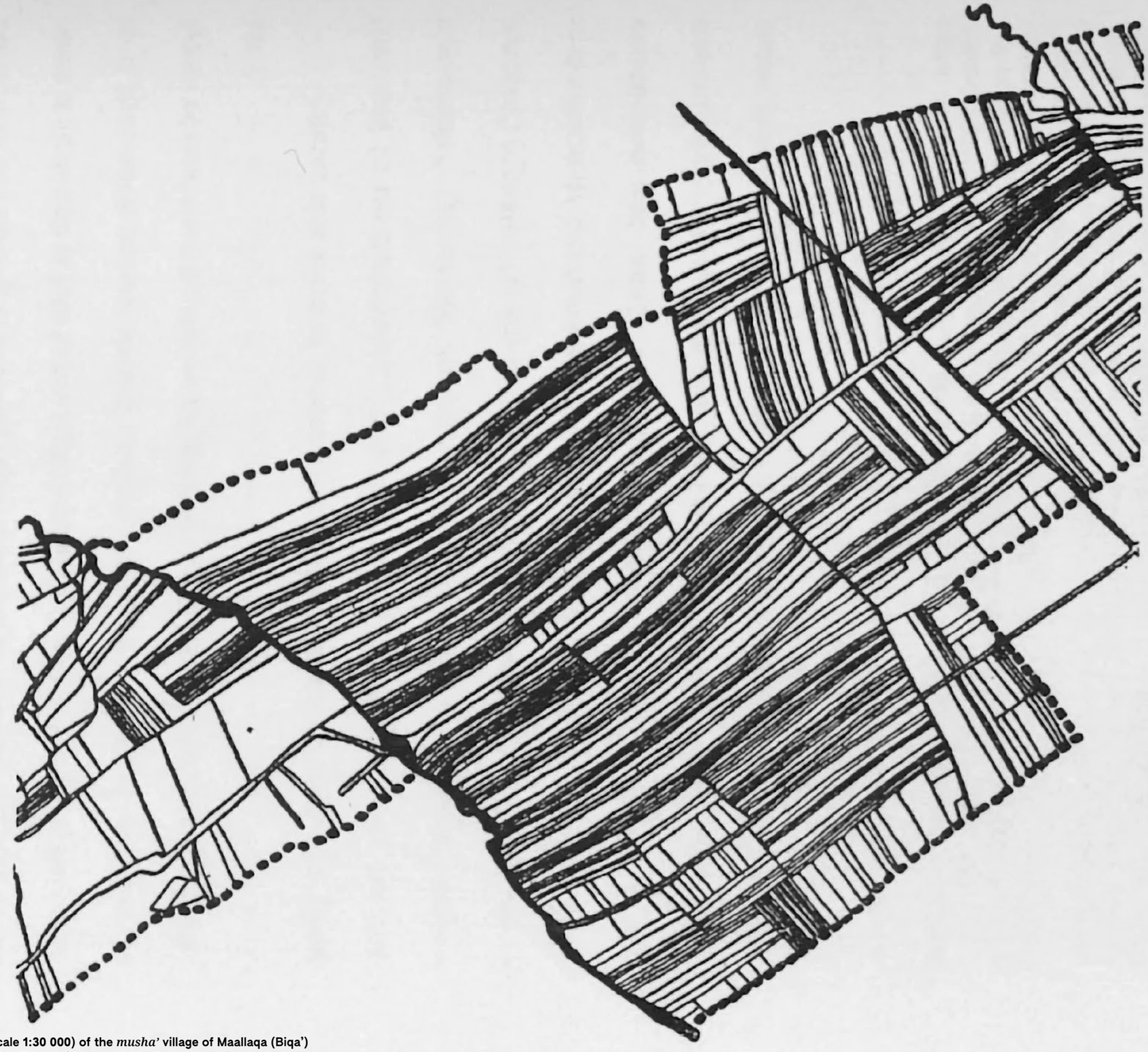
Volume 2: 2025–2026



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Collective Study in Times of Emergency

Volume 2: 2025–2026



Part of the cadastral survey map (scale 1:30 000) of the *musha'* village of Maallaqa (Biqa') taken from James Long Whitaker, *The Union of Demeter with Zeus: Agriculture and Politics in Modern Syria*, unpublished PhD, University of Durham, 1996

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Nick Aikens: It's 15 October 2026. It was two years ago that we recorded the roundtable for the publication *Collective Study in Times of Emergency*. This roundtable is an introduction – an orientation, if you like – for volume 2 of *Collective Study in Times of Emergency*. This book is the work of many, a constellation of seventeen contributions published by L'Internationale Online since January 2025. Like other recent LIO publications, we didn't start with a contents page that we then commissioned and realized. It has been a process of responding to what we feel is the urgency of the present conjuncture – a conjuncture defined by genocide and the need to rethink what it means to practise, articulate and claim internationalisms. Indeed, it comes out of a publishing strand which we renamed a couple of years ago from 'Collective Study in Times of Emergency' to 'Internationalisms' – precisely because we recognized the need to articulate the moment of genocide in Palestine with other struggles and contexts, both contemporary and historical. When we came to think about formulating this book, we had a long discussion about whether to use the frame of 'Internationalisms' or to revert to 'Collective Study'.

Bojana Piškur: I think naming *Collective Study* is important. 'Internationalisms', in a way, describes what we study, while 'collective study' describes how we work. It's also about what happens when we think together. So it's an important distinction. I am reminded of Spinoza and Deleuze and their philosophies of affect. I think this theory of affect is quite helpful here, because affects are the way that we are changed by what we encounter – by people, ideas, images, events. And they also shape how we act and how we relate to one another. So we have joy, which is a positive affect: it's an encounter that increases our power to act. And then we have the affect of sadness, which is just the opposite. Why am I saying this? Because it also helps me think about the present. Much of what we have been processing since October 2023 pulls us towards grief, towards rage, and puts us into some kind of paralysis. And this is, of course, sadness, the affect of an encounter which diminishes our power to act. Every political power knows this, because it feeds on fear, resentment and despair to keep established hierarchies in place. But solidarity, on the contrary, is the counter-movement. It's a joy – the joy of connection and shared commitment. And our collective study, study done with others, can be one such way. So it's a political practice that can be joyful in this difficult sense, without denying what we are facing.

Ezgi Yurteri: In her article, 'Today, again, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world', Françoise Vergès cited data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, saying that 'in 2023, the number of conflicts involving states totalled 59, the highest number since records began in 1946'. The same website registered 65 conflicts involving states in 2025, yet another record high. And the number of interstate conflicts doubled for the second year in a row, from two in 2023 to eight in 2025.[1] What does it mean to invoke internationalism at a moment of global disintegration? How can we address its promises and its failures? Are we in a position to do so? These were some of the questions we felt we couldn't articulate comprehensively enough within the scope of this publication. But there's also a methodological reason for the decision. This thread, or this publication, was not conceived as a book from the outset. It brings together material that accumulated over time, in response to both urgencies on the ground and the need to situate the present within a broader horizon, both historical and future-facing. It was also about being attentive to the conditions under which we operate: to whom and for whom we speak, how we allocate our resources, and what we can meaningfully take responsibility for. The conjuncture in which we published the first volume has been ongoing, so it made sense to return to a method that had already informed and shaped our work. Echoing Bojana, *Collective Study in Times of Emergency* is not only about what we study together but how we work together, how we produce knowledge, and how we build practices of solidarity and allyship.

Martin Pogačar: This morning I read through Yousri al-Ghoul's piece 'The Library and the Massacre: A Novelist's Testimony on the Destruction of Libraries in the Gaza Strip'. Thinking about collective study as method, what struck me was the metaphor of the library: having an open approach to a library as a living archive. In shaping this publication, there was a question of how to make it coherent. But its value lies precisely in its openness, in its being an unfinished project, which learning always is. In that way, the method of collective study resonates with the idea of a library – especially in the present situation, where books are being both burned and digitized, often hand in hand.

Bojana mentioned affect. Relatedly, we can also speak of resonance in relation to collective study. Resonance is something that comes upon us unprepared, haphazardly, and it always has to do with being affected: it's always related to effectuating a relation and becoming aware of our response in the process. It's always an adaptive transformation. Hartmut Rosa, the German sociologist, writes about this a lot. All the systems of surveillance, the systems of control, the systems of government try to suppress and exert ultimate control. But life is uncontrollable precisely in its unexpected resonances, just as in how we as listeners and readers come in contact with others as readers and listeners. And this is also enacted through collective study, because it is open and does not submit to a firm structure. I think this is something that we should really cherish and value, and move along those paths.

Sheena Barrett: The richness and variety of textures and the restlessness that live in these texts are a response to this time of emergency and grief. It feels important to have this range of writing in the publication, also at a time when so much of what we're reading reflects a general banalization through the excessive use of AI. Moving between these different modes of writing both situates and aligns you with different forms of solidarity in a hyperlocal way.

Sofia Dati: It's important to underscore the shift from internationalisms as a framework to collective study as a methodology which implies forms of attunement to each other and to parallel, interconnected contexts

1. **Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 'UCDP: record number of conflicts between states', 9 June, 2026, uu.se.**

of political struggle. The publication is a gathering of multiple ways in which solidarity is manifested, and translated, through words, language, poetry, images and sound. Collective study is about process: it is ongoing, allowing us to sediment moments of reflection – and of joy, to echo Bojana – instead of advancing a comprehensive story of internationalisms today. This volume of *Collective Study in Times of Emergency* shifts that axis and points to how we have been attuning to several contexts of struggle in the past years.

NA: Stuart Hall, the esteemed cultural theorist, famously talked of moments of 'arbitrary closure' where meaning and knowledge are temporarily fixed before reforming as the conjuncture changes. This publication is a moment of arbitrary closure which allows the expression of political and cultural positions.

Palestine and the genocide frame *Collective Study*, sit at its core. I both appreciate and grapple with how our address to other struggles and contexts sits in relation to the genocide. When we pivot to Manijeh Moradian's 'To Measure the Emotions of Others: Collective Mourning and Solidarity Politics in the Iranian Diaspora', to Ukraine through Slinko's 'The Object of Value' or to 'Mass Student Protests in Serbia: The possibility of different social relations' by Marijana Cvetković and Vida Knežević, it's not to draw comparisons, and it's certainly not to mark these as exceptional cases – as Ezgi said, there are tens and tens of ongoing conflicts that we're not engaging. But it is an attempt to bring contexts into relation, even if it is always and necessarily inadequate.

Many contributions were developed over time, through collaborations and programming. The project 'Critical Media Practices', where we partner with non-English publications, enabled a series of collaborations with the *Journal of Palestine Studies*: Yousri al-Ghoul's aforementioned piece ('The Library and the Massacre') and the deeply moving 'The Birth of a Dream and its continuation' by Sanaa Salameh, which celebrates the life and work of political prisoner Waalid Daqqa. On another occasion, Rana Issa was invited to the 'Collective Study in Times of Emergency' programme at De Appel, Amsterdam in 2025. There, she developed the work she had begun in 'We Have Been Here Forever. Palestinian Poets Write Back', which she subsequently delivered as a lecture at WIELS, as part of a 'Collective Study' programme that Sofia and I organized together. It was then reworked and published under the title 'Poetry Against Language Dioxide' – a hugely significant and substantial analysis of Palestinian poetry. We also co-commissioned Shayma Nader's 'Five Rocks: A Collection of Tales' as part of the WIELS exhibition project 'Magical Realism: Imagining Natural Dis/Order'. Many of these texts figured in different reading groups and classes. All this to highlight what 'Collective Study', as an intertwining strand of study, programming and publishing, entailed.

Organizing the material was a challenge. We settled on three groupings, or sections, each titled with a quote borrowed from a text. We begin with 'A Wish for a Year of Collective Liberation', a quote from Maddalena Fragnito's 'S Is for Silence', a beautiful letter written at the beginning of 2025 and the first piece that was published in this series. The section's subtitle is 'Bearing Witness, Testimony and Speaking in Times of Genocide'. These texts concern the genocide, the lived experience of destruction in Palestine, the protests in Serbia, and questions of censorship in the cultural field that have been so prevalent since October 2023. The section marks the conjuncture in which these texts have been produced, and it does so in very particular tones: tones of testimony, of personal experience, of encounter.

SD: This section connects back to Françoise Vergès's invitation to think Palestine as the centre of the world. It also speaks to a context marked by institutional disavowal and faces us with the question of how we, collectively, take responsibility for bearing witness. One of the throughlines in the section is censorship. Contributions like 'Dispatch: Institutional Critique in the Blurst of Times – On Refusal, Aesthetic Flattening, and the Politics of Looking Away' by İrem Günaydın, and 'Speaking in Times of Genocide: Censorship, "social cohesion" and the case of Khaled Sabsabi' by Alissar Seyla address the limits of what can be uttered where and in what context, and asks what the consequences of our utterances are.

Back in 2023, the gatherings titled 'Collective Study in Times of Emergency' started from a desire, or a sense of responsibility – to refuse to look away. How do you bring that gesture into being in contexts where utterance is subject to scrutiny, control and restriction? That was how the reading group was approached when Nick started it with Helena Kritis at WIELS.

NA: For me, it's incredibly important that the first text is Maddalena's letter. This was a letter that she wrote to her 'dearest ones'. It was written in Italian and originally published on an Italian platform, *Effimera*, a kind of New Year or end-of-year letter which we subsequently translated into English. In the letter she implores her colleagues, fellow cultural workers, to make themselves heard. In terms of addressing the cultural field – our allies, our friends – at the beginning of 2025, it set the tone for how we thought we needed to carry on this work. Methodologically, it's also important to say that this is a text that came sideways to L'Internationale, one written by a colleague, and that through this we also formed an alliance we didn't have before with an Italian publishing platform.

SD: Moving on to 'Trying to Read the Dead', for me, this section is significant in how it opens up space for the search for languages of commemoration and memory: reconnecting to the dead, reconnecting to the past and reinventing languages in which to grieve, to refuse amnesia. This is perhaps most explicit in Philip Rizk's 'Reading the Dead of Gaza: Musha' as mentality', from which the second section takes its title. In 'Poetry Against Language Dioxide', Rana Issa speaks of poetry and language as potential remedies: How, she asks, can we imagine and practise poetry as a tool to foster political imagination? Because when we're stuck in this space with no space for the past and no space for the future, what is also being atrophied is our capacity to imagine otherwise.

Refusing the banalization not only of how we regard our context and our surroundings is also deeply connected to the practice of collective study, part of how we tap into our collective imaginations in order to see beyond the confines of the eternal present.

There is a through line here with Shayma Nader's short-story collection 'Five Rocks' (co-commissioned by WIELS and L'Internationale), in which Nader adopts the form of the tale set in an imagined space to think through the force of resistance and of refusal in the context of enclosure, referring to the West Bank and Palestine.

SB: The pieces in this section do push back against the constant feelings of chaos and overwhelm that we inhabit, and which suppress the possibility of imagining a future. I think they also situate us in an archive. I'm thinking of Slinko's 'The Object of Value', where she looks to the history of Malevych's Black Square, threading a personal history through interrogative readings of understandings of the value of an object. Her text takes us on a journey across nations and states, from her deep family roots in the Donbas region to the visceral impact of her chance encounter with a map drawing by Kathy Prendergast in IMMA's collection, while on residency there. The relationship between the history of this artifact and the ownership of cultural memory in state museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the possibility that our transnational collections of artworks might support the holding of memory and meaning in more decolonial ways is threaded through this chapter. Our collective study too provides a space for this level of engagement across deep personal histories, large cultural movements: we can take a deep dive into the history of an object, our relationships to it, and its relationships – to place for example – as, in Slinko's text, to Donbas.

NA: Forms of grief, remembering and memorials are all here in this section. In 'A Date Palm Against the Re-Deportation of Parables, or Europe's Palestine Monument', Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman engages, through this very intricate, grief-laden writing, with Joanna Rajkowska's palm tree sculpture in Warsaw, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2002). It was the first time a substantial piece of writing had been done on this work, which is amazing considering it's been in Warsaw for more than twenty years. I'm also thinking of Rizk's 'Reading the Dead', of his precise yet poetic, moving use of words as a way to read, process and remember; but also, as his text points to, to think about the vitality of life and what it means to be alive: to have hope, to have politics.

SB: Particularly amid the proliferation of imagery and the overwhelming, massive weight of the genocide, there's a strength that comes through the solidarity of holding on to memories and experiences, traced through (personal) histories, with that linguistic precision and depth of feeling, collectively.

SD: That's what I find striking about this section: how all these different contributions think about what creative, poetic, sonic and collective forms can do. 'Until Liberation III', a twelve-hour listening session by the Learning Palestine Group, is a piece that invites activation; comprising diverse sonic archives to be listened to collectively, it offers the potential for collective attunement.

BP: I could say a little about the final section; I like that it refuses a triumphant story of internationalism. Even the title says it plainly: 'There Has Been No Peace'. So the question is not whether internationalism has succeeded, but what has made it possible historically and where it has failed. Françoise Vergès's text is, of course, key here: 'Today, again, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world'. It's important because it inverts the map: if we start from Palestine, then our institutions, our alliances and even our ideas of internationalism have to be reorganized around it. We have mentioned before that there are so many wars and conflicts. Palestine has become central to collective study not because it is the only site of injustice that deserves attention, but because it is the site where the gap between what institutions claim to stand for and what they actually do has become most acute.

Elsewhere in this section is 'Translated into Socialism: An experiment in internationalism' by Merve Elveren, Tevfik Rada and Sezgin Boynik. Referring to an exhibition we presented in Ljubljana after it was first shown at Salt, Istanbul, the text approaches internationalism as something practiced, rather than only declared, and treats translation as an experiment. I found this hopeful, because it reminds us that solidarity is made of concrete, patient work.

EY: 'Translated into Socialism' looks at the 'translation' of a Turkish-speaking community into the conditions of socialist Yugoslavia, as Sezgin, Tevfik and Merve put it. What does looking at these particular histories make possible for us in the present, at a time when present urgencies can so easily constrain our thinking, when apathy or cynicism can so easily take hold? That's exactly what the constant state of emergency does to our capacity to act, and I think this is why it matters to return to other times, other contexts: to remind ourselves that political orders and borders are historically constructed and that they are not inevitable. Not just to reckon with what's coming, with what's probable, but to envision what's *possible*, and try to cultivate those possibilities. This also feels crucial, simply to keep doing what we do: sometimes remembering or discovering other contexts can give us much-needed fuel or renew our sense of agency.

NA: I appreciate that we point out this refusal to champion or celebrate internationalisms. This is also in the subtitle, 'The Enduring Promise and Failures of Internationalism'. What these five texts point to, in very different ways, are the continuing contradictions that are at play. Manijeh's piece does this beautifully, addressing what it means to have coexisting sympathies, alliances and histories that need to be thought together, and how we constantly live with and have to negotiate contradictions. In the conversation 'Near East Far West and the Proposition of Middle East Europe', the curators of the Kyiv Biennial identify the need to think

the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the genocide in Palestine as part of the same conjuncture. And in the recent conversation 'How the Atomic Bomb Changed the World: A discussion on the geopolitical, philosophical and societal transformations of the nuclear era around the atomic bomb', which Bojana proposed, Martin, Igor Bijuklič, Gal Krizmanič and Alja Zore ask why this weapon of mass destruction, of planetary-scale ecocide, is not an urgent international concern.

MP: I'd like to linger on what Ezgi said about the constraints on our thinking today. It is crucial to allow ourselves to continue to think across ever-more strictly imposed, even if so-far invisible borders; but also, I would say, in relation to *shame*, which seems to be completely gone from political discourse. Although it is a constraint, it is a productive one as it forces one to reflect, to humble oneself in the face of the other. If in the past, after the Second World War, there was at least a pretence of saving face, of doing diplomacy, now that's just off the table. I think this holds for how politics is done in most of the world now. Thus, in a way, public discourse appears unconstrained, but it is *so* limited, precisely because it is unbounded. This appears to be an integral part of the contemporary technology of governmentality.

Recently I came across the work of French political scientist Asma Mhalla, who speaks about 'fluxocracy': we're drowning in information, it's coming all the time, so we don't really have the time to respond. We don't really have the time or space to think, which is crucial to how power operates. Merge that with digital technologies and artificial intelligence (in its current state of development), and this is utter devaluation of thought and knowledge. 'How the Atomic Bomb Changed the World' explicates this: that we should not really be talking about it as a 'weapon', because a weapon has a target, whereas nuclear weapons offer indiscriminate destruction. But 'we' cannot think the nuclear apocalypse anymore, the possible destruction that comes with the proliferation of nuclear (or automated) weapons. When we're not given time to think, we cannot really think about the past. And thinking about the future is affected as well. The constraint on thinking forecloses the horizon. So we're stuck in this perpetual present which is just a massive pile-up of everything that happens, regurgitated, reframed and remediated through news feeds and so on. When you live in fluxocracy, you don't have the time to think. You just have to survive.

EY: Putting these texts into groups retrospectively helped me, at least, make sense of what we are marking at this specific moment. I can see how they speak to one another and how they came to form certain assemblages, in ways that reflect shared hopes and fears. This also relates to publishing as practice, and to Martin's address on resonance – collective resonance, or intuitions, if you will.

SB: When you put it like that, Ezgi, I can see how it mirrors our curatorial practices of speculative exhibition-making: bringing together works from different contexts, some commissioned, some on loan, to sit alongside each other and create new resonances. This book does not need to be read in a linear fashion, and the reader can make connections as they see them, adding resonance to the rich textures already there.

BP: The important question for me is: what can a person reading this publication do after reading it that they could not do before? How did it change their ways of seeing the world and doing things?

I. ‘A wish for a year of collective liberation’: Bearing witness, testimony and speaking in times of genocide

S is for Silence

Maddalena Fragnito
translated from Italian by Sarah Barberis,
originally published on effimera.org

13 Jan 2025

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Every now and then, language dies.
It is dying now.
Who is alive to speak about it?
– Fady Joudah, 2024[1]

1. Fady Joudah, ‘From time to time, language dies. / It is dying now. / Who is alive to speak it?’, bostonreview.net, 2024

I’ve taken my time before writing this letter, which I’m sending today to my dearest ones as a wish for a year of collective liberation. It was 'too soon' a year ago - so they said - but now it’s too late. Too late to break the silence on Gaza’s destruction, and too late to pretend that Palestine can be wiped out from our collective memory. Our silence cannot cover up the past year: silence is the name of the year 2024, and the year stands as a testament to a world that chose to look away from a genocide aired in real time. The most brutal, relativised, and well-funded genocide, supported by Western governments and others. Those who sought to stop it through international law faced harsh and disgraceful condemnation, while the perpetrators were, and continue to be, shielded, supported, and justified.

Sooner or later, we will discuss this, when words regain their power and silence becomes unbearable, even for those who remain silent. We will talk about what we saw and what we chose not to say. We will reflect on how discourse was not just limited by the threats over our every word, but how there are no words to adequately express what is unfolding. How do you express 'horror' when words no longer shake you to the core? Another newborn dies of cold in the quiet of Christmas, his sister missing her legs, his brother destroyed by a drone made in our universities, his mother lost in childbirth, and his father killed months ago. No further words are needed.

We will talk about how history records even silence, because the support for the destruction of an entire population will leave an indelible mark. We will reflect on how we were all aware we were witnessing a catastrophic moment in modern history, with profound moral, political, and social consequences, both now and in the future. But eventually, words will reveal how the language to describe it seemed somehow lifeless. A death imposed by the forced use of vocabulary and prescriptive grammar: what can and cannot be said is a result of the repression by complicit governments and by our own actions. Thus, language also died by suicide, stifled by everything we didn’t say while turning away from the destruction of a territory, its history, its homes, its infrastructure, its roads, and its people. Have we even acknowledged the most brutal extermination of journalists in history? Or the trucks of sandbags used to starve two million people? Have we mentioned that no independent international journalist has yet entered Gaza? Or the ambulances that explode like popcorn? Schools, universities, cultural centers: nothing is left. Did we acknowledge it, or did we avoid it to spare ourselves from confronting the most contradictory aspects of our present?

We were labelled anti-Semitic, dismissed, ostracised, removed from our roles, stripped of income; we lost friends, faced assaults, lost awards and grants, were excluded from conferences, investigated by police, and sometimes summoned to court. Yet, we too shaped the boundaries of our thinking, constructing silence with our own tongues, drawing both imaginary and real lines between what is acceptable to say and what is not. This, too, we will address - the fear that is human, and the cowardice. How we absorbed the law of silence while resisting the power of the strong. A surveillance of language, which is also a surveillance of thought, perpetuated by those who accused and defamed the ones who broke the silence. Those who kept calling for a debate on words, using language to uphold speech, inside-out, outside-in, clapping our lips to make the world more understandable, driven by the need for a shared memory, to prevent death by silence.

And while it's clear how such a collapse of language demands collective reflection, Dr Hussam Abu Safiya walks resolutely towards the end, clad in his white coat. The year 2024 ends with this image that speaks all the words we lacked the courage to utter together. The silence that allowed yet another Israeli assault on Gaza’s health infrastructure - perhaps its last hospital - echoes in the pixelated grains of this image. Dr Hussam Abu Safiya moves through the rubble, like Handala, the crumpled child by Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, and like Handala, he heads towards a horizon we can no longer clearly see - will these ruins be ours? As we cultivate silence in the name of 'morality,' the inevitability of 'collateral damage,' the set tables, the 'right to self-defence,' the liberal etiquette, the 'democratic' and revisionist decency. While we linger in this polite silence, it quietly erases each one of us, forcing us to the insignificance of 'common sense.' We will speak of this eventually, when words find their strength again: about how we succumbed to the ethics of 'moderation' and the seductive complicity of 'calm,' about what remains of thought when language collapses, about what remains of the world when we confine speech.

Dr Hussam Abu Safiya walking away through our rubble is the last image of a year that will never be forgotten. A year in which a population, besieged for decades, confronted the world with the courage ignited by the desire for liberation, a way of life we have unlearned but can reclaim through words - our words - to assert that it is neither 'difficult' nor 'complicated.' Genocide is genocide, ecocide is genocide, colonial occupation is genocide, the destruction of social infrastructure is genocide, preventing a group’s reproduction is genocide, silencing all criticism by accusing it of 'terrorism' is genocide, the impunity Israel has enjoyed since 1948 is another form of genocide. The extermination of Jews was genocide, as was that of the Herero, the Kurds, the Armenians. From Turtle Island to Rwanda, genocides have persisted without end. One genocide does not negate another: it is always pronounced 'genocide' and read as a scream against the horror of death by the greed of certain humans.

Those who renounce language, therefore, both kill and die, because silence is a weapon difficult to master. Silence offers no protection, nor does it make our lives any less fragile or fragmented. Thus, these are some of the words we will speak in the coming year, to revive ourselves and feel truly alive together; to pose the questions that matter to us, those that

challenge first our very existence. What life is there without language? For whom and for what do we toil in silence? Is it worth navigating spaces and times where speaking is forbidden? To live again, for those of us who can afford it, means rejecting 'common sense' and the privilege of remaining politely silent, choosing instead to voice these words out loud as an essential act. To feel alive once more, and to make ourselves heard again.

The Library and the Massacre: A Novelist’s Testimony on the Destruction of Libraries in the Gaza Strip

Yousri al-Ghoul
translated from Arabic by Jude Taha,
originally published by Institute for Palestine Studies

20 Jan 2025

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I often dreamed of living my life surrounded by books, moving from one to another – diving into a dictionary then exploring an encyclopedia, searching through indexes, and skimming through countless references each day. A page here would captivate me, a chapter there, perhaps a cover or an ending elsewhere. So, I decided to create a personal library in my home, one that would serve as a legacy for my children, my neighbors, and anyone in my community interested in reading and writing. My journey began during my university years when I started collecting books, particularly literary works, as I embarked on my path as a writer. Today, I practice narrative writing professionally and have published nine works, including short story collections and novels. Many of these have been translated into multiple languages and reprinted in several editions. My latest novel, *Clothes That Miraculously Survived*, published by the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing in Beirut, envisions a devastating massacre through the interplay of two narrative worlds: a shelter and the memoirs of a former Minister of Culture.

My home library continued to grow, as did libraries across other homes and throughout the city. Cultural life flourished, with cafés transforming into intellectual hubs. One such space was the Cordoba Culture, which I established eight years ago as a platform for intellectuals and literary figures in Gaza. Similarly, the Shaghaf Cultural Initiative brought together university writers, holding meetings at venues like the Palmera Restaurant, Cordoba Café, Masarat Center, and the House of Wisdom. At times, it felt as though Gaza itself had become a sanctuary – a vibrant center for intellectuals seeking their identity through colors and words. This was especially evident in the Shababeek for Contemporary Art, a venue showcasing art exhibitions by both established and emerging artists. These efforts were part of a larger mission: to create a legacy, to affirm an identity that the occupation seeks to erase from the collective memory of the world. Yet surely, those who paint or write poetry cannot be erased – so how could those who carry a rifle to fight?



With children in the neighbourhood, Yousri al-Ghoul, Gaza City, July 2024

Several years ago, the occupation destroyed the National Library in Gaza City, razing its towering structure to the ground. With its destruction, the dream of creating a repository for both ancient and modern Palestinian works was obliterated. The site that once promised to preserve a rich cultural heritage became little more than a platform for displaying political party flags and leaders' portraits. Yet, this cultural devastation was not an isolated incident; it was preceded by a systematic siege on books. While Palestinians had anticipated restrictions on food, fuel, and travel, few realized the occupation would also besiege their minds.

Books were imprisoned, their circulation banned, and their entry blocked.

The global silence on Palestinians' right to read – a basic freedom enjoyed elsewhere – only deepened the loss. Libraries, stripped of vital collections, struggled to replace missing titles. The acquisition of new works, in an attempt to provide access to the latest knowledge and literary productions, became a desperate reliance on the internet and modest printing efforts, barely sustaining access to knowledge and literary expression.

And when Hamas assumed power, the Gaza Strip became besieged, enduring a series of Israeli assaults and military operations that claimed the lives of thousands of this bereaved population. The infrastructure lay in ruins, leaving Palestinians preoccupied, consumed by the struggle to rebuild amidst destruction, while the occupation methodically devoured the West Bank – Judaizing land, erecting new settlements for a people brought to a land with deep-rooted, native owners since the dawn of history.

In Gaza, Palestinians endure with very little. Internal political divisions have further marginalized the already neglected role of culture, which the Palestinian Authority allocates less than one percent of its budget. Islamic movements in Gaza have displayed indifference in cultural initiatives, even within their own institutions – an approach that, regrettably, mirrors that of official Arab and Palestinian governments.

I remember vividly August 2018, when the occupation destroyed the Said al-Mishal Center. A space that was once a sanctuary for dreamers – young people seeking beauty through painting and poetry, cultural evenings, theater performances, film screenings, and book signings. Its destruction reduced more than just the building to rubble – it crushed the spirit of a community and extinguished the dream of a special cultural haven.

Home to a large theatre and multiple exhibition halls, the Center was where we witnessed countless artistic and theatrical performances by Gaza's celebrated artists, signed our literary works, and collaborated with the Press House, which nurtured young talents. Yet, we found ourselves mourning not only the loss of the Press House but also its founder, the late martyr Bilal Jadallah.

Then the massacre came, extinguishing the very dream of life itself – beyond the dreams of writing or painting. The occupation deliberately

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targeted human existence, not just Palestinian identities, committing acts of genocide unparalleled in modern history. Even stones and trees were razed, leaving the people of Gaza grappling with a single, desperate concern: preserving their lives and families. But, even this modest aspiration became an impossible dream under the relentless shadow of planes raining barrel bombs on fragile homes in overcrowded refugee camps.

Homes seemed to lean on one another, bleeding and mourning entire lives, dreams, and memories.

Each fragmented ruin tells a story: That crumbled wall once held a photograph of a young man who lost a leg in the war. That patch of paint was chosen after a wife insisted on a shade of gray she admired in an old Egyptian film. Those scribbles on the wall belonged to children dreaming of becoming doctors and engineers. That tattered painting was crafted by a child who had won second place in a school competition on children's rights. That shattered frame held the bachelor's degree of a young man who fled south seeking safety, only to be killed by a soldier's bullet. And those scattered kitchen utensils were purchased after countless arguments between a husband and wife over a paycheck too small to meet the household's needs.

These images cascade, but for the ordinary, disoriented citizen searching desperately for food to feed their children, such destruction becomes a blur. The loss of the Gaza Municipal Library means little when survival itself hangs in the balance. Food – any food – becomes the sole focus amidst a suffocating siege in northern Gaza, where even animal feed had run out.

I remember, during that grim chapter in human history, how I joined my neighbour – the so-called 'thief' – to scavenge through the abandoned homes of those who had fled south in search of safety. We searched for anything – an old can of tuna, a handful of flour, even dog food.

Together, we went to the northern beach area, the ominous buzz of drones and the quadcopters overhead. We recited the shahada, weaving through alleys and the rubble of shattered homes to reach a house we knew. Entering through a gaping hole in the wall, we climbed cautiously to the first floor as artillery fire thundered nearby, targeting other 'thieves' scavenging for food for their children. My body trembled with terror, but my friend said: 'Don't be afraid; you'll make it back to your kids. You're here to feed them, not to steal.'

As a university lecturer and director at a respected institution, I found myself silently pleading with God not to let me die in the home of a family I would never meet. My friend suddenly shouted with joy: 'Come here!'

I hoisted sacks of bread and flour while he carried a plastic container of clean water – a rare treasure in Gaza, where Israel had bombed desalination plants, leaving the available water unfit even for animals.

We fled as the drones circled above, quickening our steps toward the displacement shelter in Al-Shati Camp. My friend laughed, and said: 'Don't worry, they know we're here to steal, not to resist.'

We returned victorious. I carried 15 kilograms of flour – a triumphant knight with enough to sustain his family for a month. Others died searching for food. My cousin, Ahmed Mohammed Al-Ghoul, was one of them. He vanished, his 31-year old body discovered only after the occupation withdrew months later. By then, it was barely recognizable, riddled with shrapnel and decomposed. Perhaps animals had scavenged his remains, as they had with so many martyrs of this genocide. Or perhaps the bombs had ripped him apart, just as they had ripped apart our homeland.



Looking at the ruins of the city, Yousri al-Ghoul, Gaza City, June 2024

Between my grandmother, who sought refuge at the UNDP headquarters and found no water to drink until my uncle placed a container under the air conditioner's drainage pipe to collect the trickle, and Gaza Municipal

Library, where people stole books to light fires for cooking, the culture of civilization and humanity crumbled. The beleaguered citizen lost faith in both Arabism and Islam amidst deafening popular and official Arab silence and a dubious global complicity.

Books no longer held a place amid the bloodshed. The mask of the silent Arab elite had fallen, leaving behind women who had lost their femininity, burning those letters and words to cook meager meals – the wild herbs we gathered from fields soaked in gunpowder, blood, and remnants of scattered missiles.

Amidst this, I returned home and found my library – whose collection had taken over twenty exhausting years to assemble – reduced to ashes. Despite this devastation, I tried to document the scene, photographing the books crying on the soil of a city drowning in its grief.

As I stood there, a group of children, robbed of their childhood, approached. No longer did they go to school, watch television, or play in parks and playgrounds. Instead, they worked, transporting food, gathering firewood, and queuing for bread. When they saw the scattered books, they exclaimed joyfully, 'these are perfect for lighting the fire'. They carried the books home with them, triumphant in their defeat.

I, too, left my house, wandering between locations in search of food. On my way, I passed the Rashad Shawa Cultural Center, once the largest and finest venue for grand events in Gaza. I stopped for a picture at its destroyed entrance, surrounded by memories of Diana Sabbagh' library, the vast halls, and walls that had whispered their connection to letters and ideas.

From there, I continued walking to the bookstore of my friend Samir Mansour, a cornerstone of Gaza's cultural scene. This bookstore had championed the works of young Gazan authors, bringing their voices to the world through participation in Arab book fairs. But when I arrived, I was confronted with a scene of utter devastation – a vision of hell. The books were reduced to ash, just like those of my friend Atef Al-Durra, the founder of Dar Al Kalima for Publishing. He had fled to the southern part of the Strip, leaving behind a lifetime's work to burn alongside the homes of his neighbours.

Between the books and libraries, a realization took hold among this Palestinian: liberation is impossible as long as the minds of the young remain occupied. The enemy knows this too, which is why they burn our books, kill the heroes of our stories, and even steal our identity – claiming our heritage as their own. Traditional dishes like shakshuka, falafel, and hummus are presented as Israeli, part of an erasure of our cultural essence. Yet they fail to grasp that the Palestinian spirit is indomitable. As long as our language survives, we endure.

Gaza's writers have turned to their words during this massacre. Through diaries and texts published in newspapers, magazines, and books, they recount the suffering. The Ministry of Culture's recent publication, *Writing Behind the Lines*, documents the massacres committed by the occupation, as does the book *The Commandments*, which I had the honor of supervising.

The targeting of Gaza's historical sites only deepens the pain. The enemy's attacks go beyond the present, striking at our very roots: the Great Omari Mosque, Qasr al-Basha, Sayed al-Hashim Mosque (named after Prophet Muhammad's grandfather, peace be upon him), the Byzantine Church, the historic Al-Ghussein House, Al-Saqqa House, and countless other irreplaceable landmarks, that cannot be confined to a single testimony. It is as if they are declaring: 'We will crush you at your roots.' Yet they underestimate the Spartan-like resilience of the Palestinian people – unyielding and enduring, as Hemingway wrote in *The Old Man and the Sea*: 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'

So how can the Palestinian, the rightful owner of this land, ever be defeated, especially now, as the world begins to awaken to the savage brutality of the colonial Zionist occupation?



Collecting wood for fire, Yousri al-Ghoul, Gaza City, Spring 2024

Not long ago, I visited Shababeek for Contemporary Art, where I often sat with friends Majed Shala, Shareef Sarhan, and Basel Elmaqosui, the founders of this important artistic space. Upon arrival, I found the paintings I had once hoped to adorn my new home with completely ruined – torn and saturated with rainwater – after the occupation wiped the area off the map during the incursion near Al-Shifa Hospital. Yet, the inspiring part of this story is that Basel, Majed, and Sherif refuse to stop painting, even in their places of displacement. More than that, they are teaching children to paint, just as I once did with boys and girls at the Asma School run by UNRWA, which had become a shelter after the school year ended without education and over 15,000 students were martyred.

I still remember Sumayya Ghazi Haniyeh, 16 years old – may she rest in peace – who used to come to school asking for recommendations from the library that still functioned at the shelter. She would listen eagerly as I spoke about literature and writers, soaking in every word. But Sumayya's fate mirrored that of thousands of girls in Gaza. She was killed when an F-35 strike obliterated her family's home. Even as I write this testimony, her body remains buried under the rubble. Sometimes I find myself visiting the site, as if to tell her more stories, longing to hear her ask me once again, 'Why didn't I become a superhero like the characters in your stories, Yousri?'.

In the camp, where rubble and sewage water chokes the streets, where the stench of decomposing bodies clings to the air, it's nearly impossible to pass a child who doesn't engage you in profound conversations about survival – discussing how to cook without wood or gas, when the city has run dry of both.

They speak with a startling practicality, paying little mind to the blood in the streets, the trash piled high, or the omnipresent hum of planes that has become a permanent fixture in our memories.

And then, they suddenly ask, 'When do you think the war will end?'.

Milad: The Birth of a Dream and Its Continuation

Sanaa Salameh
translated from Arabic by Jude Taha,
originally published in Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya (issue 139, summer 2024)

20 Jan 2025

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Walid taught me, through his patience and unwavering strength, how to cultivate the most profound connections and safeguard the most sacred ones. He showed me how to breathe amidst the polluted air of an era defined by national and moral decay, how to remain ethically alive, and how to lead a life motivated with meaning and purpose, even in a world that has reduced human worth to that of a disposable cup. Yet, for all I learned from him, he often told me that I had taught him something even greater – that love is as essential as freedom. In his Letter to a Companion, he described me as the ‘al’ – the defining article – in his life.

Our life together was never easy, Walid, but it remains unlike any other. Everything we have taken from this world, took from us, giving everything a unique meaning. Every phase of our journey is a story worth telling – stories we share with ourselves and with others. The crown jewel of these stories is Milad.

Though Milad and I must now navigate this difficult life alone, carrying only your memory, you will always remain our first teacher. We will follow your path and pursue your dreams. We will continue to dream, for dreaming is a beautiful act – it magnifies our strength to face life’s challenges and complexities. Many fear dreaming, confronting it as if it were a nightmare. But Milad and I will dream boldly, without fear, because the worst that can happen is waking up – ready to face reality, clear-eyed and aware.

I remember my first visit to Walid as though it were an extension of the visits I used to make to my father during his imprisonment in the 1970s. Back then, we referred to ten-year sentences as ‘short periods’, a grim concession to the decades our prisoners now endure in Israeli prisons. Through my father, I came to know the icons of the prisoner’s movement, those who spent countless years in captivity, like the martyr Omar Al-Qasim. Little did I know then that my life would become intricately connected to a prisoner whose journey would so closely mirror that of Omar Al-Qasim.

Walid, both a martyr and a witness, remains in my memory. I recall his unwavering moral integrity and remarkable politeness during that first visit, which I initiated to better report on the prisoners directly. Out of courtesy, I asked him, ‘What can I bring for you (all), Walid? Is there something you need?’. Without hesitation, he replied, ‘Yes, yes, please bring me the book *The Israeli Military Mind*’. From that day forward, books became Walid’s foremost request. At the start of every visit, his first question was always, ‘Did you bring books?’. Over time, after Milad’s birth, this question evolved into something more tender: ‘Did you bring photos?’.

My prison visits became sacred rituals, each one marked by meticulous preparation and lingering reflections afterward. The energy, hope, and determination that Walid infused in me were unparalleled. Each visit was divided into two parts: the ‘work visit’ and the ‘hope visit’. The work visit was filled with discussions of instructions, plans, and activities to support the prisoners’ cause from within the prison walls. I do not recall Walid ever

speaking only about himself or his own conditions; his focus remained steadfast on the collective – on the prisoners, the prisoner movement, broader political and national issues, and even the state of the larger Arab world.

I vividly remember visiting him in Gilboa Prison during the Egyptian revolution, after he had already endured 25 years of incarceration. With unshakable resolve, he told me, ‘If spending another 25 years in prison is what it takes for the Egyptian revolution to succeed, then I am ready.’.

As for the hope visit, which focused on Walid’s eventual freedom, it remains unfinished to this day.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. Together, we created countless memories, too many to recount here. Through it all, Walid remained steadfast in his struggle both within and beyond the prison walls. He dedicated himself to grappling with the most difficult questions and seeking even harder solutions for the Palestinian national movement. Walid continued to write, to nurture hope, and to cling to the unyielding dream of freedom and liberation.

Yet Walid was abandoned by the very national movement he devoted his life to, forgotten by those for whom he sacrificed everything. I still recall the piercing cry I delivered in Ramallah on May 8, 2023, during a speech commemorating the 21st anniversary of national leader Marwan Barghouti’s imprisonment. My words were directed at the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the national and Arab movements, and all supporters of Palestine worldwide. Today, I repeat that cry: I demand the release of Walid Al-Sharif’s body so it may rest in the sacred soil of Palestine, not remain imprisoned in the cold, oppressive refrigerators of the occupation.

Must the prisoner wage the battle for freedom alone? Must his family shoulder the burden of securing his release – or even just his body – on behalf of the entire national movement? How can we justify a prisoner languishing in captivity for four decades if not as a result of betrayal? What is more unbearable: the silence of the betrayer, or the anguished cry of the betrayed?

At that time, I stood before the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah and screamed, and I continue to scream the words Walid could never write and will never write – words lost to the illness, exhaustion, and betrayal that consumed him during his long, cursed wait… until martyrdom claimed him. My words were as stark as Walid’s plight, as the plight of all prisoners of the Palestinian national movement. As stark as captivity, as stark as freedom. As stark as martyrdom, and as stark as the martyr himself.

Walid joined the struggle as a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in 1983. He was arrested on March 25, 1986, and, in March 1987, sentenced to life imprisonment by the military court in occupied Al-Lydd. In 1998, Walid and a group of his comrades from Jerusalem and

Palestine 1948 officially joined the National Democratic Assembly Party, though they had been actively involved with it prior to that. Despite being abandoned by their national movement and enduring the depths of prison, these individuals never ceased their struggle within its ranks.

In 2012, Walid's life sentence was set at 37 years, meaning his release was scheduled for March 24, 2023. However, on May 28, 2018, the military court in Beersheba issued an unjust ruling, adding two more years to his sentence under the pretext of his involvement in smuggling mobile phones to facilitate communication between prisoners and their families. As a result, his new release date became March 24, 2025. And given the slim chances of repealing the Zionist law that prevents early release for prisoners like Walid – even for medical treatment, unless granted clemency by the state president — his family began pursuing legal avenues to challenge the additional two-year sentence and to request a one-third reduction of this extended term.

In the final chapter of Walid's illness, as the walls of his captivity tightened and the Palestinian national movement faltered, his family found itself nearly alone in their struggle. On March 28, 2023, they launched the 'Campaign to Release the Prisoner Walid Daqqa,' rallying the support of thousands of Palestinians, Arabs, and advocates for justice and freedom worldwide. The campaign's sole objective was clear: 'the immediate release of prisoner Walid Daqqa to allow him access to unrestricted medical treatment.'

Yet, this goal was cruelly thwarted. The racist Zionist judicial system denied justice, solidarity protests faced brutal repression, campaign content on social media was censored, and a torrent of malicious rumors sought to undermine their efforts. Undeterred, the family worked tirelessly to refute these falsehoods. During this time, prisoner leader Zakaria Zubeidi rose up from solitary confinement and submitted an urgent request to donate bone marrow to his brother-in-struggle, Walid, declaring himself a comrade 'to the bone'. Yet others hesitated, and tragically, all attempts failed.

The shocking, unofficial announcement of Walid's martyrdom came on April 7, 2024, transforming the campaign from one for his release into one for the liberation of his corpse.

Walid Daqqa was always a unifier, a relentless critic of wrongdoing, whether within his organizational framework, the PLO, or the broader Palestinian national movement. Today, we do not seek to overshadow Walid's voice, but we have the right to ask: how could he be excluded from prisoner release deals and exchange agreements not once, but four times – in 1994, 2008, 2011, and 2014? What did every individual and leader in his national movement do for Walid Daqqa, whose body remains detained alongside his comrades? What have they done, and what will they do, for the sick prisoners and all those still languishing in enemy prisons? How will they confront Walid's memory, knowing they failed to secure his freedom in life?

Walid wrote extensively about resistance – the resistance in Jenin, the resistance against the erasure of consciousness, and the resistance to the ordinary and parallel time imposed on prisoners' bodies. Even in his children's trilogy, he centered his stories on prisoners, refugees, and martyrs, yet he steadfastly refused to write about death. Instead, he wrote a play about martyred prisoners, *The Martyrs Return to Ramallah*. Time and again, we called for Walid not to be left alone, for his prophecy of returning as a martyr to remain unfulfilled. We urged that he must not end up like the characters in his play, whose spirits returned to Ramallah to inscribe on the walls of authority buildings: 'Free the martyred prisoners. Liberate the prisoners' remains.'

On March 25, 1986, Walid Daqqa founded a university unlike any other in the world – a university whose branches now extend across 28 locations in northern, central, and southern occupied Palestine: 19 prisons, 4 interrogation centers, 3 detention centers, and 2 military courts. This institution spans the entirety of historic Palestine, covering 27,027 square kilometers, unimpeded by checkpoints, as if one owns the entire land with no one to stop them.

Nothing could stop Walid – not even his martyrdom, which was unofficially announced on April 7, 2024. He remained steadfast, as he said to me and a comrade in a recorded call before the war of extermination on Gaza and Palestine: 'I will not let them write the final line.' True to his words, he continues his struggle even after his physical absence through three texts: a novel, a play, and an intellectual study, published in the special issue of the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, where he served on the editorial board.

We will continue, alongside those who carry Walid's legacy, to protect, amplify, and translate his vision into action through a precise programme that honors his body of work, just as Walid intended and as befits him and Palestine. Walid's spirit still fights, and his presence lingers, even as his body remains unjustly and unlawfully detained.

Walid Daqqa continues to defend us – his people's cause, the prisoners' cause, and the cause of freedom and liberation.

Mass Student Protests in Serbia: The possibility of different social relations

Marijana Cvetković & Vida Knežević

31 Mar 2025

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Mass student protests and blockades have been taking place in Serbia for the past three months, triggered by attacks and violence committed against students during 'Your Hands Are Bloody' and 'Serbia, stop', a series of civil protests initiated after the collapse of the canopy above the main entrance of the railway station building in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024 at 11.52 a.m.[1] The incident resulted in the death of fifteen people, including a six-year-old child, while two others were seriously injured and permanently disabled. The entire state leadership is being blamed for the collapse of the canopy, which was ceremoniously inaugurated in July 2024, with demands for accountability regarding evident corruption and attempts to cover up the case.

In the four months following this event, Serbia has witnessed the largest student and worker protests in its recent history, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets in cities and villages across the country. These protests have been fuelled by the outcomes and consequences of the twelve-year rule of the current president Aleksandar Vučić, and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), during which labour and social rights for the majority of working people have rapidly deteriorated. This period has been marked by the looting of public budgets, the collapse of public institutions and state-owned enterprises, crime, corruption, the sale and destruction of infrastructural facilities, and the demolition of cultural heritage sites.

1. Needless to say, the situation is ongoing, and developments have continued since our completion of this text at the beginning of March 2025.



Joint mass protest of students, workers and women, International Women's Day, 8 March, 2024.
Photo: Lara Končar.

The ruling regime has significantly amplified the sociopolitical processes that have been unfolding in Serbia since the dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia, the wars of the 1990s, and the widespread pauperization and privatization that persisted into the 2000s. These developments have been further accelerated by the imposition of neoliberal reforms. Tailored to Serbia's position as a peripheral European country, this sort of capitalist system entails a regime of economic and political pressures that enable neocolonial relations, primarily in the form of cheap labour by workers disincentivized to fight for their fundamental rights. Brutal appropriation of natural and mineral resources and the granting of concessions over extensive systems (roads, airports and other transport infrastructure, land) and political support to the local comprador elite (who also profit from these processes) to the public detriment, are all outcomes of this regime. Concurrently, the entire society has been plunged into poverty, compelled to 'accept' inadequate living standards. The consequences of these economic and social policies are evident in the fact that Serbia is the country with the most pronounced social disparities in Europe.[2]

Amid the prevailing sociopolitical landscape, the ongoing mass student and civil protests have successfully catalysed a transformative 'rupture', as metaphorically articulated by the renowned author Arundhati Roy in connection with the global pandemic of 2020. Despite our relentless efforts to restore the 'normality' of the past, this 'rupture' has unveiled a 'gateway to another world. And the readiness to fight for it.'[3]

For numerous artists and cultural workers, this 'rupture' has ushered in an intense period of self-organized practices, driven by social solidarity, resistance and a sense of shared struggles.

The political potential of the movement is reflected in the students' push to expand the front lines, persistently urging other, predominantly atomized, social groups and sectors to (self-)organize and connect. Under the slogan commonly used by students, 'Students in Blockade, Workers on Strike', solidarity is 'pumped up' among students and workers, as well as for all other segments of society.

With the support of the student body, the first general strike and day of 'widespread civil disobedience' was 24 January 2025. Tens of thousands of citizens, students and secondary school pupils flooded the streets of Belgrade and other cities. The students' appeal stated, 'We will not work, we will not attend lectures, we will not do daily errands. We are taking freedom into our own hands. Your participation makes a difference.' This appeal garnered a substantial public response, despite the escalating pressure of the ruling regime's attempt to exert complete control over the entire public sector and its institutions, including the management of key representative unions. For a day, numerous small business owners, including grocers, restaurants, cafes, bookstores, craft shops and other establishments, closed their doors. Lawyers, trade unions representing cultural workers, theatres, a portion of the media and numerous professional associations also supported the suspension of work.

2. See Mihail Arandarenko, Gorana Krstić and Jelena Žarković Rakić, 'Analysing Income Inequality in Serbia', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Belgrade, November 2017, library.fes.de.

3. Arundhati Roy, 'The pandemic is a portal', Financial Times, 3 April 2020, ft.com.

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Students were joined by pupils from various secondary schools and their parents, as well as by educators who suspended classes nationwide. In the interim, a call for a general strike was issued on 7 March, organized by students blocking faculties in Novi Sad. They urged citizens to cease work, refrain from shopping and avoid using hospitality services, public transportation, cinemas or theatres on that day, inviting them to join the students on the streets instead.

Despite tremendous pressure, threats of salary cuts and dismissals, and despite the teachers’ trade unions accepting the ruling regime’s offer intended to pacify them, school employees established new informal networks, such as the ‘Association of Schools on Strike’, through which they continued to support student demands while simultaneously articulating their own. Wave after wave of strikes within the education sector have persisted for the past year, flaring up in the autumn and intensifying in tandem with the student blockades. Having quickly recognized the significance of the educators’ struggle, the students unequivocally supported all the demands of education workers in their public appearances and announcements. They actively participated in their protest actions and gatherings and coordinated their actions with them. It is important to add that the vast majority of secondary schools in Serbia experienced school blockades and pupil plenums initiated primarily by final-year pupils, following the lead of university students. Initially, the pupils demonstrated solidarity with the students, and subsequently, inspired by this alliance, also extended their solidarity to their striking teachers. The final-year students were followed by other, younger, secondary school pupils, who, embarked on another, unforeseen trajectory of sociopolitical education: through practicing solidarity, togetherness, direct democracy, negotiation, and striking. Through this form of education, they gained a practical understanding and experiences of complex social processes that were merely lessons from textbooks in school programmes.

In response to the students’ emphasis, throughout their public appearances and announcements, on collaborative partnerships between students, pupils, parents, teachers and university professors, as well as all citizens, there has been a significant shift in public perception of the social role of education and education workers. Moreover, over the past four months, school reform has unofficially begun. This transformation has been achieved through the power of unity, solidarity, plenums, negotiations and mutual support among pupils, teachers and parents. In the process, a system of relationships and information has been established that has empowered individuals in education, even amid immense pressure, to feel that they are in control.





Mass Student Protests in Serbia 2024-2025. Photos: Vida Knezevic





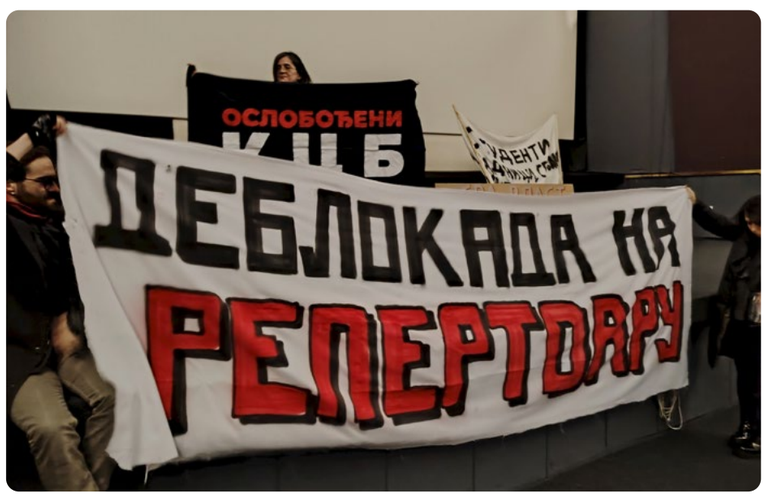












Mass Student Protests in Serbia 2024-2025. Photos: Vida Knezevic

'All Power to the Plenums': The spread of a mass student uprising

The initial blockade of an academic faculty commenced at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDU) in Belgrade. This action transpired following the attack on faculty students and professors on 22 November 2024, while they were peacefully demonstrating to pay their respects to the victims of Novi Sad. The blockade began on 26 November because the police failed to respond to the students' request to apprehend the attackers. Subsequently, the rebellion spread to encompass all public universities throughout Serbia.

A distinctive feature of the mass student protests is their organizational structure through plenums, a direct-democratic method of decision-making, involving all participating students, by a simple majority. The students' choice of this form of political organization is neither coincidental nor historically unfounded.[4] The organizing of faculty blockades is the foundation of their perseverance, mass mobilization, and political potential, enabling other social segments to join the fight. The students have effectively opened the door to self-organized practices 'from below': direct action and direct-democratic methods that were once neglected or confined to small, marginalized anarchist and radical left collectives. Today, the term 'plenum' holds real significance in Serbia, opening up a range of possibilities for radical, systemic social transformations as well as the political subjectivization of new generations who may be instrumental in implementing change.

This form of organization has allowed students to present an initially wide set of demands, subsequently condensed to an ideological minimum in order to establish a mass front of social support and struggle. Recognizing the ideological differences that have been hindering political activity in Serbia for decades (as a result of the regime's demonization of opposition and even political engagement itself), the student plenums have maintained a stance of noncooperation and disengagement with all political parties and organizations from the outset. The students continue to assert that their struggle is directed towards the realization of four fundamental demands, and the establishment of a social system in which 'institutions fulfil their mandates' as defined by the laws and the Constitution. With this strategy, the students have effectively neutralized the potency of the right-wing topics and prominent figures that have been tainting political and social discourse in Serbia since the end of the 1980s. At public student and civil demonstrations, issues such as Kosovo, Serbian nationalism, the 'endangerment of the Serbian people' and religious fundamentalism are less prominent. This shift has resulted in right-wing parties falling silent. They are absent from media outlets and public spaces, and there is declining public interest in their views – in other words, no one seeks their opinion.

Instead of drawing inspiration from the mass student protests that occurred during the 1990s, which were predominantly organized in a parliamentary manner (adhering to the principles of representative democracy) and featured recognizable student leaders (typically embodied in dominant male figures), the current students are inspired by the student protests from the second half of the 2000s. These include the 2006 student protests in Belgrade, which featured the slogan 'Faculty Blockade: Knowledge Is Not a Commodity' and resulted in the publication of the manual *A Short Guide to Student Self-Organization*, and the 2009 Zagreb protests, whose experiences and lessons were documented in *The Blockade Cookbook*. Over the past three months, the student manual has undoubtedly become the most widely read book among students participating in the blockade, providing comprehensive information on horizontal student organization structured around three fundamental bodies: the plenum, working groups and attendants.

As the governing body, the plenum of each faculty establishes its own set of specific rules of conduct and determines the working groups that subsequently assume responsibilities such as security, housekeeping and hygiene, strategy, goal development and communication, as well as various public actions. The attendants' function is paramount in ensuring the implementation of protests and other activities. Their mass organization and discipline serve as a valuable lesson not only for the political opposition, but also for trade unions and broader society, demonstrating the potential for effective collective action through solidarity and unwavering determination in pursuing one's struggles. The desire for justice, expressed as a call for institutions to uphold the law and 'do their job', has become a powerful motivator for thousands of Serbians. There is widespread public support for students, including donations of food and essential equipment to the blockaded faculties. Additionally, along their marches the students have been met with overwhelming receptions in numerous villages and cities, liberating residents from fear, anger, depression and political apathy. These encounters have led to cathartic experiences that foster (political) awareness and subjectivization among individuals who, for decades, had internalized the sense of being deprived of their voice (and right to vote).Recent research supports this notion, revealing that approximately 80 percent of Serbian citizens support most student demands, and 64 percent express support for the ongoing protests, in which a full third of the population has actively participated.[5]

'Students, Workers, Peasants and Artists – A Single Struggle': The implications of the student uprising for the cultural sector

As 'the student perspective' highlights the dysfunction of the general system and its institutions in Serbia, it also illuminates the systemic weaknesses of the cultural institutions that, for decades, have been on the verge of functioning, so to speak, due to the 'state of emergency'. In recent decades, the Serbian cultural landscape has been characterized by a profound disconnect between public cultural institutions and the creators of culture themselves, including artists and cultural workers within those institutions, as well as those undertaking various self-organized initiatives

4. See Dušanka Milosavljević, 'Serbian Students are Reimagining What Society Could Be', Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 20 February 2025, rosalux.de.

5. See N1 Belgrade, 'CRTA: Serbian citizens' massive support for students' demands and protests', N1, 19 February 2025, n1info.rs.

and independent cultural and artistic practices. Public cultural policies often obscure the true state of affairs, failing to identify critical issues that call for attention, or potent resources that require investment. Furthermore, an atmosphere of division and mistrust, particularly between the public sector and the independent cultural scene, has been first fostered and then nurtured by decision makers for an extended period. Additionally, the cultural sector in Serbia faces significant challenges in terms of financial, spatial and other resources, alongside concerns about the potential loss of hard-earned funding (and privileges), due to a tendentious misallocation of substantial funds to government-aligned structures and projects.

The impossibility of addressing these issues in this domain within the existing system of relations has led to pervasive decline in cultural life over the last fifteen years or more. The hierarchical decision-making and partocratic[6] governance in place hinder pluralism in politics and democratic dialogue on critical matters. This governance structure is predicated on the exclusive control and implementation of a single dominant sociopolitical discourse, a system that closely resembles relations of production characterized by private ownership, while the public sector undergoes a gradual reduction and neutralization as a social factor. Consequently, cultural-institutional actors whose resources, finances, freedom of speech and labour are progressively curtailed, leading to a loss of autonomy and inability to determine the programmes they produce and present, are rendered incapable of defending these institutions.

6. **'Partocratic', a term to describe a political party–based system of government, in which members of the ruling party are socially and economically privileged, and who gain further privileges by belonging to their party, as seen in autocratic regimes in particular.**

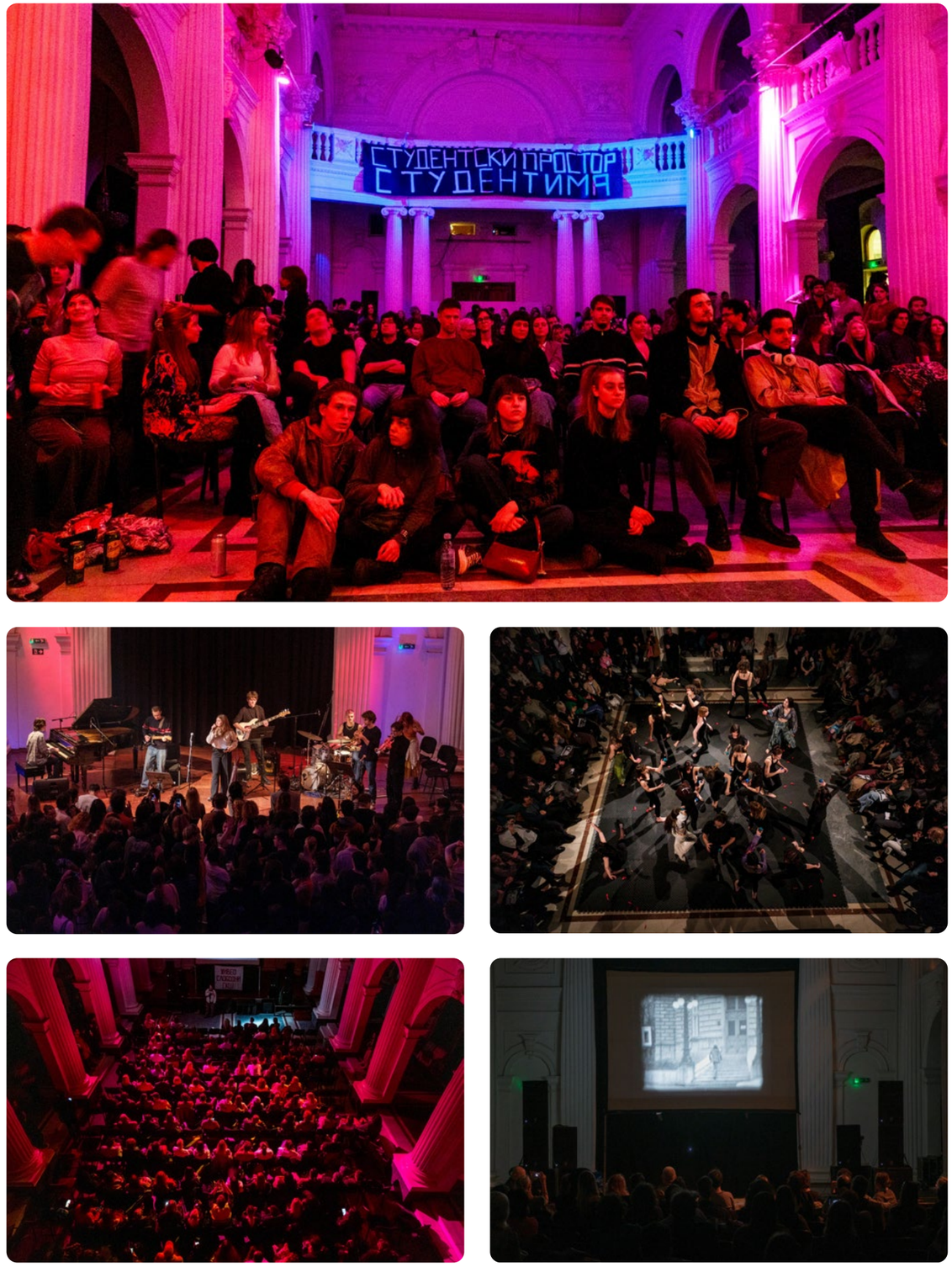
This state of affairs has further exposed the class inequities within the sector and revealed the extent and the consequences of the catastrophically articulated and even more poorly implemented state cultural policies, which have left many on the brink of financial ruin. Unacknowledged and invisible, these practitioners have long since become 'the dark matter' of the system, as defined by artist and theorist Gregory Sholette.[7]

7. **See Gregory Sholette,** *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, **London: Pluto Press, 2010, gregorysholette.com.**

Student Cultural Centre and Cultural Centre of Belgrade: 'The Student Cultural Centre for Students!' and 'Culture for All'

The prelude to the rebellion and blockades in the cultural sphere began in December 2024, when public theatres in Belgrade, Novi Sad and other cities staged a powerful symbolic gesture by ending their performances with bloodied hands. This action went on for several weeks and was followed by strikes and work stoppages, with actors and other employees of these theatres expressing unequivocal support for the students. Subsequently, large orchestras, including the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, the National Theatre Orchestra and the Serbian National Theatre, also joined the cause.

In early February 2025, while students were preparing for the occupation of the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) in Belgrade, once a vital institution for



Liberated Students Cultural Center in Belgrade. Photos: Knežević Strika.

youth and student culture, an informal initiative titled 'Culture in Blockade' (hereafter also 'the initiative') was launched. The initiative 'liberated' the Cultural Centre of Belgrade (KCB), one of the city's vital central institutions, by taking over its cinema hall (DKC), and organizing daily plenums.

The objective of the self-organized students who occupied the SKC was to liberate the institution towards critical thinking and self-education, fostering new encounters and exchanges of ideas. As they themselves emphasized, the SKC should serve as 'a welcoming space we happily return to and which is an integral part of our lives'. Originally, the SKC was one of numerous youth cultural centres established during the socialist self-management period in Yugoslavia, a direct result of the famous student protests that took place in 1968. Over the past few decades, the SKC has been transformed into an institution of the national neoliberal capitalist state. During the 1990s and the subsequent neoliberal transformations of the 2000s, an entire array of student and youth institutions, which had, in the former Yugoslavia, served as platforms for young individuals to engage in the creation of various cultural, artistic and educational content, became gradually detached from the fundamental principles upon which they were established. This trend included but was not limited to the SKC, which was not only subjected to non-transparent and irregular management practices but also struggled with the commercialization of its infrastructure and programmatic content. Situated in the heart of Belgrade, this significant youth institution began its operations two years after the demonstrations of '68, and at this pivotal moment its management was entrusted to the University of Belgrade. In 1993, a legislative amendment resulted in the SKC's separation from the university and its direct administration by the Ministry of Education. This shift symbolically and administratively alienated the institution from its intended constituencies, effectively removing not only the SKC's management and decision-making processes, but also its access and use, as well as the cultivation and development of student culture, from the purview of students and faculty. One of the primary objectives of the ongoing student blockade is to restore the SKC's affiliation with the university, thereby empowering the majority of students to participate in decision-making processes with the assistance of their professors. This request was submitted to the Ministry of Education shortly after the establishment of the SKC blockade in February of this year.

Inspired by the students' protests, the informal 'Culture in Blockade' initiative is also organized on the principles of direct democracy and plenum, and is open to all cultural workers, independent artists, members of art associations and employees of public cultural institutions. From the outset, the initiative has supported the students' blockades and advocated for their demands, while expanding the social front of the struggle in solidarity with educators, farmers and workers in other sectors, thereby raising the question of the position and function of cultural institutions and the need for radical transformation.

It is possible that this change might serve as a catalyst for a profound re-evaluation of cultural institutions and the role of art in fostering potentially different (more equitable) social structures, not least, a radical transformation in the organization of workers within the cultural sector and a critical examination of both content and production methods. It could also lead to the emergence of a new class antagonism and new avenues for struggle through artistic and political means – precisely the kinds of practices that Walter Benjamin ascribed to the role of intellectuals engaged in social struggles, their position relative to the proletariat, and the manner in which they are to be organized.[8] From the Paris Commune to the present, such connections between artistic and political struggles have been and continue to be integral components of the art of the Left, and are still evident today. These critical artistic practices authentically raise awareness of the ineffectiveness of addressing political issues solely through aesthetic means.

The history of distinctive encounters between Yugoslav art and politics during the long twentieth century continues to be etched in collective memory. Notably, this includes the interwar revolutionary social movement that emerged from the convergence of workers', students', women's and artists' fronts, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. This movement played a pivotal political role in shaping new, socialist social relations, following World War II. Despite the strong revisionist tendencies imposed 'from above', transgenerational memories persist of the socialist self-management policies that were practiced and experienced. Not confined to specific institutions, these policies permeated various aspects of our lives, including in schools, workplaces, local communities and other forms of collective existence. The integration of this knowledge of previous generations into the fabric of our society enables today's students to instinctively, affectively, spontaneously and intuitively comprehend the power of collective action.

In response to the 'Culture in Blockade' general strike, numerous cultural institutions at which work had been suspended were subjected to attacks by the authorities, including inspection visits and intimidation by the Ministry of Culture. The initiative has continued to organize protests in front of the Ministry, with clear demands. Of these, key demands include ensuring accessible culture for all by securing sustainable financing for the cultural sector, allocating at least 1.5 percent of the national budget and 6 percent of the local budget to be fairly distributed via a process including the full participation of all relevant actors and entities. Further demands include the release of complete documentation regarding the EXPO 2027 project,[9] and a halt to 'investment urbanism' and the destruction of cultural heritage in Serbia, citing current examples of illegal and unconstitutional decisions such as revoking the permanent cultural heritage status of the Yugoslav Ministry of Defence Building, and the case of the Belgrade Fair complex.[10]

In a public explanation, the initiative clarified that the KCB had been 'liberated' rather than occupied. This distinction underscores that the status of a public cultural institution is that of a shared resource, serving all citizens as a legitimate platform for societal engagement. The

8. Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', New Left Review, vo1. 1, no. 62, July – August 1970, marxists.org.

9. The megalomaniacal project of the ruling regime, which, coupled with the country's substantial debt burden spanning several decades, diverts a substantial portion of the public budget from other crucial priorities, serves as a pretext for these construction projects. They provide an ideal environment for corruption and a snowballing of schemes that benefit the members of the ruling group and their associates.

10. See Z.S., 'The fate of the Belgrade Fair: Relocation or demolition', Vreme, 13 July 2023, vreme.com.

insistence on the concept of 'liberation' implies an awareness that the goal of all struggles in various segments of society over the past few months has been just that: liberation. In this case, the initiative specified, the forces from which the KCB has been liberated include 'individual interests, capitalistic exploitation, nepotism, partocratic employment, exclusive market practices, and corruption'.[11]

11. **'Zašto oslobođenje?', Kultura u blokadi, n.d., kulturaublokadi.net.**

There is an alternative, it is right before our eyes

Since the protests began, waves of optimism and hope have continued to emerge, helping to unite, connect, influence and effect changes within the social system, which, in Serbia, is underpinned by nationalist policies and the privatization of all social resources. The result has been extreme class and economic stratification, dividing society into the comprador bourgeoisie, the silenced middle class, and the impoverished workers. Furthermore, values such as solidarity, togetherness and compassion have been effectively neutralized. The messages and actions of the student groups, operating as a united, cohesive and disciplined social force, could not fail to get the attention of those groups that have been opposing the regime for years, albeit with less success: educators, farmers, cultural workers from the independent cultural scene, environmental justice fighters and activists (against, for example, the privatization of mineral resources and lithium mining, the pollution of air and waterways, etc.), and unions in the public and other sectors, such as electric power production, where corruption and abuse of public resources have become evident. The students, for their part, recognizing all these fights, organized in support and formulated direct messages to encourage those groups to continue their struggle. Emerging from these initial alliances, the fight has gradually expanded to include other citizens who joined the protests and who, while they shared the students' demands, also brought demands of their own that were significant to their communities. Through this alliance, these citizens' demands too gained further momentum. A widespread feeling of liberation from the fear of the oppressive influence of authorities and their coercive tactics of 'ruling' has permeated the entire nation. In almost every municipality, for several weeks, daily protests have continued (and continue) to be organized, simultaneously addressing local concerns and fostering a sense of community, solidarity and faith in the potential for collective social transformation.

That these cohesive social processes are propelled by determination, resistance and struggle for systemic change makes the current events a particularly sensitive topic in relation to the policies of the European Union, the United States, China and Russia towards Serbia. All of these political entities share support for the current Serbian regime, albeit in their own ways and for their own interests, while being declaratively in favour of peaceful negotiations and against violence. The European administration, for one, appears to have been caught unprepared by the students' tactics and strategies, and equally apprehensive about questioning the adequacy and efficacy of representative democracy.[12] Furthermore, the EU seems more concerned with the realization of its economic and political interests than the aspiration of the Serbian people to liberate themselves from the corrupt regime.[13] Yet, the students' demand, and that of a growing number of other social actors, for the introduction into society of plenum organization and direct democracy has emerged as the most significant achievement of these protests. Through, and for, its consistent application and ongoing critical self-examination, a new generation of conscious and active citizens has come to be recognized. This generation emerges as one that has successfully overcome numerous constitutive elements of the neoliberal system, such as competition, privatization, individualism and uneven power relations among people and nations.

12. **See Boris Buden, '*Ne, to nisu ponavljači! Dvije slatke iluzije i jedna gorka istina studentskih protesta u Srbiji*.', Masina, 6 March 2025, masina.rs.**

13. **See Saša Savanović, 'The protests in Serbia are historic, the world shouldn't ignore them', Al Jazeera, 23 February 2025, aljazeera.com.**

Underpinned by the Thatcherite paradigm that posits the nonexistence of society and the primacy of individuals and their private interests, the systemic erosion of the social fabric has been imposed upon us since the 1980s as an unquestioned doctrine without an alternative. However, a reaction to this ideology is re-emerging, and, like a boomerang thrown from a peripheral capitalist *colony* to today's Europe, it comes with a powerful message: there is an alternative, it exists, and it is unfolding before your eyes.



Mass student protests in Serbia 2024-25. Photos: Lara Končar















Mass student protests in Serbia 2024-25. Photos: Lara Končar

Dispatch: Institutional Critique in the Blurst of Times – On Refusal, Aesthetic Flattening, and the Politics of Looking Away

İrem Günaydın

7 Oct 2025

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The title borrows the phrase ‘the blurst of times’ from *The Simpsons* (S04E17), where a monkey, hired by Mr. Burns to write the greatest novel ever, mistakenly types, *It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times*. The line humorously misfires while attempting to recreate the famous first sentence, ‘best of times, worst of times’, from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. It’s a joke, but one laced with accidental resonance. Referencing the Infinite Monkey Theorem – the idea that a monkey hitting keys at random for an infinite amount of time will eventually reproduce any given text – the scene absurdly collapses infinite possibility into a single moment of near-success, foiled by one misplaced letter. That tension between genius and gibberish, effort and error, is not unfamiliar to artists. Contemporary artistic labour often feels like typing into a void: endlessly producing under pressure, often misread, often rejected. Like the monkey’s almost-profound failure, the artist’s work exists in a system that demands legibility and punishes deviation. This essay takes that slippage seriously. ‘The blurst of times’ signals a fractured present – one that feels absurd, tragic, and numbingly familiar to artists navigating today’s institutional landscape.

The inbox fills with rejections, or worse, silence. Application after application disappears into the ether of institutional indifference. Meanwhile, the art world continues to applaud the photogenic, the digestible, the vaguely ‘urgent’ work that somehow avoids naming anything at all.

I’ve begun to think that rejections form a kind of shadow practice. They build up like sediment. They shape the rhythm of our work more than any exhibition deadline. And strangely, they sharpen something too: a clarity, a resistance. To keep applying in the blurst of times, knowing the system prefers the silent, the fashionable, the unlooking, is itself an act of critique. Perhaps to keep making after rejection is not only to persist, but to insist: that the work is not dependent on applause, that the only value is not in being seen, but in continuing to see otherwise.

In a field increasingly driven by visibility metrics, resisting the urge to be legible in the present becomes a form of artistic dissent. It opens up space for work that doesn’t yet fit, that lags behind or runs ahead of the institutional clock. In these blurst of times, to be an artist is to practice refusal, not only of what to depict, but of what to become.

Today, institutions champion works that perform urgency without holding any real stakes. The fashionable thrives precisely because it is non-threatening; it circulates easily, decorates, and affirms the institution’s self-image as progressive, without asking it to take risks. This dangerous mediocrity is not accidental. It’s selected. Curated. Funded.

We live in the blurst of times – where major cultural institutions choose to ignore the genocide in Gaza, remain silent on censorship (if not enforce it), and turn away from state violence. That logic trickles down: when an institution refuses to speak, it rewards work that doesn’t speak either. It prefers art that looks away. Even institutions beyond the so-called ‘centre’, those calling themselves ‘critical’, often adopt the same posture. Many strategically perform a reverse Orientalist aesthetic: narrating the ‘East’ as bruised, lyrical, and manageable enough to fit, never enough to disrupt.

Their fluency in institutional language allows them to frame work within familiar, grant-friendly tropes, trauma, identity, ecology, colonialism, solidarity, and displacement, but only in exhibition-ready formats. These themes don’t circulate for what they provoke, but for how easily they can be contained. Compressed into wall texts. Filtered into press releases. Art that fits the expected image of the Global South: poetic in its suffering, polished in its despair, composed to remain recognizable. These institutions mirror the logic of Western validation. They maintain their place by appearing to look. But they are not looking. Not at Gaza. Not at censorship. Not at what hurts.

There is always a fashion in art. It changes its clothes every few seasons: the anthropocene, the archive, the glitch, the healing ritual, the wound. But like any fashion industry, it demands surface. It wants just enough content to be legible, just enough pain to be moving, just enough political suggestion to be admired, but never too much. Never enough to rupture comfort or implicate the institution itself. Trauma, but poetic. Identity, but beautifully staged. Displacement, but with high-resolution images. 8k, preferably. The institution doesn’t want the mess, the complexity, the politics; it wants the performance of relevance. This is how critique is neutralized: through framing. This is how art is disarmed. The institution absorbs. It flattens. It selects the version of a theme that is most palatable, feasible, visually appealing, and exportable. And in doing so, it determines who gets visibility, not based on depth or resistance, but on how well an artist’s work can be framed within its own spectacle of relevance.

What happens when you do not comply with these frames? When your work cannot be reduced to a fashionable caption? When your voice does not echo what the institution wants to hear? What happens when you name the unnameable and stand with the silenced?

You face censorship, indifference, or rejection.

This is where rejection becomes more than a personal defeat. It becomes structural. Ideological. The artist who does not flatten becomes a threat, not because of radicalism, but because they insist on another kind of seeing.

The inbox is still mostly quiet. But maybe it’s not silence, it’s sediment. The layered remains of refusals that signal the work has not folded itself to fit. Each unanswered proposal, each curt rejection is not a void; together, they are a counter-archive. They mark the refusal to be compliant, the refusal to become fluent in the expected dialect.

And in this quiet, counter-archive, something holds. Not hope, necessarily. But continuity. A slow, stubborn insistence that there is still value in making the work, even when no one is looking, especially when no one is looking.

The following images are photographs from İrem Günaydın's ongoing series – unsanctioned, site-specific inscriptions written in lipstick on museum restroom mirrors, each beginning with 'The museum is...' to reflect, distort, and confront the institution's presence, politics, and self-image as an artist. All images courtesy the artist.



The museum is a bank — SALT Beyoğlu, İstanbul, 2025



The museum is gentrification — Arter, İstanbul, 2025



The museum is not İstanbul—İstanbul Modern, 2025



The museum is orientalism — Pera Museum, Istanbul, 2025



The museum is a brand — Sakıp Sabancı Museum, Istanbul, 2025



The museum is the nation — İstanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture



The museum is a battleship — İstanbul Naval Museum, Istanbul

Speaking in Times of Genocide: Censorship, ‘social cohesion’ and the case of Khaled Sabsabi

Alissar Seyla

18 Jun 2025

Introductory notes

This article is an attempt to make sense of the 'Australian' art system and its failures. Written as a Lebanese researcher, writer and visual artist currently practising in Narrm, or 'Melbourne', in 'Australia', it is the outcome of much research and reflection. What follows are my thoughts as I navigate a landscape where supporting myself financially through secure, ongoing employment is dependent on whether or not I self-censor and refrain from showing public grief and outrage at the ongoing genocide of Palestinians as well as the brutal attacks on my homeland. Because of the generosity of a few people in Narrm I have been able to maintain a connection to art spaces and have continued my practice through the darkest moments of the past eighteen months.

I am writing here for an international platform whose readers may as yet know little about the controversy regarding the Australian Pavilion at the 2026 Venice Biennale, the initial impetus for L'Internationale Online's editors to commission this piece. The editors requested a text that addressed the mistreatment of Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi by the national funding agency Creative Australia. These egregious actions raise issues of government interference in arts and cultural institutions, censorship masked as community safety, and a funding body's self-regulated definition of art and its purpose.

With the 2024 Golden Lion in Venice going to artist Archie Moore, a Kamilaroi and Bigambul man with British and Scottish heritage, there might have been an external assumption that Australia was in some sense addressing its colonial history through art. Sadly, subsequent events have proven the opposite: Sabsabi's mistreatment demonstrates a growing trend of censorship by Australian arts and cultural institutions to silence political dissent. I have chosen therefore to outline the current situation regarding Sabsabi before expanding on what this one incident might say about this situation in a settler-colonial nation more broadly. Then, rather than pretend that any of us are uncompromised in the complex systems we all move and exist in – rather than to attack or blame – I will try to write honestly about the spaces we occupy.

Khaled Sabsabi and Creative Australia

For readers unfamiliar with Khaled Sabsabi's mistreatment by Creative Australia, it is worth recounting the key events. Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino were chosen to represent Australia at the 2026 Venice Biennale in February 2025. For reasons that can only be described as political theatre, following a media smear campaign shortly after his selection was announced, the shadow arts minister and Liberal politician, Claire Chandler, framed Sabsabi's previous work as politically contentious in the Australian Senate.[1] One of the works referred to in the senate was *YOU* (2007), a multichannel sound and video installation addressing the brutality of the thirty-four–day war in Lebanon in 2006, which features footage of now deceased Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah.[2] The second

1. See 'Khaled Sabsabi speaks on the damage of being dumped from the Venice Biennale', *Full Story Podcast, Guardian Australia*, 2 April 2025, theguardian.com; Linda Morris, '"I do not stand for terrorism": sacked artist breaks silence, vows to fight for reinstatement', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 April 2025, smh.com.au.

2. See Khaled Sabsabi, 'YOU, 2007', Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 27 February 2025, mca.com.au.



Seyla, A., *Of this land*, 2023, charcoal & graphite on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.

piece, *Thank You Very Much* (2006), features footage of the September 11 attacks.[3] Though both works are deliberately ambiguous, Sabsabi was openly accused of sympathizing with and promoting terrorism by Senator Chandler and the Murdoch press that dominates media in this country.[4] Having received a call from Minister for the Arts Tony Burke, and fearing controversy, Creative Australia's board unanimously agreed to ask both Sabsabi and Dagostino to resign, just six days after their appointment.[5] The duo refused, and their invitation was withdrawn immediately. As far as I know, at the time of writing, they are still waiting for 90 percent of their respective fees as artist and curator to be paid.[6]

Chief Executive Officer of Creative Australia Adrian Collette explained that the sacking was done to avoid prolonged debate and threats to 'social cohesion', against the fear that political controversy might call into question the organization's social license and endanger its support from stakeholders, from within government and among the general public.[7] At a Senate estimates hearing in February 2025, Collette defended the decision as follows:

> **Art has always occupied the complex and often uncomfortable space where competing perspectives and social pressures intersect. Maintaining social cohesion is a national priority, and the issues we are confronting are being navigated not just by artists and arts institutions or organisations but by workplaces, universities and communities.[8]**

This statement is a non sequitur. Art's 'occupation' of uncomfortable space cannot, on any terms, have 'social cohesion' as its goal. Nor is sacking Sabsabi justified by the fact that the 'issues' he addresses are currently being 'navigated' outside the cultural sphere. Rather, it seems to me, here 'social cohesion' appears as a convenient alibi for censorship.

The origins of the social cohesion argument might be traced back, at least in part, to the key findings of the 'National Arts Participation Survey' carried out in 2019 by the Australia Council for the Arts, Creative Australia's predecessor. This affirmed that art and creativity can be positive indicators of social cohesion and intercultural empathy and that they can help build a shared sense of national identity.[9] However, the subsequent sleight of hand that essentially swapped an effect, or consequence, of art on society for its underlying purpose is extremely dangerous. Creative Australia's functions do not include any explicit mention of responsibility to proactively maintain social cohesion. They do, however, include other kinds of responsibilities: to promote the safety of artists and their artistic expression, to safeguard a diversity of creative practices and to provide community advice and evidence-based recommendations to the federal government.[10] These functions, enshrined in founding legislation and operationalized in policy, are supposed to be conducted free from ministerial influence. This was clearly not the case for Sabsabi's sacking. Collette admitted in a parliamentary session that, after Chandler called attention to it in the Senate, he had received a phone call from arts minister Burke expressing 'shock' over Sabsabi's work and questioning Creative Australia's next steps. Remarkably, Collette claimed that he had already taken all the actions Burke asked of him, in the minutes before the minister called.[11]

In the hearing, Senator Chandler asked why a thorough vetting of Sabsabi's previous works had not taken place and raised a 'conflict of interest' issue regarding the artist's boycott of the 2022 Sydney Festival, after it obtained funding from the Israeli Embassy – even though an artist's political views are not deemed relevant to the Venice Biennale selection process.[12] The chair of the Creative Australia board, Robert Morgan, said there was no ministerial influence on the decision to cancel Sabsabi and Dagostino's contracts, but statements from both him and Collette made throughout the Senate hearing suggest that ministerial pressure factored into decision-making, breaking their own 'arms-length from government' rule, while the board's decision undercut that of the expert committee that had selected the pair.[13]

It is important to add that the committee's selection processes are not above criticism. They seem to have changed recently to give Creative Australia and its CEO more power, and many have called for them to be reviewed.[14] My contention here is that the attempt to sidestep further ministerial scrutiny and ongoing media controversy by firing Sabsabi and Dagostino goes against Creative Australia's own founding mandate, aligning the organization not only with Australian government policy (which is in full support of the Palestinian genocide) but also with the questionable view that art should be confined to work that only has 'socially cohesive' effects. With a casual wave of the CEO's hand, it is implied that art should not stimulate thought or discussion dissonant to the political status quo.

Given the level of incompetence they demonstrated, it is entirely possible that Collette and Morgan are not aware of the implications of their decisions, but that does not mean others should not take their words seriously. The right to disagree in a democracy extends to artistic expression, and Creative Australia is charged with protecting the right of all artists to convey a plurality of viewpoints (political or otherwise).[15] For failing to do so, Collette has been called on to resign publicly. To date, he has been served with two letters of complaint from Creative Australia staff and a third letter, signed by over six hundred Australian literary figures, citing 'deficiencies in leadership' and fears of discrimination on the basis of religious, cultural and political views.[16] As Professor Anthony Gardner rightly observed, 'the moment [Collette and the board] were caught between supporting the artists and keeping an organization's status quo and choosing not to support the artist – that is the moment their positions became untenable.'[17] At the time of this text's publication, Morgan has 'retired' honourably and is leaving the board soon, while Collette remains in post.

3. See Paris Lettau and Rex Butler, 'Khaled Sabsabi, Thank You Very Much (2006)', *Memo*, 20 February 2025, memoreview.net.

4. See Cecelia Cmielewski, '"A shameful call by Creative Australia": the arts community reacts to Khaled Sabsabi being dropped from the Venice Biennale', *The Conversation*, 14 February 2025, theconversation.com.

5. Ibid.

6. See Elizabeth Fortescue, 'In a rare interview, Khaled Sabsabi speaks of his "devastation" after being dropped as Australia's representative at the 2026 Venice Biennale', *The Art Newspaper*, 3 April 2025, theartnewspaper.com.

7. Penelope Benton, 'Media Release: NAVA condemns Creative Australia's failure to defend artistic freedom', National Association for the Visual Arts, 26 February 2025, visualarts.net.au; see also Laura Tingle, 'The politics of the Creative Australia controversy reveal a trend that ultimately weakens institutions', *ABC News*, 1 March 2025, abc.net.au.

8. Adrian Collette, Proof Committee Hansard, Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates (Public), Canberra, Australia, 25 February 2025, p. 100, parlinfo.aph.gov.au.

9. See 'Spotlight – Creating Our Future: social cohesion', Australia Council for the Arts, 2020, creative.gov.au; Pino Migliorino, 'The arts and cultural diversity – commentary by Pino Migliorino', in *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, Australia Council for the Arts, 2017, p. 50, creative.gov.au.

10. See Creative Australia Act 2023, no. 24, classic. austlii.edu.au.

11. See Collette, Proof Committee Hansard, Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates, p. 101; Kelly Burke, 'Venice Biennale pavilion could be empty, Creative Australia chief tells senators', *Guardian Australia*, 26 February 2025, theguardian.com.

12. Collette, Proof Committee Hansard, Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates, pp. 106–07; see also Nick Galvin, 'High-profile figures join Sydney Festival boycott over Israeli funding', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 December 2021, smh.com.au.

13. 'About us: Creative Australia is for the artists, Creative Australia is for us all', Creative Australia, 24 August 2023, creative.gov.au; see also Collette, Proof Committee Hansard, Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates, p. 111.

14. See Penelope Benton, 'Media Release: NAVA's response to Creative Australia's governance review announcement', National Association for the Visual Arts, 17 March 2025, visualarts.net.au; Josh Milani, Anthony Gardner, Louise Adler, Ghassan Hage and Azza Zein, 'Public Forum: Who's Afraid of Khaled Sabsabi?', video, *Memo*, no. 3, Autumn/Winter 2025, memoreview.net.

15. See 'A Creative Sector that Reflects Us All: Recommendations for the 2025 Federal Election', Diversity Arts Australia, 30 April 2025, diversityarts.org.au.

16. Kelly Burke, 'Embattled Creative Australia boss served angry letters from staff and 600 literary figures amid Sabsabi fallout", *Guardian Australia*, 17 April 2025, theguardian.com.

17. Milani et al., 'Public Forum: Who's Afraid of Khaled Sabsabi?', video, 37:48.

Censorship, diversity and racism policy

Even with the latter's resignation and disgrace, and the reinstatement of Sabsabi and Dagostino, the fundamental need for reflection and action would remain urgent. Creative Australia's blatantly racist attack on Sabsabi is not an isolated incident. Calling it out without examining the wider context in which it occurred clouds the deeper issue of structural racism in Australian arts and cultural institutions at large. Speaking at a recent event in Narrm, Louise Adler described the long history of political meddling and racism in the arts, including the way that the Zionist lobby in Australia has successfully 'turned the focus from ethnic cleansing in Palestine to a wildly exaggerated campaign against antisemitism'.[18] Due to this shift, the view of Sabsabi's work as compelling and socially engaged flipped very quickly to that of its being 'divisive' and 'antisemitic'.[19] The Creative Australia debacle came about at a time when institutions fear to appear to be affiliated with individuals, particularly Arab Australians, who engage with politics either through their work or in their private lives.[20] Thus, by Collette's own admission, due to the obstacles, stated above, that Sabsabi has to face as an Arab-Australian artist, the fear was that Creative Australia would suffer reputational damage as a result of honouring his contract.[21]

The sacking of Sabsabi was preceded by pressure from government and interest groups that resulted in cultural censorship and was followed by further silencing and erasure: the initial, though later rescinded, postponement of Sabsabi's show at the Monash University Museum of Art a few weeks after he was sacked is a case in point.[22] Other actions, such as the State Library of Queensland stripping First Nations author, K.A. Ren Wyld, of a 15,000 dollar black&write! fellowship for sharing Gaza-related content on social media (May 2025),[23] censorship of the Palestinian flag at the National Gallery of Australia (February 2025),[24] and the firing of four pro-Palestinian writers from the State Library of Victoria (March 2024) under the guise of cultural and child safety policy,[25] reveal the efforts to eradicate voices that refuse to remain silent in the face of Palestinian genocide.

Around the same time that Sabsabi and Dagostino were fired, Universities Australia adopted a definition of antisemitism (for application within the organization and with regard to their member universities' racism policies) based on that of the contentious International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which conflates both criticism of Israel and support for Palestinians with antisemitism.[26] The definition, which was adopted without adequate consultation with the National Tertiary Education Union, university students or staff, posits that while criticism of the Israeli government may not be necessarily antisemitic in itself, 'criticism of Israel can be antisemitic when it is grounded in harmful tropes, stereotypes or assumptions and when it calls for the elimination of the State of Israel or all Jews or when it holds Jewish individuals or communities responsible for Israel's actions'.[27] The adoption of this deliberately ambiguous definition is politically motivated, intended to silence students, academics and other university staff engaged in pro-Palestinian debate and activism.[28] It is particularly shameful to censor community grief when Palestinian and Arab lives and deaths are being treated with no small amount of disrespect by politicians and the mainstream media.

Professor Ghassan Hage, himself fired for speaking up against Israeli violence in Gaza,[29] is one of the only Australian intellectuals to have clearly articulated that it is the 'logic of war' to silence Palestinians and those who are pro-Palestinian, and that this is being done in the name of so-called 'diversity policy'.[30] In a media release opposing the IHRA definition, The Jewish Council of Australia has condemned its adoption as 'dangerous', stating, 'it threatens academic freedom, will have a chilling effect on the legitimate criticism of Israel, and risks institutionalizing anti-Palestinian racism'.[31] In spite of this, it has now become the only form of racism and discrimination policy that is included in the Higher Education Standards Framework, which is charged with protecting the safety and wellbeing of under-represented and disadvantaged groups in institutional policies and practices.[32]

Political neutrality and community safety

The root of these exclusionary guidelines is not in fact 'social cohesion' but rather the older, liberal doctrine of institutional 'neutrality' towards art and culture. History tells us that adopting a position of neutrality is itself a political position. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in the face of an ideologically bipolar world, formed a united front of postcolonial states working towards decolonization, anti-racism and noninvolvement in global power conflicts, being thus opposed to apartheid, imperial expansionism and Zionism.[33] Based on principles of transnational solidarity and the integrity of state and territorial sovereignty, member nations sought to focus on their own national development concerns while taking a position of neutrality towards and noninterference in the matters of other states.[34] However complicated this was at the time, the NAM alliance was clearly framed to strengthen solidarity in and between developing nations while challenging the new forms of colonialism being developed in 'the west'. In a world order based on western hegemony, NAM maintained a position of both neutrality and anti-racism.

After the collapse of the bipolar world order around 1990, the notion of neutrality came to be linked to ideas of artistic (not political) autonomy, as museums and art institutions began to proclaim their own neutrality as a way of giving voice to artists.[35] Disconnected from demands for broad social and economic justice, this new neutrality was not de- but re-politicized in favour of the status quo and the interconnected systems rigged to the advantage of countries in the Global North.[36] The claim to neutrality as an apolitical position in the art field today should therefore be understood as a misnomer that is bound to (and powered by) ideologies of colonialism and exploitation of the Global South.

In the context of Australian arts and cultural institution policies, 'neutrality' is used to enforce a veneer of impartiality, supposedly not favouring one

18. Memo Review (@memo_review), 'Louise Adler speaks at Who's Afraid of Khaled Sabsabi?', Instagram Reel, 11 April 2025, instagram.com.

19. Terry Smith, 'Art Against Contemporary Autocracies—Australia Included?', *Memo Review*, no. 3, Autumn/Winter 2025, memoreview.net.

20. See Maya Pontone, 'Why Did Australia Abruptly Ditch Its Venice Biennial Artist and Curator?', *Hyperallergic*, 13 February 2025, hyperallergic.com.

21. See Collette, Proof Committee Hansard, Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Estimates, p. 101.

22. See Penelope Benton and Ben Eltham, 'Media release: Monash University's postponement of exhibition featuring Khaled Sabsabi undermines artistic and academic freedom', National Association for the Visual Arts, 27 March 2025, visualarts.net.au.

23. See Kelly Burke, 'First Nations writer speaks out after being stripped of $15,000 State Library of Queensland award over Gaza tweet', *Guardian Australia*, 21 May 2025, theguardian.com.

24. See 'AFIC Condemns the National Gallery of Australia's Censorship of Palestinian Art', Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, 20 February 2025, afic.com.au.

25. See Chris Dite, Jinghua Qian and Omar Sakr, 'In Australia, Pro-Palestinian writers are defying censorship', *Jacobin*, 28 March 2024, jacobin.com.

26. See Jan Deckers and Jonathan Coulter, 'What Is Wrong with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's Definition of Antisemitism?', *Res Publica*, 2022, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 733–52, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov; 'Media Release: Statement on racism', Universities Australia, 27 February 2025, universitiesaustralia.edu.au; 'Jewish Council of Australia slams universities' adoption of dangerous, politicised and unworkable antisemitism definition', Jewish Council Australia, 26 January 2025, jewishcouncil.com.au.

27. 'NTEU statement on Universities Australia definition of antisemitism', National Tertiary Education Union, nteu.au; see also 'Jewish Council of Australia slams universities' adoption of dangerous, politicised and unworkable antisemitism definition'.

28. See 'Alex McKinnon, '"We see what's happening in the United States": "Antisemitism" crackdown intensifies at Sydney University', *Everything is Fine*, 10 April 2025, everythingisfine.beehiiv.com; Dick Moses, Lana Tatour and Geoffrey Brahm Levey, 'The problem with Universities Australia's response to antisemitism', *The Age*, 20 March 2025, theage.com.au.

29. See Ghassan Hage, 'Statement Regarding my sacking from the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology', *Arena*, 10 February 2025, arena.org.au.

30. Milani et al., 'Public Forum: Who's Afraid of Khaled Sabsabi?', video, 53:50.

31. 'Academic freedom and censorship at our universities: Make your voice heard', Jewish Council Australia, 20 March 2025, jewishcouncil.com.au.

32. See 'NTEU statement on Universities Australia definition of antisemitism', National Tertiary Education Union.

33. See Mohamed Bennouna, 'Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)', Max Planck *Encyclopaedia of Public International Law*, May 2018, opil.ouplaw.com; Hennie Strydom, 'The Non-Aligned Movement and the Reform of International Relations', *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law Online*, vol. 11, 2007, pp. 1–46, mpil.de.

cultural, ethnic or 'othered' group or political standpoint over another. Rather than a clearly articulated and formalized strategy, the result is that institutions assert bias through western definitions of multiculturalism and universality, allowing for censorship to occur under the guise of safety frameworks and diversity policies. Writing about museums in the United States, Laura Raicovich argues, 'neutrality and universality is claimed on behalf of a white, Euro-American perspective. Under the banner of universality, neutrality hides that there has always been a perspective, a set of biases, an exclusivity, that is at its core political and has always been.'[37] 'Neutrality', as a policy to cover institutional bias, is a highly politicized directive manufactured to serve certain individuals, systems and ideologies.

'Neutrality' is adopted as a necessary condition for 'cultural safety', another concept that is used by institutions and policymakers to show an (often superficial) understanding of intersectionality and commitment to creating environments conducive to inclusion, healing and empathy. Originally based on the practice wisdom of healthcare providers engaging with people from Māori communities in Aotearoa, or colonial New Zealand,[38] cultural safety guidance has been adapted to people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds in Australia,[39] and more recently, applied to those from immigrant and refugee communities.[40] It is a valuable tool for Australian health and social services, supporting quality of care and reflexivity among those working with communities labelled as 'other' and marginalized by government systems. Its application in arts and cultural institutions, however, seems to be more in service of silencing 'othered' voices that are not perceived to be neutral or socially (read: politically) cohesive.

The term has been effectively weaponized to exclude artists deemed dangerous due to their Arab- or Muslim-ness and/or pro-Palestinian views. The State Library of Victoria, for example, demonstrated its abuse of 'cultural safety' policy in the name of neutrality by firing pro-Palestinian writers in early 2024 and issuing a ban on the expression of political views by any staff member, with public-facing staff specifically advised not to wear anything that could be deemed supportive of Palestine.[41] Internal documents released under the state Freedom of Information Act reveal that executive staff and board members discussed the religious and political views of these writers prior to cancelling their contracts, going so far as to consult with the government before making a final decision.[42] One board member, a former Member of Parliament, warned that the Library was required to 'adhere to a policy of strict neutrality', which meant that, 'on a subject such as Gaza/Israel we have a duty to be absolutely thorough and super careful about the way language is used by the people we engage'.[43] In other documents, staff targeted Omar Sakr, an Arab-Turkish Muslim poet, stating that his subject position required further 'risk management' and raised concerns about cultural and child safety.[44]

Censorship of Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims took place in Australia well before 7 October 2023. However, due to the subsequent escalation and scale of violence against Palestinians (and, to a much lesser degree in Australia, Arabs in general and those who are supportive of Palestine), there is now rightly a debate in Australia, as elsewhere, about whether arguing for a 'neutral' position is tenable, particularly in times of conflict, and whether it serves the needs of multifaith and multiethnic communities. Political bias informs arts and culture institutional policies in Australia. It is driven by western-centred, settler-colonial ideology and its supposed neutrality, and the resulting forms of censorship and cancellation are erasing voices.[45] This needs to be acknowledged and actively addressed with fearlessness. The current problem has two interlocking components: (1) institutions are facing huge pressure to sustain operations in global minority countries (particularly the settler colonies of Australia and the United States) at a time of economic precarity and increasing state hostility towards arts and diversity; and (2) empowered by structural racism, the managers of arts and cultural institutions are choosing to be complicit with the state-level silencing of those voicing support for Palestine rather than serving artists, art workers and communities. Australian pundits point to Trump's defunding of the arts as a dangerous trend making its way to our shores, and frame any type of political dissent as potentially harmful, leading to government scrutiny, slanderous media campaigns, and loss of funding.[46] This argument accounts in large part for the silencing of criticisms of Creative Australia, particularly since it announced an independent review of governance processes to inform ongoing and future decision-making with regard to the Venice Biennale.[47]

The second part of the problem refers to the foundational ideologies of arts and cultural institutions. There is a longstanding story many workers tell themselves about being able to change systems from the inside, fuelled by beliefs that diversity and inclusion are hard-won in the elitist realms of Australian creative industries and that any kind of diversity is better than none at all.[48] This narrative follows an incrementalist logic: that policy moves slowly along a linear path, that big change is too disruptive and divisive, that expecting too much too soon is unrealistic.[49] It makes sense within the boundaries of a risk-averse, conservative worldview, one that hides behind realist or 'pragmatic' thinking and sees accelerated change as damaging to 'social cohesion' or, as Adler described it, 'banality by misdirection'.[50] But policy-making is not, as we know, a straightforward, linear process: it is dependent on the whims of dominant powers and subject to a multitude of global and local pressures.[51]

Recent expressions of support for Sabsabi from artist-run associations, galleries, individual artists and artworkers, many of which are funded by Creative Australia but not directly representative either of Australia or of a particular state or territory, are in large part due to embarrassment over how Creative Australia's actions play out on an international stage. While it seems tangible to grasp (on a surface level at least) that it is wrong for an individual artist to experience a blatantly racist attack, the prospect of addressing the overwhelming scale of structural racism that permits censorship of political critique in Australia while ignoring genocide in Palestine appears to be a critique too far. Here it is crucial to understand that the root cause of attacks on Sabsabi is *the genocide in Palestine itself*. The genocide, or rather Australia's tacit support of Israel's genocidal war,

34. See Strydom, 'The Non-Aligned Movement and the Reform of International Relations'.

35. See Bojana Piškur, 'Solidarity in Arts and Culture. Some cases from the Non-Aligned Movement', L'Internationale Online, 1 October 2016, internationaleonline.org.

36. See C. Clapham, 'The Challenge of the State in a Globalised World', *Development and Change*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2002, pp. 775–95.

37. Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike: Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*, London: Verso, 2021, p. 27.

38. See Elaine Papps and Irihapeti Ramsden, 'Cultural Safety in Nursing: the New Zealand Experience', International Journal for *Quality in Health Care*, vol. 8, no. 5, 1996, pp. 491–97.

39. See Stephanie De Zilva, Troy Walker, Claire Palermo and Julie Brimblecombe, 'Culturally safe health care practice for Indigenous Peoples in Australia: A systematic meta-ethnographic review', *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2022, pp. 74–84; Terrina Fernando and Bindi Bennett, 'Creating a culturally safe space when teaching Aboriginal content in social work: A scoping review', *Australian Social Work*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2019, pp. 47–61.

40. See Jasten Phiri, Elaine Dietsch and Anne Bonner, 'Cultural safety and its importance for Australian midwifery practice', *Collegian*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2010, pp. 105–11; Kathy Reavy, Judith Hobbs, Mary Hereford and Kim Crosby, 'A new clinic model for refugee health care: adaptation of cultural safety', *Rural and Remote Health*, vol. 12, 2012, pp. 185–96.

41. Michael Bradley, 'The State Library of Victoria furore is about censorship, not Palestine', *Crikey*, 17 July 2024, crikey.com.au.

42. See Kerrie O'Brien, 'State Library probed writers' political, religious views before cancellations', *The Age*, 16 July 2024, theage.com.au.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.; see also Andrew Brooks and Astrid Lorange, 'The Ruse of Safety', *Overland Literary Journal*, no. 254, overland.org.au.

45. Josephine Caust, 'Cultural policy in an Australian setting', *Australian Politics and Policy* (ed. Nick Barry, Peter Chen, Yvonne Haigh, Sara C. Motta and Diana Perche), Sydney University Press, 2023.

46. See David Pledger, 'A cultural policy will protect Australian democracy', *ANU Reporter*, 15 April 2025, reporter.anu.edu.au.

47. See Benton, 'Media Release: NAVA's response to Creative Australia's governance review announcement'; Burke, 'Embattled Creative Australia boss served angry letters from staff and 600 literary figures amid Sabsabi fallout'.

48. See Sebastian Henry-Jones, 'On Enduring Structures and New Commitments at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia', *Decolonial Hacker*, 15 July 2021, decolonialhacker.org.

49. Roaa Ali and Bridget Byrne, 'The Trouble with Diversity: The Cultural Sector and Ethnic Inequality', *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2023, pp. 493–513, doi.org.

50. Milani et al., 'Public Forum: Who's Afraid of Khaled Sabsabi?', video, 45:18.

51. See Tully Barnett, 'The arts are being sidelined in the cost of living crisis. It's time we stopped framing them as a luxury', *The Conversation*, 4 June 2024, theconversation.com; Lauren C. Harris, 'How Neoliberalism Swallowed Arts Policy', *Kill Your Darlings*,



Photograph taken from the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) webpage promoting the event Symposium: Blackfulla Palestinian Solidarity November 7th, 2023.

is what has framed Creative Australia's reading of Sabsabi's Arab-Australian identity as well as a number of his artworks that respond to situations in his birth country of Lebanon. Yet, for the funding bodies that keep arts and cultural institutions alive in this country, it has proved much easier to display solidarity with one Arab-Australian and express support for that individual's right to artistic freedom than it has been to take a fundamental, moral, anti-racist stand against horrific, ongoing violence backed by government support.[52] Maintaining a focus on one individual as an isolated incident resulting from external political meddling, as I have discussed, diverts attention towards a strategic error made by one government organization and away from the root institutional problems.

Final thoughts

While Creative Australia, the nation's principal arts investment and advisory body, is tasked with safeguarding artistic expression of diverse cultural identities, it fails to translate this into action.[53] The arts and cultural sector is heavily influenced, if not shaped, by Creative Australia in terms of how it reacts to perceived political pressure by enacting policies that enable the implicit censorship of art that does not conform to the political status quo.[54] Sabsabi and Dagostino's unceremonious dismissal was well-documented by Australian news media, in think pieces and in open letters from artists and institutions.[55] Sabsabi himself broke his silence about the experience, vowing to make the proposed work and exhibit at the Venice Biennale regardless.[56] He has been duly supported by a popular crowdfund campaign, as well as the National Association for the Visual Arts and the artists and curators shortlisted for the Australian Pavilion at the 2026 Venice Biennale.[57] However, very few statements of support for Sabsabi make mention of the Israeli assault on Gaza as the cause of such censorship, instead passively gesturing to a turbulent global context and sociopolitical pressures brought about by ongoing conflict in 'the Middle East'.[58]

Critical debate about Sabsabi and Creative Australia has shone a spotlight on the inherently political position of so-called institutional neutrality in its attempt to mask structural racism. Such 'neutrality' supports a government mired in the 'logic of war', and institutions, in their disregarding of the sovereignty and self-determination of Palestine, grant their tacit approval for colonial erasure via genocide, as well as colonial theft of both resources and land.

A joint statement released by Sabsabi and Dagostino (2025) declares that 'art should not be censored as artists reflect the times they live in'.[59] In fact, institutions are self-censoring to avoid discomfort and debate, allowing themselves to be coerced by government ministers and interest groups to secure funding: censorship is expected in return. In this sense, the field of art is reflecting the times, and with very little prompting. The art world adopts an 'apolitical' stance that is, in fact, highly political, while opting against political forms of action, critique or empathy. These flawed and diversionary diversity policies shore up and exacerbate the supposed neutrality of arts and cultural institutions founded on colonial violence.

11 April 2022, killyourdarlings.com.au; Matthew L. Jacobsmeier, 'Demographic and Political Influences on Public Support for the Arts', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2020, pp. 463–84, colab.ws.

52. See Matt Chun, 'Have you comprehensively rejected the Besen Family Foundation?', Matt Chun's Substack, 15 December 2023, substack.com.

53. See Benton, 'Media Release: NAVA condemns Creative Australia's failure to defend artistic freedom'.

54. See David Pledger, 'Pattern recognition: censorship, control and interference in Australia's art ecology', *Overland Literary Journal*, 25 February 2025, overland.org.au.

55. For example, see this show of public support from a collective of arts institutions: 'Open Letter to the CEO and Board of Creative Australia From All Conference', All Conference, 27 February 2025, allconference.org.au.

56. See Linda Morris, '"I do not stand for terrorism"'.

57. See Penelope Benton, 'NAVA statement in support of artist Khaled Sabsabi', National Association for the Visual Arts, 14 February 2025, visualarts.net.au; Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino, 'Support the Venice Biennale 2026 Exhibition by Khaled Sabsabi Curated by Michael Dagostino', Khaled Sabsabi, 7 April 2025, khaledsabsabi.com; J. Nguyen, H. Millar Baker, M. O'Callaghan, J. Mayilema Lee, T. Hong and T. Albert, 'Open Letter to Reinstate Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino', *e-flux*, 14 February 2025, e-flux.com.

58. See Tingle, 'The politics of the Creative Australia controversy reveal a trend that ultimately weakens institutions'; Smith, 'Art Against Contemporary Autocracy—Australia Included?'.

59. Nour Haydar, '"Art should not be censored": Khaled Sabsabi responds to cancellation of Venice Biennale project', *Guardian Australia*, 14 February 2025, theguardian.com.

II. ‘Trying to read the dead’: Language as resistance and the poetics of remembering

Poetry Against Language Dioxide

Rana Issa

12 Feb 2026

I don't wish to die trapped under the rubble of my home
until my corpse rots amid the wreckage

I don't wish to die in pieces scattered here and there
so my casket isn't a black plastic bag

I don't wish to die on the sidewalk by a sniper
where stray dogs feast on my remains

I don't want to die and for my body to burn
leaving my mom and dad unable to recognize me

– Poem written on the rubble of a home in Gaza
by an anonymous poet

Blessed is the blood of our martyrs. Blessed is our poisoned earth.
Avenge us beloved Mother avenge the blood of our children & the
tortured bodies of our people. Send your seas and drown the barbarians
& protect our people in Palestine.

– A prayer I wrote

From the earliest days of their dispossession, Palestinians have recorded their plight in poetry.[1] There is a long tradition of this among Arabs who, since long before the birth of Islam, have considered poetry a *diwan*, a historical record. Palestinian poets are also Arab poets; they find inspiration in a poetic tradition that is geographically expansive and predates the Zionist project by more than a millennium. Unlike historical writing, for which Arabs are also renowned, poetry is a mnemonic device that penetrates people's consciousness and registers, and shapes their affective state. While historical writing on Palestine can document pain and loss, Palestinian poetry actively resists what the martyred political prisoner Walid Daqqa terms 'language dioxide', or the 'garbage of language' – the language of oppression.[2] Poetry refuses the banalization of language and testifies against injustice, enshrining the form as both diwan and protest. Palestinians learn and memorize poetry as well as produce it. Through poetry, they cultivate their political imagination and preserve their collective spirit.

1. I am profoundly grateful for the valuable feedback of my dear friends Jumana Manna and Wendy Lotterman. An earlier, much shorter version of this piece was published on L'Internationale Online on 4 March 2024, internationaleonline.org, then included in the *Collective Study in Times of Emergency* e-book, December 2024, internationaleonline.org/publications. This longer version was solicited by De Appel, Amsterdam, on 11 May 2025. A more polished version was presented at WIELS, Forest, Belgium, on 24 June 2025. The feedback I received on those later iterations was crucial for this final version of the piece. I am grateful to my editor, Nick Aikens, for working so closely with me to develop the piece throughout this period.

2. Abdel Rahim al-Sheikh, '*Al-makan al-muwazi: rasm al-zaman fi fikr Walid Daqqa*', *Mussassat al-dirasat al-filastiniya*, Beirut: Sayf, 2023, pp. 187–22, 187.

Pull Yourself Together
Heba Abu Nada trans.
Huda Fakhreddine

O! How alone we are!
All the others have won their wars
and you were left in your mud,
barren.

Darwish, don't you know? No poetry will return to the lonely what was lost, what was stolen.

How alone we are! This is another age of ignorance. Cursed are those who divided us in war and marched in your funeral as one.

How alone we are! This earth is an open market, and your great countries have been auctioned away, gone!

How alone we are! This is an age of insolence, and no one will stand by our side, Never.

O! How alone we are! Wipe away your poems, old and new, and all these tears. And you, O Palestine, pull yourself together.

The poetic becomes an occasion to restore language to meaning, and vice versa to express the trials of Palestinians as they face the necropolitics of the settler regime. In Arabic, there are semantic connections that bind words: meaning, *maana*; prohibition, *man*'; suffering, *muaanat*; and care, *inaya*. These four words share a three-letter root, which, for lexicographers, indicates a semantic logic that maintains the bond between prohibition and the necessity of meaning-making in trying times as a form of care and repair that alleviates suffering. Since the beginning of this genocide, I have been battling with *maana* and its family of words in my personal quest to work through the grief of witnessing the extermination of my people and the prohibition that world powers have enforced on Palestinian mourning. I learned during this time the paradox of grief. Through my grief, I sensed a function of poetry for Palestinians today. On one hand, grief can drive us to isolation, an unsurmountable loneliness; on the other hand, through ritual performances of grief – through demonstrations and funerals, as well as other communal acts like writing, organizing, witnessing – we search to overcome our psychic isolation to connect with others. Like Refaat al-Areer's poem, 'If I Must Die',[3] which circulated widely after his murder alongside most of his

3. Refaat al-Areer, 'If I Must Die', posted by the poet to x.com in English on 1 November 2023 with the post, 'If I must die, let it be a tale #FreePalestine #Gaza', x.com.

family in Gaza on 6 December 2023 – his death is meaningful so long as there are those who live to tell and share the story. This is the grief that permeates the poetry of Heba Abu Nada, who was martyred in Gaza on 20 October 2023. In 'Pull Yourself Together', Abu Nada demands that she and her people remain steadfast in the face of grief; 'How alone we are!' becomes the refrain that carries the people through their helplessness vis-à-vis the world in the 'age of insolence'. Poetry, she writes, cannot return 'to the lonely / what was lost, what was / stolen'. Poetry is akin to tears to be wept then wiped away, and Palestinians, the poet cries out, must pull themselves together.

Palestinian poetry, whether written in Palestine, in exile, in Arabic, in other languages, by Palestinians, or by poets in solidarity, is framed by land struggle. The figure of the poet in this struggle can be understood through the negation of lived space, through dispossession. In the camp and in the prison cell, the Palestinian refugee and prisoner are forced into the architectural markers of Zionism, spaces of unsettledness, incarceration and colonial deadliness. The camp and the prison cell are spatial forms that theorist Nasser Abourahme describes as consisting of 'a flexible mixture of penal-carceral, extractive, labor exploitative, demographic, and territorial logics'.[4]

Palestinian subjects of incarceration and displacement grapple with erasure and deracination and long for liberated forms of belonging to Palestine, as well as to the foreign environments they inhabit as refugees. Palestinian writing challenges how literature continues to be traditionally catalogued and studied. Firstly, it exceeds the conceptualization of literature within nationalist frameworks – whether written in Arabic, or in the other languages poets have used to articulate their Palestinian identities. As scholar Refqa Abu Remaileh writes, 'refugees' complex ties to various and multiple geographies can distort, problematize, and perforate conceptions of national literatures.'[5] The figure of the refugee foregrounds the Palestinian subject because the persistent Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands places any Palestinian who survives Israeli violence under the threat of becoming a refugee.

Secondly, incarceration encloses the compass of Palestinian poetry, in the sense that the threat and realities of the imprisonment of Palestinians produce a schizophrenic kind of relation to time and space. Kaleem Hawa writes that the split between self and body produces a 'process of derealization, what Daqqa defined as, "the state of losing the ability to interpret reality".'[6] Poetry must reckon with this derealization in its contemplation of the body within time-space coordinates. In the complexities of belonging that confront Palestinian poets, their poetry expresses the difficulties of inhabiting the spaces forced upon them. The prisoner redraws the minimality of incarcerated space and struggles to connect the small prison they are within to the big prison that is Palestine. Political prisoners challenge their atomization and the idea of their defeat through these acts of symbolic collective return. These returns restore connections and open new possibilities for solidarity and the entwining of fates. This is how Black Panther Party leading member George Jackson reties the Palestinians to their Black comrades: mistakenly, and poignantly, taken to be the writer of 'Enemy of the Sun' by Samih al-Qasim, when the poem was published, following Jackson's assassination by prison guards, in a Black Panther Party paper. Jackson had previously copied out the poem by hand.[7] The mistake fixed the bond between the Palestinian and Black radical movements, and reveals the extent to which our predicaments are intertwined.[8]

Enemy of the Sun
Samih al-Qasim
(read and loved by George Jackson)

I may – if you wish – lose my livelihood
I may sell my shirt and bed.
I may work as a stone cutter,
A street sweeper, a porter.
I may clean your stores
Or rummage your garbage for food.
I may lie down hungry,
O enemy of the sun,
But I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist.

You may take the last strip of my land,
Feed my youth to prison cells.

4. Nasser Abourahme, *The Time Beneath the Concrete: Palestine Between Camp and Colony*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2025, p. 5.

5. Refqa Abu Remaileh, 'Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 52, 2021, p. 70.

6. Kaleem Hawa, 'Like a Bag Trying to Empty: On the Palestinian Prisoner and Martyr Walid Daqqa', *Parapraxis*, 24 August 2024, parapraxismagazine.com.

7. The poem appeared as a full-page spread in The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service, 25 September 1971. See Derek Ford, 'A common enemy of the sun: George Jackson and Samih al-Qasim', Indy Liberation Center, 15 February 2024, indyliberationcenter.org.

8. For more on the history of this poem, listen to Greg Thomas speak to Shireen Hamza (host), 'George Jackson in the Sun of Palestine', Ottoman History Podcast, ep. 366, 11 July 2018, ottomanhistorypodcast.com.

You may plunder my heritage.
You may burn my books, my poems
Or feed my flesh to the dogs.
You may spread a web of terror
On the roofs of my village,
O enemy of the sun,
But I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist.

You may put out the light in my eyes.
You may deprive me of my mother's kisses.
You may curse my father, my people.
You may distort my history,
You may deprive my children of a smile
And of life's necessities.
You may fool my friends with a borrowed face.
You may build walls of hatred around me.
You may glue my eyes to humiliations,
O enemy of the sun,
But I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist.
O enemy of the sun
The decorations are raised at the port.
The ejaculations fill the air,
A glow in the hearts,
And in the horizon
A sail is seen
Challenging the wind
And the depths.
It is Ulysses Returning home
From the sea of loss

It is the return of the sun,
Of my exiled ones
And for her sake,
and his I swear I shall not compromise
And to the last pulse in my veins
I shall resist,
Resist – and resist.

This resilience does nothing to halt the velocity of displacement facing Palestinians. The lost land is not only a thing of the past but also a loss that structures the relation to the present and opens up questions about what possibilities lie in the future.

Phobia
Najwan Darwish
trans. Kareem James Abu Zeid

I'll be banished from the city
Before night falls: They'll claim
I neglected to pay for the air
I'll be banished from the city
Before the advent of evening: They'll claim
I paid no rent for the sun
Nor any fees for the clouds
I'll be banished from the city
Before the sun rises: They'll say
I gave night grief
And failed to lift my praises to the stars
I'll be banished from the city
Before I've even left the womb
Because all I did for seven months
Was write poems and wait to be
I'll be banished from being
Because I'm partial to the void
I'll be banished from the void
For my suspect ties to being
I'll be banished from both being and the void
Because I was born of becoming
I'll be banished

'Phobia' lists the impossible monetization of life, which is the cardinal method that leads to banishment. The ongoing loss of land is the backdrop for lived experiences of dispossession under oppression and leaves its mark on every Palestinian regardless of the type of brutalization they or their loved ones have undergone. In 'A Litany for "One Land", *After Audre Lorde*', Mosab Abu Toha, from Gaza, addresses Israeli citizens, and cannot fathom how they can watch and be complicit with the genocidal violence of the Zionist entity.

A Litany for 'One Land'
After Audre Lorde
Mosab Abu Toha

For those living on the other side,
we can see you, we can see the rain
when it pours on your (our) fields, on your (our) valleys,
and when it slides down the roofs of your 'modern' houses
(built atop our homes).

Can you take off your sunglasses and look at us here,
see how the rain has flooded our streets,
how the children's umbrellas have been pierced by a prickly downpour on their way to school?
The trees you see have been watered with our tears.
They bear no fruit.

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In facing spatial dispossession, time becomes the organizing axis for imagining Palestine. Time, for Palestinians, is a measure for lives facing colonial oppression, for individuals, as well as fractured collectives, and does not lend itself to a cohesive national narrative. For a Palestinian prisoner, time moves differently than time spent in a refugee camp, in exile, or in genocide. The temporalities that make up Palestinian social and political identification capture the heterogeneity of Palestinian experiences and have been a running theme in Palestinian poetry since 1948. Time is measured in the number of martyrs, as Gazan Nasser Rabah says in his poem 'In the Endless War'.

In the Endless War
Nasser Rabah
trans. The Brooklyn Translation Collective

**The red roses take their color from our blood.
They smell of death.**

**The river that separates us from you is just
a mirage you created when you expelled us.**

IT IS ONE LAND!

**For those who are standing on the other side
shooting at us, spitting on us,
how long can you stand there, fenced by hate?
Are you going to keep your black glasses on until
you're unable to put them down?**

**Soon we won't be here for you to watch.
It won't matter if you blink your eyes or not,
if you can stand or not.
You won't cross that river
to take more lands,
because you will vanish into your mirage.
You can't build a new colony on our graves.**

**And when we die,
our bones will continue to grow,
to reach and intertwine with the roots
of the olive and orange trees,
to bathe in the sweet Yaffa sea.
One day, we will be born again when you're not
there.
Because this lands knows us. She is our mother.
When we die, we're just resting in her womb
until the darkness is cleared.**

**For those who are NOT here anymore,
We have been here forever.
We have been speaking but you
never cared to listen.**

**Put your hearts under the beds—exhausted
neglected shoes
not to be covered by the dust of war:**

'and you shall not know'.

**Put your hearts on the case of an old and broken
clock, so the raid won't shake them:**

'and you shall not be sad'.

**In war the heart expands, becoming a boat for
the children, an hour of**

clarity, and a sky for writing.

**In war the heart chokes, words flee, and along its
edge birds melt into**

red dew.

**It flutters on a tall post—a gasp called the
homeland.
In war you leave your heart aside and you salvage
a bundle of paper: your old picture at the school
gate, the deed of your demolished home,**

your son's birth certificate.

**Your heart doesn't matter now. The beloved will
await war's end to**

ask: did you remember me?

**In war no one believes your grief-stricken heart.
The rescuers scale
your arms to hold up the roof of sobbing, the
planes land their
shadows around you, and your soul flies out like
a flock of glass.
You are the time and nothing aims a piece of
shrapnel at a soul but
you. Maybe you long to throw your heart at your
children like a ball.
Maybe you long to open the window without the
shot of a stray
woman. It's alright, it's war, another one and it
will pass.
In war time commits suicide.
The day goes by before it's your turn for the
bathroom. The hour is
that space between a building embraced by a
missile and another
one opening its chest for the last person gasping
on a street about to exit history instantaneously.**

As for the minute, no
minutes in war, time is rather measured by
martyrs: a hundred and a thousand. In war we sit,
no legs to carry us and run.
In war a missile follows you like a loyal dog and
a boring neighbor
exchanging greetings and bad jokes.
You etch a tattoo shaped like home into memory.
It was a beautiful home before the arrival of the
missile.
In war the children are embarrassed by their
tantrums, they grow
before us as if we're meeting old neighbors. How
are you, son? I'm still
running father, I'm still running, alone in the
madness race.
In war you brought me into the experience.
You're the one who
dragged the fairytale's ghouls to my door. You're
the one who
with premeditation forgot the barbecue on, and
I'm screaming: it's my
heart. You did not hear and you did not forgive.
Of love, you left
nothing; of hate, you left nothing for me to finish
the poem. Then
you, like a pale cloud of smoke, deceived me into
safety.
In war life envies you for life. Gangrene homes,
windows of hysteria,
and the eczema of streets, everything in the
horrifying scene resents
that you could see it all and not cry.
In war you're not made of flesh and bones, you're
someone else in the
same clothes, bloodied, dirty, and lying—
testifying that you're not
dead yet.

Palestinians also measure their geography in the number of years of nakba, which has dispossessed them since 1948, as diasporic Palestinian Hala Alayan proposes.

When they say pledge allegiance, I say
Hala Alayan

my country is a ghost // a mouth trying to say sorry and it comes out all smog // all citizen and bullet and seed // my country is a machine // a spell of bad weather // a feather lacing my mother's black hair // I mean her dyed hair // I mean her blonde hair // I mean her hair matches my country // so shiny and borrowed and painted over // my country is a number

like—

it is 1948 and my great-great-grandmother flattens bread with her hands // while my other great-great-grandmother prays with her hands // one watches her land disappear // the other builds a house on land that will disappear

my country is an airport line a year of highways an intermission // my country is Stockholm syndrome // is immigrant mouth saying thank you saying please saying // my country is no country but ghost // is no man but ghost // my country is dead // my country is name the dead // give them their salt

my country is a mouth trying to say pledge and it comes out all salt // my country is a mouth and nobody can pronounce my name // I mean my country forgets my name // I mean my country is always asking for my name // and I'm always saying it twice // spelling it like an address // my country is a number

like—

it is 1967 and every Arab leader is crying every mother is clutching // the sons she has left and my great-grandmother names my mother // nostalgia while my other great-grandmother names my father // a gun // my country is all ghost // my grandmother is all ghost // my grandmother is a country I mean my grandmother is my country // I mean my country is a lie is an emptied house is one thousand cardboard boxes // my country is remember when we left Akka // I mean Gaza // I mean Homs // my country is a number

like—

it is 1990 // my mother is crossing a border I mean desert I mean life // I am at her heels // I am paying attention // I mean I am learning to pray to a flag // I mean I am learning English // I mean I am forgetting Arabic

or—

it is 1994 and I am falling in love with a white boy // a habit I'll never kick

or—

it is 2006 and my grandparents won't evacuate // won't leave another war // and all summer I dream of floods // collect bullets and love the wrong person

or—

it is 2003 and I am in Beirut watching Baghdad burn because of America // I mean I am in my country // watching my country burn because of my // country

or—

it is 2016 and who saw it coming // some saw it coming

or—

it is 2020 and the women in Beirut are a sea // I mean my country // looks beautiful in red // I mean I look beautiful in red // I mean this country likes me in red

or—

it is every year and my country is taken // I mean my country is stolen land // I mean all my countries are stolen land // I mean sometimes I am on the wrong side of the stealing // my country is an opening // I mean bloom // I mean bloom not like flower // but bloom like explosion // my country is a teacher // I mean do you want to see my passport // I mean do you like my accent // I mean I stole them // I mean I stole them // I mean where do you think I learned that from

Inhabiting time proves no less barbarous for the poets than the land that is denied to them. Wars of extermination enforce their own rhythms that render their victims helpless in their confrontation with their unnatural deaths. Poetry counters and resists the temporalities of land theft and the brutalities that are meted out on Palestinian bodies and livelihoods. Time for Palestinian poets is a country.

Amman-born Noor Hindi writes about her father drawing and redrawing the map of Palestine.

I Once Looked In a Mirror But Couldn't See my Body
(Ekphrastic poem, after 'The Persistence of Memory' by Salvador Dalí after Mahmoud Darwish)
Noor Hindi

Since the Nakba of 1948, Palestinians have been living with forms of violence that repeat and multiply, wherein Palestinian immiseration and the losses incurred of homes, kin and ecologies relentlessly destroy their lives. Images repeat, the discourse that legitimizes the violence they endure repeats, the language used to describe them repeats. Thus, a poem from the past remains relevant, as if it's written in the present. Such is the case with Gaza-born Kamal Nasser's poem 'The Green Light', about an unnamed city – perhaps Gaza.

The Green Light
Kamal Nasser
trans. Rana Issa

It didn't feel much different
than walking through this country, citizen
less & carrying a history.
Somewhere is my body
alone & watching
my father
in the middle of the night
drawing & redrawing
a map of Palestine, green
ink—

& it hurts
& it hurts
& it hurts
& it hurts

What is Palestine if not the olive tree growing on my father's tongue
What is Palestine if not the olive tree growing
What is Palestine if not the olive
What is Palestine
What—

Somewhere is a clock.
Melting.

Lifetimes melt in the fire of the military erasures of Palestine as a land and a people.

I walk through the city of the dead
trampling over my shadow
I beg the slain ruins for life
in my land and my people.
This silence, this slumber terrifies me
how the pale casts its long shadow, it frightens me,
as if it's all that remains
of the corpses
embracing me
coiling around me ...
should I walk in the city of the

In 2017 Lena Khalaf Tuffaha wrote a poem that signalled genocidal violence before the advent of this latest and accelerated ongoing genocide.

Running Orders
Lena Khalaf Tuffaha

dead

〰〰〰

No
I did not come to bring life,
to my city, and I did not come to re-member the
fragments.
The big game collapsed
in the playing fields of the endgame.
Shame offered prayers at the funeral.
The banquet of conflict is whored
made wanton by the propagandists
and the patrons.
Feeble she stood erect … bringing crumbs

Crumbs will not satisfy
Crumbs will not satisfy

〰〰〰

When I walk in the city of the dead
trampling over my shadow
I beg the slain ruins for life
in my land and my people
I find everything. Died.

〰〰〰

And when I walked through the city of the dead
desolation killing me
my I wounding me
proud impotence marching away from survival
with me in procession,
I caught a specter obliterating the emptiness,
creeping like light on the world.
I found myself traversing the vast expanse
walking behind it
I found myself crossing through life
walking like faith itself, in the city of the dead…
The torment of existence surging through me
I glimpsed a child … one year old.

15/10/1965

They call us now,
before they drop the bombs.
The phone rings
and someone who knows my first name
calls and says in perfect Arabic
'This is David.'
And in my stupor of sonic booms and glass-
shattering symphonies
still smashing around in my head
I think, Do I know any Davids in Gaza?
They call us now to say
Run.
You have 58 seconds from the end of this
message.
Your house is next.
They think of it as some kind of
war-time courtesy.
It doesn't matter that
there is nowhere to run to.
It means nothing that the borders are closed
and your papers are worthless
and mark you only for a life sentence
in this prison by the sea
and the alleyways are narrow
and there are more human lives
packed one against the other
more than any other place on earth
Just run.
We aren't trying to kill you.
It doesn't matter that
you can't call us back to tell us
the people we claim to want aren't in your house
that there's no one here
except you and your children
who were cheering for Argentina
sharing the last loaf of bread for this week
counting candles left in case the power goes out.
It doesn't matter that you have children.
You live in the wrong place
and now is your chance to run
to nowhere.
It doesn't matter
that 58 seconds isn't long enough
to find your wedding album
or your son's favorite blanket
or your daughter's almost completed college
application
or your shoes
or to gather everyone in the house.
It doesn't matter what you had planned.
It doesn't matter who you are.
Prove you're human.
Prove you stand on two legs.
Run.

The repetitive temporalities of Israeli violence threaten to normalize and fetishize the victimization of Palestinians. This prompts Yafa poet Sheikha Helawy to write 'Nakba'.

Nakba
Sheikha Helawy
trans. Fady Joudah

My mother is three years younger than Nakba.
But she doesn't believe in great powers.
Twice a day she brings God down from his throne
then reconciles with him
through the mediation of the best
recorded Quranic recitations.
And she can't bear meek women.
She never once mentioned Nakba.
Had Nakba been her neighbor,
my mom would've shamelessly chided her:
'I'm sick of the clothes on my back.'
And had Nakba been her older sister,
she would've courted her with a dish
of khubaizeh, but if her sister whined
too much, my mom would tell her: 'Enough.
You're boring holes in my brain. Maybe
we shouldn't visit for a while?'
And had Nakba been an old friend,
my mom would tolerate her idiocy
until she died, then imprison her in a young
picture
up on the wall of the departed,
a kind of cleansing ritual before she'd sit to watch
dubbed Turkish soap operas.
And had Nakba been an elderly Jewish woman
that my mom had to care for on Sabbath,
my mom would teasingly tell her
in cute Hebrew: 'You hussy,
you still got a feel for it, don't you?'
And had Nakba been younger than my mom,
she'd spit in her face and say:
'Rein in your kids, get'em inside,
you drifter.'

Nablus-born Zakaria Mohammad reflects on the boredom and normalization of this catastrophic situation that repeats: 'a day after another day / another unchanging day / the days replicate in our time / what is different between them is the measure of misery added to our memory / that is laden with older burdens'. This repetitive temporality cages Palestinians in an eternally catastrophic present of nakba, the condition of Palestinian immiseration and erasure. Palestinian poets write against the temporalities of war and struggle to force open pockets of resistance through insisting on living, loving and the right to an everyday. As martyred author and political spokesperson Ghassan Kanafani (born in Akka in 1936) expressed, the notion of resistance poetry in occupied Palestine aligns with an everyday practice of asserting Palestinian identity in the face of cultural, social and political erasures enforced by the Israeli settler regime.[9]

The predicament of Palestinians forces new metaphors where time gives way to the corporal, and political domination expresses itself in psychosomatic signs. The ongoing genocide in Gaza made this relation blatant for me, as I experienced my body fall apart, and learned from my friends that their bodies too are not faring any better than mine. Genocidal time disrupts the fulfillment of basic needs like sleep and food and causes our tempers to become so unstable as to affect our interpersonal lives. We felt fatigued from the first massacre, and many of us labour hard to reject the normalization of Palestinian death. Colonial time is felt by our bodies, and it is through our bodies that we look for ways to resist their brutality. In the earlier poem 'I Once Looked in a Mirror but Couldn't see my Body', Noor Hindi writes: 'Somewhere / is my body / alone & watching / my father / in the middle of the night / drawing & redrawing / a map of Palestine, green / ink—'. We turn inwards, towards our bodies, and listen to what hurts, to find ways to describe the physical and mental onslaught of colonial time. Najwan Darwish captures these often invisible processes through the poetic displacement of time onto his heartbeat. In listening to his heart's rhythms, Darwish registers the ruination he is witnessing beyond his perishing body.

Nothing More to Lose
Najwan Darwish
trans. Kareem James Abu Zeid

Lay your head on my chest and listen
to the layers of ruins
behind the madrasah of Saladin
hear the houses sliced open
in the village of Lifta
hear the wrecked mill, the lessons and reading
on the mosque's ground floor
hear the balcony lights
go out for the very last time
on the heights of Wadi Salib
hear the crowds drag their feet

9. See Ghassan Kanafani, 'Selection from Resistance Literature in Occupied Palestine, 1948–1966 by Ghassān Kanafānī' (ed. Johanna Sellman, trans. Shadi Rohana), *Journal of Arabic Literature*, vol. 55, 2024, pp. 168–88.

and hear them returning
hear the bodies as they’re thrown, listen
to their breathing on the bed
of the Sea of Galilee
listen like a fish
in a lake guarded by an angel
hear the tales of the villagers, embroidered
like kaffiyehs in the poems
hear the singers growing old
hear their ageless voices
hear the women of Nazareth
as they cross the meadow
hear the camel driver
who never stops tormenting me
Hear it
and let us, together, remember
then let us, together, forget
all that we have heard
Lay your head on my chest:
I’m listening to the dirt
I’m listening to the grass
as it splits through my skin…
We lost our heads in love
and have nothing more to lose

Incidents of brutalization leave their marks on Darwish’s body and lodge themselves in the rhythms of his heart. With Nasser Rabah’s ‘In the Endless War’ we encounter the effects of yet another war in Gaza (prior to genocide) on the terrified bodies of inhabitants. Bodies mangle with the ruined spaces of Gazan lives; hearts stop and start while hands keep searching for the necessary documents that are legal proof of lived life; tears and ceilings fuse, and the distance between two buildings is the space of one hour, ‘a building embraced by a missile and another/ one opening its chest for the last person gasping on/ a street about to exit history instantaneously. As for the minute, no minutes in war, time is rather measured by martyrs.’ In Gaza it is no longer possible to discern the shapes of the world with its organisms and matter.

The history of Palestinian poetry belongs to the legacy of Palestinian poets targeted through imprisonment and assassination by the colonizers – British as well as Israeli – that goes as far back as Tamra-born Nuh Ibrahim (a poet who was imprisoned several times by the British for his poetry, and who was killed in battle in 1938), and includes famous poets like Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad, Nasser Abu Srour, Dareen Tatour, and many others. Poets, too, sometimes die fighting. Such was the fate of Abd al-Rahim Mahmoud, a poet who died in the battle of al-Shajara in 1948, famous for ‘The Shaheed’ (1939), which begins: ‘I carry my soul in my palm / And deliver it in the valley of death / For either a life that delights my friend / Or a death that vexes the enemy’.[10] Other poets die as civilian casualties, victims of Israeli violence that is committed to striking civilians and civilian infrastructure. During this war we mourned the loss of Gazan poet Heba Abu Nada, killed on 20 October 2023. We also mourn the loss of poet and scholar Refaat al-Areer, who was most likely assassinated in a targeted bombing along with six members of his family (with three more members wounded) in December 2023.[11] Al-Areer was punished a second time, after his death, through another assassination in April 2024 targeting his daughter Shaima, her husband, and her infant son.[12] We mourn at least forty-five poets and writers who have died in Gaza since the beginning of this war and acknowledge other poets we have undoubtedly lost but who are not yet accounted for.[13] Most of them were targeted by the Zionist entity not because they were poets, simply because they were Gazans.

Since the Oslo Accords (1993/95), Palestinian poetry has borne witness to land annexation, aerial bombing, imprisonment, and their accompanying feelings of deep alienation, anger and perplexity. In the words of Gazan Marwan Makhoul: ‘To write non-political verse / I must listen to the birds / To hear the birds / The plane must hush’. In contemporary Palestinian poetry, the poetic subject writes of the war of decimation, to grapple with staring death in the face, as a daily travail. This is a far cry from the high poetic voice of Palestine’s most famous poet, Al-Birwa–born Mahmoud Darwish, who envisioned himself as a prophet and understood his poetic vocation as representative of Palestinian struggle.

10. Translation by Rana Issa.

11. On al-Areer’s assassination, see the investigation conducted by Euro Med Monitor, ‘Israeli Strike on Refaat al-Areer Apparently Deliberate’, 8 December 2023, euromedmonitor.org.

12. See Dan Sheehan, ‘Refaat Alareer’s daughter and grandchild have been killed in an Israeli airstrike.’ Literary Hub, 26 April 2024, lithub.com.

13. See ‘Israel has killed 45 writers and artists in Gaza since Oct. 7– PCBS’, Jordan News, 14 March 2024, jordannews.jo.

In Jerusalem
Mahmoud Darwish
trans. Fady Joudah

In Jerusalem, and I mean within the ancient walls,
I walk from one epoch to another without a memory
to guide me. The prophets over there are sharing
the history of the holy … ascending to heaven
and returning less discouraged and melancholy, because love
and peace are holy and are coming to town.
I was walking down a slope and thinking to myself: How
do the narrators disagree over what light said about a stone?
Is it from a dimly lit stone that wars flare up?
I walk in my sleep. I stare in my sleep. I see
no one behind me. I see no one ahead of me.
All this light is for me. I walk. I become lighter. I fly
then I become another. Transfigured. Words
sprout like grass from Isaiah's messenger mouth: 'If you don't believe you won't be safe.'
I walk as if I were another. And my wound a white biblical rose. And my hands like two doves
on the cross hovering and carrying the earth.
I don't walk, I fly, I become another,
transfigured. No place and no time. So who am I?
I am no I in ascension's presence. But I
think to myself: Alone, the prophet Muhammad spoke classical Arabic. 'And then what?'
Then what? A woman soldier shouted:
Is that you again? Didn't I kill you?
I said: You killed me … and I forgot, like you, to die.

Referred to in the poetry of Heba Abu Nada, Samer Abu Hawwash, Noor Hindi, and many others, Darwish's legacy seems to be conjured to be venerated, yet also in that his voice no longer suffices in the present moment. Death has become too voracious for the eloquence and self-confidence that belongs to an earlier time of revolution and literary renewal. What has changed since Darwish's time is a weakened Palestinian political leadership as a result of the Oslo Accords, which has led effectively to the politicide of Palestinians. In these circumstances, poetry and writing become a refusal to be silenced by the fact of death.

While Darwish acts as the towering literary figure that newer Palestinian poets both celebrate and altercate with, he, too, displaced space onto time. In Jerusalem, the poet walks along streets, from 'time to time without remembrance to guide me'.[14] Lost in the temporal layers of the city, Darwish likens himself to the prophets who walked these streets before him. Today's poets do not wish to become prophets, and their poetry rejects its oracular function. Poetry today inverts the relation to the collective. Rather than speak on behalf of Palestinians, poets now struggle to find ways to overcome their isolation, work through their grief and reconnect with their community. They dissolve their artistic function into the antiheroic; one of the people, not speaking for them. Poets' lives, like all Palestinians' lives, are precarious; they lack adequate means to end the onslaught of violence they confront. In such conditions, representational politics becomes a toxic lie covered up by the *garbage of language* that so bothered Walid Daqqa, and still vexes Palestinians to this day.

In the face of overwhelming extermination, Palestinian poets insist on their right to life. The wager is on the capacity of Palestinians to overcome their brokenness and to pursue possibilities for the exercise of freedom. Yet the same words that poets work with are used to justify the murder of Palestinians in international media and diplomatic forums. In Noor Hindi's poem, 'the shell of a cactus fruit', the poet samples Benjamin Netanyahu's speech at a UN General Assembly meeting in order to reclaim the depiction of Palestinian loss.

the shell of a cactus fruit
Noor Hindi

Dear K,
Have you dreamt of pomegranates this week? All the time you would talk of the pomegranate trees that reflected from your grandfather's eyes. If history is a woman with gentle hands pouring black tea, let there be sunlight, a soft chair, a young Palestinian boy entering his home for the first time. How remarkable is that? Let the woman be Jewish, and let there be nothing political about the way she yearns for her son's safety, about the years between 1948 and 1974, years your grandfather spent mourning the dirt he used to plant those pomegranate trees. In this version of history, there is some forgiveness. Come in, come in she beckons you. Everything

14. In variation with the previous translation of this poem by Fady Joudah, I give my translation inline here.

will change. Maybe you remind her of her son, how you both share the same olive-skinned complexion. You enter.

Dear K,
All this is real. You tell me stories. You repeat did you get that? and do you hear me? like I won't believe you. You hate the way I interrupt Al Jazeera, the way I ask questions. Your body is collapsed on our tired beige couch. Every hour we talk makes me wonder if you'll ever make eye contact. Will you look at me? Palestinian habits die because Palestinian bodies are dying – are dead. It happens every day. They couldn't care less about your grandfather, how he spent so many of his days staring at a ceiling, inhaling cigarette smoke, relying on the United Nations for food, for shelter. Year after year, you hovered around him – unbreakable.

Dear K,
In a photo, you stand next to him, wearing a small smile, dress pants, and a sweater. You told me once that he would smack fear right out of you. Is this why you have a history of hostility? Mom says you wrote love letters to her. She ripped each and every note you ever gave her, then burned them. This conflict rages. I wonder how much of you existed in those pages.

Dear K,
Imagine a day in the life of a 13-year-old Palestinian boy, I'll call him . throws a rock at an Israeli tank because Israel will not allow more than two to four hours of electricity a day for residents in Gaza. An Israeli soldier catches , lines him up in front of a wall, then threatens to shoot. thinks about clouds, how he'd one day like to greet them. was you, is you. In a dream, my great-grandmother flees her home, a pot held over her head to keep from the sun. Perhaps if she had thirsted a little less your love would be greater, stronger, more profound.

Dear K, Remember the cactus fruits you would always bring home? The shell of the cactus fruit has hundreds of hair-like thorns hiding under its surface. You always knew the exact place the blade of the knife must slice to open the sweet part of the fruit. Is that not love?

Like a plant in photosynthesis, Hindi transforms *language dioxide* – to return to Walid Daqqa's words, and to the title of this piece – into meaning. Photosynthetic linguistic transformations find a powerful counterpart in the practices of resistance, equally poetic in their imaginative subversion of the settler-colonial machinery of Israeli violence.

Daqqa gives me another key to unpack the function of poetry in Palestine today: his active resistance, from prison, against the Zionist state. From Baqa al-Gharbiyye, Daqqa was martyred on 7 April 2024 in the prison in which he was first incarcerated on 25 March 1986. He died from medical neglect and torture at the age of sixty-two, having spent the entirety of these decades serving time between all of Israel's prisons. Daqqa became known from behind bars as a political theorist, literary writer and illustrator. Together with his wife Sanaa, his daughter Milad (in Arabic, Birth) was also born while he was behind bars, by smuggling his Palestinian sperm from the Israeli jail, a subversive practice that has so far resulted in 181 Palestinian children born to incarcerated fathers.

I am concerned with two of Daqqa's works in particular: *Consciousness Molded or the Re-identification of Torture*, on how Israeli prisons work, and a children's tale, *The Oil's Secret*.[15] Both texts give a brutal depiction of the reality of Zionist occupation as seen from the perspectives of a prisoner and a young teenager, respectively. I wanted to read *The Oil's Secret* to my teenage son, but was struck by how it seems impossible to translate the occupation to a child who has neither experienced such violence, nor yet been adequately initiated into the history of our people.

I associate Daqqa's voice reaching us in spite of his prison walls with the poems by writers from Gaza that now reach us from behind the

15. *Consciousness Molded or the Re-identification of Torture* **(صهر الوعي:او إعادة تعريف التعذيب), Doha: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2010. The Oil's Secret (حكاية سر الزيت), Gilboa Prison, 2017.**

watertight siege and the genocide – with the words of Heba Abu Nada and Refaat al-Areer, or of the anonymous poets writing on the rubble of Gaza’s homes, or Gaza residents Maryam Qawash, Heba Agha and Sumia Wadi who continue to publish on social media at the time of writing. Their poems, which we read too often after their deaths, are kin to the children who are born to imprisoned freedom fighters, and to books penned and drawings smuggled out of the Israeli prison complex.

The poetic imagination enables leaps that overcome the enforced logic of Israeli erasure, where metaphoric overcoming is embodied in resistance practices on the ground and not only in language. It is an imagination that informs such practices of resistance, like the Gilboa Prison break of 2021, when six Palestinian prisoners escaped by digging a tunnel with a spoon. The Israelis pronounce all these acts – poetic and practical – on a par with one another, in order to justify their application of severe force on the Palestinians who perform them. The Israeli settler regime brutalizes the subjects who make these acts, along with their families; any attempts at self-narration or self-determination are punished under the false assumption that force will weaken the will for liberation.[16] Regimes of brutalization are never able, it seems, to learn the simple if uneasy lesson that the wretched of this earth never tire of seeking their liberation.

Palestinian poets work through their dispersals and dispossessions so new beginnings can manifest, even without the appearance of an end. Through their words they intervene in the repetition and normalization of the nakba’s eternal presence. Palestinian poetry is not alone in such a pursuit of new beginnings: its voices connect with the labour of liberation practiced by other wretched peoples, with the writings of Black poets, Arab poets and the colonized else- and everywhere. To close with the words of exiled Egyptian author Haytham el-Wardany on Gaza: ‘to speak any other language than the language of the dead today is to participate in the ongoing crime. The dead. The unburied dead. They can never be annihilated, even though our enemy continues to be victorious. Their language is that of the tiniest imperishable life forms, persistently sending signals, from beneath the earth.’[17]

16. Dareen Tatour spent three years in and out of jail for a poem she wrote. Sperm smugglers are very heavily punished, with fathers’ sentences being extended and their babies being refused official registration upon birth. Armed resistance leads to the geocoding of Gaza, to the bombing of Jenin, Tul Karm, Nablus… The list of seemingly infinite acts of cruelty goes on.

17. Haytham el-Wardany, ‘Labour of Listening’, Minor Literature[s], 23 July 2024, minorliteratures.com.

The Object of Value

Slinko

3 Mar 2026

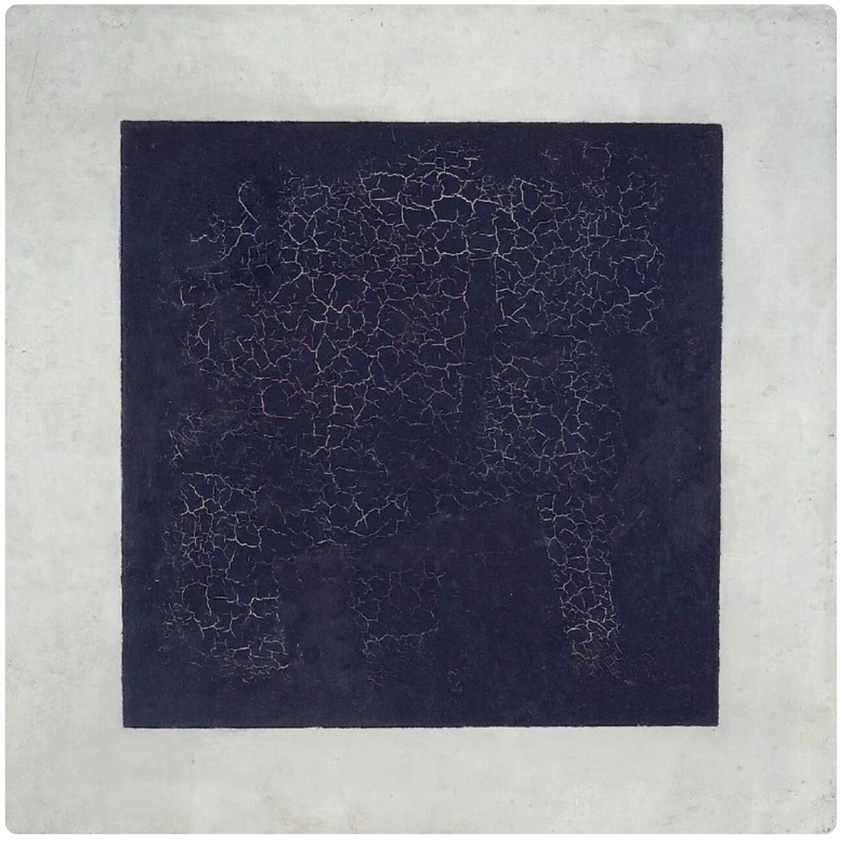
Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration.

– Carl von Clausewitz, 1832[1]

1. **Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret), Princeton University Press, 1976 [1832], p. 92.**

In his still-influential *On War* (1832), Carl von Clausewitz describes the pursuit of a political object that drives nations to wage war. If the value of this object is high enough, Clausewitz argues, war becomes an acceptable means of obtaining it. If the effort needed to secure the object exceeds its value, the war must be abandoned. In other words, to achieve peace, the object of value must become worthless.

In this text, I want to think through abstraction and representation by focusing on my homeland region of Donbas in eastern Ukraine and examining its stereotyping as a wasteland.



Kazymyr Malevych, *Black Suprematic Square*, 1915, oil on linen canvas, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

First, let me consider an object valued at 85 million dollars: the 1915 *Black Square* painting by Kazymyr Malevych,[2] part of the State Tretyakov Gallery's collection in Moscow. The *Black Square* first appeared in 1913 as a stage design for the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, in which the protagonist sought to abolish reason by capturing the sun and destroying time.

2. **Malevych is the romanized Ukrainian spelling.**



'The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0,10', Petrograd, 1915-1916

The play was a failure, but Malevych became convinced he had made a major breakthrough. Two years later, he presented the *Black Square* at 'The Last Futurist Exhibition' and announced the birth of a new artistic movement, Suprematism:

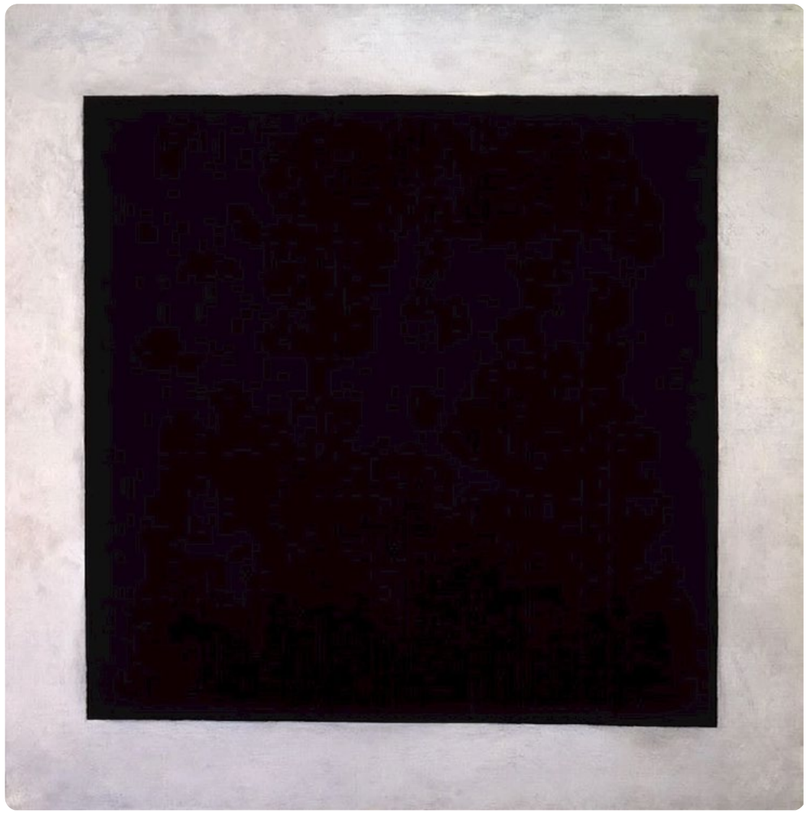
By Suprematism I mean the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art. To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling.[3]

3. **Kazymyr Malevych, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (trans. Howard Dearstyne), New York: Dover Publications, 2003 [1926], p. 67.**

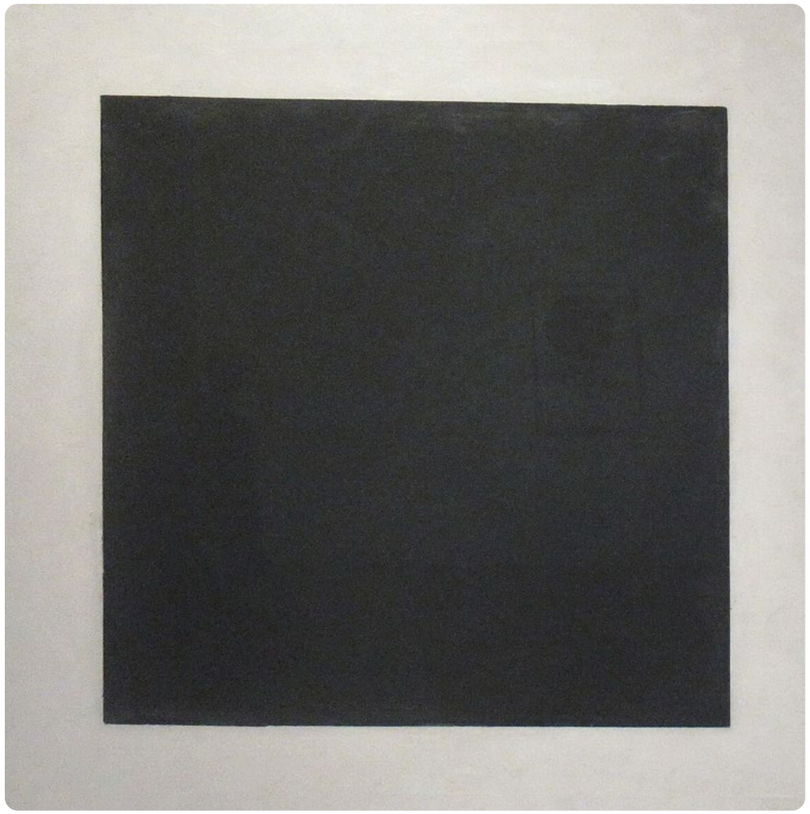
Over the next twenty years Malevych produced many Suprematist works, but the Black Square never ceded its importance. Malevych used it as insignia on his students' lapels and produced no fewer than three other versions of the original painting.

Never lacking in confidence or grandiosity, he was convinced that Suprematism was a world-shattering event, declaring the *Black Square* the 'zero point of painting'. Even in the context of the First World War and the end of the Russian Empire, he advocated the supremacy of pure feeling over objective reality.

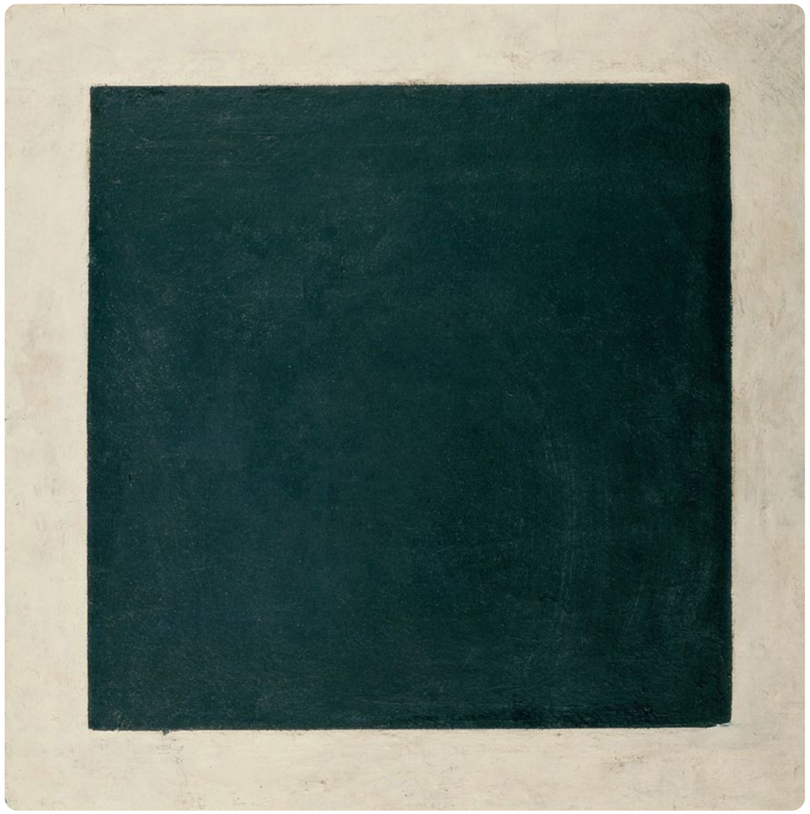
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Kazymyr Malevych, *Black Square*, 1923,
The Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg



Kazymyr Malevych, *Black Square*, 1929,
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Kazymyr Malevych, *Black Square*, c. late 1920s–1930s,
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The Black Square even followed Malevych to his grave. Laid beneath a *Black Square* painting, his coffin was transported in a truck adorned with a Black Square. His burial site, a cube containing the artist's ashes, was marked with the Black Square. In supreme irony, the burial site was destroyed in the Second World War: thus, the artist dissolved into the pure abstraction of the non-objective world.





Kazymyr Malevych's Funeral, © Foundation Khardzhiev

The Square: Sarah Pierce

When I arrived at IMMA in February 2024, I felt severed from a certain object of great value to me: a small village in Donbas that ceased to exist after the bombing in March 2023. To paraphrase Malevych's words, the objective world in which this village existed as my family's homeland had become meaningless. My attachment to this place was now a pure feeling liberated from its object.

A question grew in my mind: What was this feeling, exactly? Each time a new Donbas settlement was pronounced destroyed, the question expanded. It now demanded a coherent answer to systematic obliteration. From bits and pieces in Telegram channels, war reports, podcasts and news, and from the rubble, the question sought to assemble meaning.

At IMMA, a black square appeared. It was painted by a group of artists on the wall of Sarah Pierce's studio.[4] During the workshop, Sarah's instructions were simple: paint a 1 x 1 m square without using measurement tools or speaking to each other. Later we were to speak to the square directly. I failed at that task. I could not address this square without thinking of Malevych's *Black Square*.

4. Sarah Pierce, *The Square* (2017–). See Judith Wilkinson, 'Sarah Pierce Destabilises the Spectatorship of Art', *ArtReview*, 9 May 2023, artreview.com.



Sarah Pierce, *The Square*, 2017, performance and installation, commissioned by Jennie Guy for 'It's Very New School at Rua Red', South Dublin Arts Centre, Tallaght

The *Black Square* bothered me because it represented the cultural fight over the term 'Russian Avant-Garde'. With the start of the current war, Ukrainian cultural workers put a lot of effort into reclaiming historic accuracy: Malevych was of Polish descent, born in Kyiv and raised in Ukraine. The default 'Russian' label is liberally attached to him and other artists of his day. This is not surprising; the Russian Empire was a multiethnic state where anyone with ambition gravitated towards Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

But the imperial centre of gravity entailed a significant trade-off: to gain access to power and resources, one had to speak Russian; and once one spoke Russian, one was Russian in the eyes of the Empire. Of the long list of the so-called Russian Avant-Garde, many artists were Ukrainian, Polish, Belarusian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Finnish, German, Moldovan, Armenian, or of other ethnicities. We can debate whether they identified as Russians, with the Russian Empire, or whether this question even arose. For Malevych, the answer came during his second arrest in 1930; the OGPU records show his nationality as Ukrainian.[5] Still, it was the vaguely defined Russian culture that reaped the benefits of his cultural production.

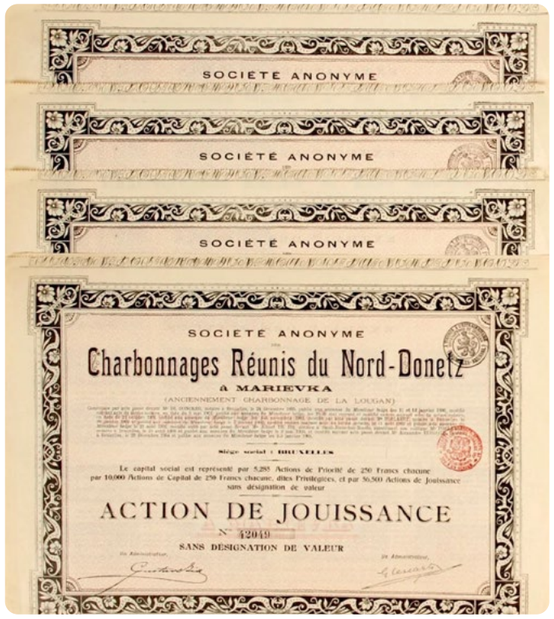
With the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917, the logic of coloniality and cultural extraction did not fall away but was rather repurposed by the new Soviet state. Later, the Russian Federation inherited the Soviet state as its successor. Today, the state museums in Moscow and Saint Petersburg continue to own the most valuable artifacts of complex and shared histories and to control the narratives around them.

These were the thoughts racing through my head when my turn came to address the black square at IMMA. I did not see it as abstraction, a coat of fresh paint, or a Brechtian learning play. I'm not even sure I saw a square. Instead, I saw the feeling finally taking shape, and it took me back to Ukraine and the black coal seams of Donbas.

5. OGPU (Ob'yedinyonnoye gosudarstvennoye politicheskoye upravleniye [Joint State Political Directorate]) arrest records, 20 September 1930. See Irina Vakar and Tatiana Mikhienko (ed.), Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism, vol. 1, London: Tate, 2015, pp. 563 and 565; cited in Marie Gasper-Hulvat, 'State-Sanctioned Trips of Soviet Artists to the West in the Late 1920s: The Unusual Case of Kazimir Malevich', Scalar, vol. 15, 2019, scalar.usc.edu.

Donbas: an enigma

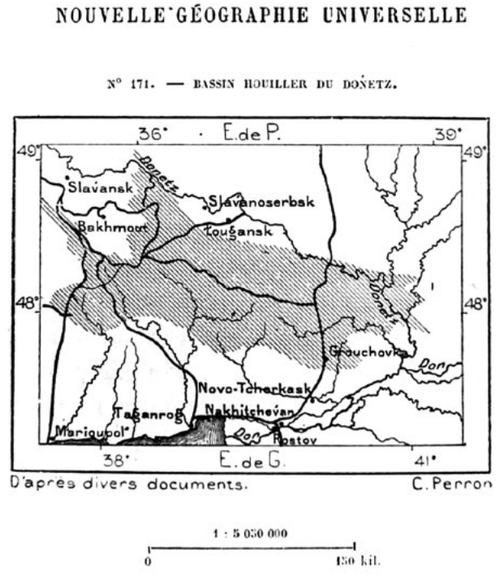
Donbas is an industrial region in eastern Ukraine, and its name is an abbreviation of Donets Coal Basin. While stereotypes about Donbas often paint it as pro-Russian, apolitical, or filled with Soviet nostalgia, the region's true identity remains an enigma. Home to ethnically diverse groups including Ukrainians, Greeks, Tatars, Moldovans, Jews, Armenians, Georgians, Azeris, Belarusians and Poles, Donbas also has a significant Russian minority.



An example of a pre-revolutionary mining security issued by the Société Anonyme des Charbonnages Réunis du Nord-Donetz à Mariévka, a Belgian-financed coal company operating in the Donets Basin, late 19th–early 20th century



Contemporary map of Ukraine



Map from Élisée Reclus, *Nouvelle géographie universelle: la terre et les hommes. Volume 5: L'Europe scandinave et russe*. Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1876-94, Plate No. 171: *Bassin houiller du Donetz*. Map by C. Perron

Historically, Donbas was and remains a borderland, embodying the spirit of the Wild Field it was when a sparsely populated, nomadic steppe.66.Dyke Pole, the historical Ukrainian name for the region, translates as Wild Field. For a map of the region, see Wikimedia Commons: commons.wikimedia. org. From its early nomadic days and Cossack settlements through industrialization and economic decline, Donbas has been the subject of contestation. It truly emerged on the world scene with the discovery of coal deposits in the nineteenth century. The Russian Empire promptly began leasing Donbas lands to investors from Belgium, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Switzerland. By the beginning of the twentieth century, foreign capital accounted for 70 percent of the coal mining and 86 percent of the iron ore mining industries. The Wild Field, which had been opaque to the eye of the Empire, was now defined as an extractive resource, setting Donbas on a trajectory of both economic pride and dispossession, and shaping its multicultural and international identity. It became a place of opportunity and escape, as Hiroaki Kuromiya writes:

> **What is remarkable about the Donbas is that even at the height of Stalinism it continued to maintain some elements of the free steppe, providing refuge to the disenfranchised, to outcasts, fugitives, criminals, and others. … Throughout its history, the Donbas has been politically unmanageable.[7]**

7. **Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Freedom and Terror in the Donbas: A Ukrainian-Russian borderland, 1870s–1990s*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 2–3.**



'Mechanizing Donbas', Alexandr Deyneka



'Let's Make Old Donbas into New Mechanized', Adolf Strakhov

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Many of Donbas’s persisting stereotypes stem from the Soviet imagery of nation-state building. As early as 1921, the region was recast as the heart of Soviet Russia, a new political regime under the same imperial lingua franca. Although the Soviet state was multi-ethnic, the label ‘Russian’ was deliberately imposed to convey uniformity, making it ‘Russian Avant-Garde’, ‘Russian Revolution’ and ‘Soviet Russia’, and labelling Donbas ‘Russian’.



Soviet poster, 1921. Source: New York Public Library

In this image, the phrase ‘Donbas, the heart of Russia’, is framed by two half-naked, faceless miners straining into the darkness. Donbas itself appears as a red blob, its tendrils reaching out to cities, factories, and plants. To understand this image as a harbinger, let me provide some historical context.

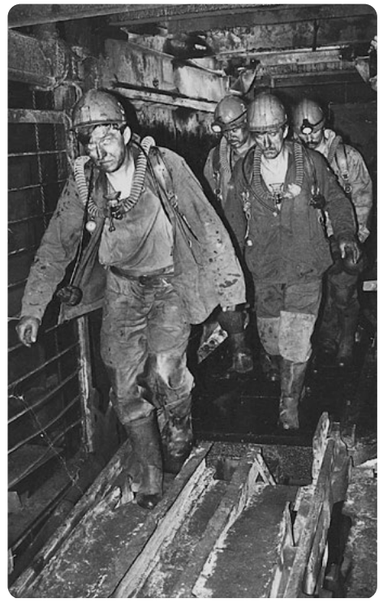
The poster dates to 1921, the year of Ukraine’s first famine and civil war, and marks the start of Donbas’s rapid industrialization and Russification. Coal and steel factories drew overwhelmingly Russophone workers, while state policies elevated Russian as the sole language of education, industry and administration, largely confining indigenous Ukrainian to the countryside. This was followed by the Great Famine (Holodomor) of 1931–33, the Great Terror of 1937–38, the Nazi occupation of 1941–43, and the post-war famine of 1946–47. Looking at this image, I can’t ignore

its cannibalistic metaphor, with the state feeding its military-industrial complex on the body of Donbas.

If Donbas was the heart of Soviet industry, then coal was at the heart of the Donets Basin. Donbas’s seams are rich in anthracite, the purest and highest-grade coal. It is shiny black and burns with a blue flame. Used for heating, metallurgy and other heavy industries, anthracite is embedded in Donbas’s identity and quite literally in the bodies of its inhabitants.



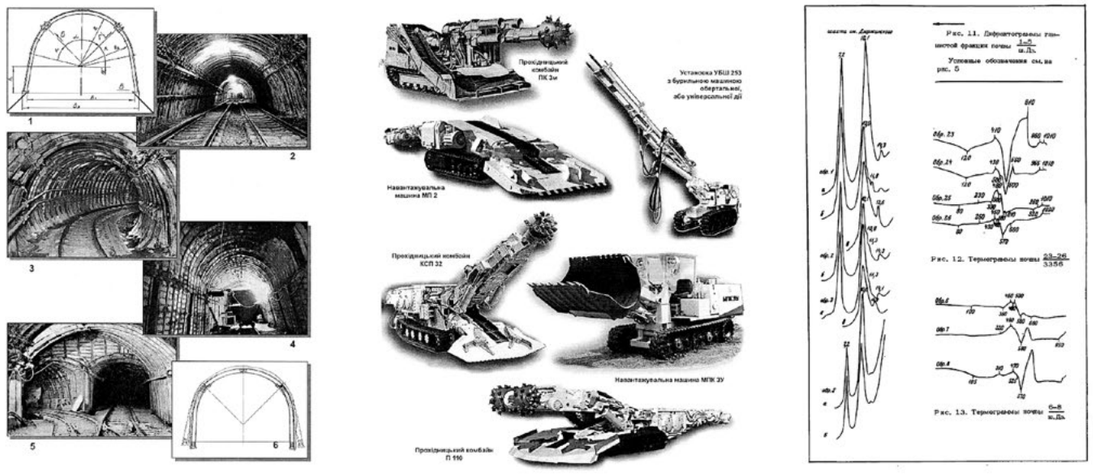
Hero of Socialist Labor, miner of the ‘Kapitalna’ mine, Y. I. Hrynovetskyi, Makiivka, 1972. Photo Album, Kyiv: Mystetstvo Publishers



Personal archive, found press photo, 1990s

Mining anthracite means working at depths of 350–600 metres. It’s incredibly hot down there, and time becomes imperceptible. During Stalin’s industrialization, forced labour in unsafe conditions was common and workers could be imprisoned for the smallest infractions. As coal production intensified, so did the image of Donbas as a region of proud coal miners digging their way to socialism.

By the end of the USSR, picture-perfect coal miners had become abstractions, alienated from themselves and from the objective reality of their lives. Where the blackness of the mines had once held the promise of a bright future, extraction had produced a meaningless void. The now-failing coal industry continued its pursuit of efficiency, rendering Donbas’s land ever more abstract: a cross-section of soil, core samples, pressure calculations and coal impurity studies. Riddled with endless mineshafts, Donbas became a hollowed-out political enigma.



Left: Designs of mine roof supports. Centre: Samples of Tunneling Equipment. (H, Pinkovskyi, 2006. *The Dniprodiproshakht Institute and the Coal Industry of Ukraine: A Documentary Edition*, Dnipropetrovsk: PP Lira LTD, 2006) Right: Clay Material in Soils and Parent Materials (A, Feofilova, *Fossil Soils of the Carboniferous and Permian of the Donets Basin*. Transactions, no. 270. Moscow: Nauka, 1975)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Donbas experienced a steep economic decline and rapid privatization. This created a permanent underclass of once-heroic miners, gave rise to illegal coal mining, organized crime and a new class of oligarchs. In the 1990s, Donbas was one of the most dangerous regions in Ukraine, with frequent assassinations and rival criminal factions. Those who survived became known as 'Donetskiye', a new political class that exerted power over the local population and extracted favours from Kyiv.

It was in this landscape of disenfranchisement and inequality that the Kremlin saw an opportunity to undermine Ukrainian independence by destabilizing Donbas. The Russkiy Mir Foundation, which envisions a Russia transcending the Federation's borders, began operating in Luhansk in 2009. Its stated mission is to project cultural, political and military influence wherever Russian speakers are found. In Donbas, it funded publications and conferences that amplified narratives of fear about Ukrainian nationalism, the hostile West and the assault on traditional Christian values. When Ukrainians ousted the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, himself a native of Donbas, in 2014, the ground for a backlash against Kyiv was already well-prepared.

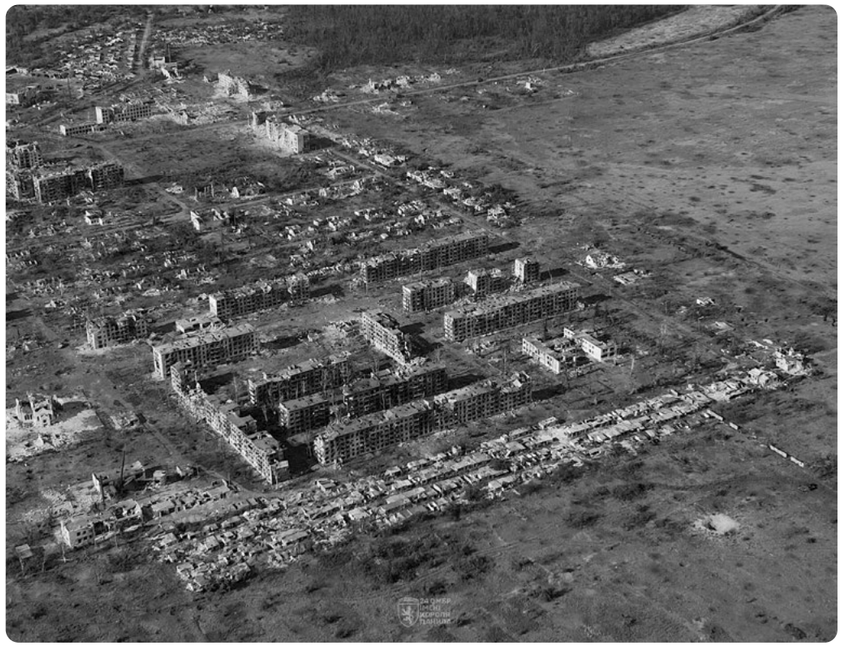
Capitalizing on its legacy of Russification and the mobilization of radicalized, disenfranchised groups, the Kremlin laid claim to this Russian-speaking region and 'rewarded' it with severance from Ukraine as the breakaway Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. In Russian state media, Donbas is called Novorossiya, or 'New Russia', a term coined after the Russian Empire conquered and annexed the Crimean Khanate in the eighteenth century. As Oleksiy Radynski brilliantly writes in 'Maidan and

Beyond, Part II: The Cacophony of Donbas', history 'repeats itself as historical reenactment'.[8]

Russkiy Mir: the Russian Retro-Garde

For the majority of Russian-speaking Ukrainians whom the Russkiy Mir purports to protect, the costs of this continuing war are staggering: so far over 70 percent of the destruction is concentrated in Donbas. Because neither Donbas nor its Russian speakers represent an object of value for the Kremlin, they are expendable means of pursuing its true political goal: a Russkiy Mir (Russian World), a phantom empire transcending international borders. As the 'special military operation' grinds Donbas settlements into a grey zone of abstraction metre by metre, the Russian Retro-Garde renders the objective reality of eastern Ukraine meaningless. Here, these words from Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2010) echo with a particular poignancy:

> **The East became a kind of mysterious vacuum in which only oblivion was possible.[9]**



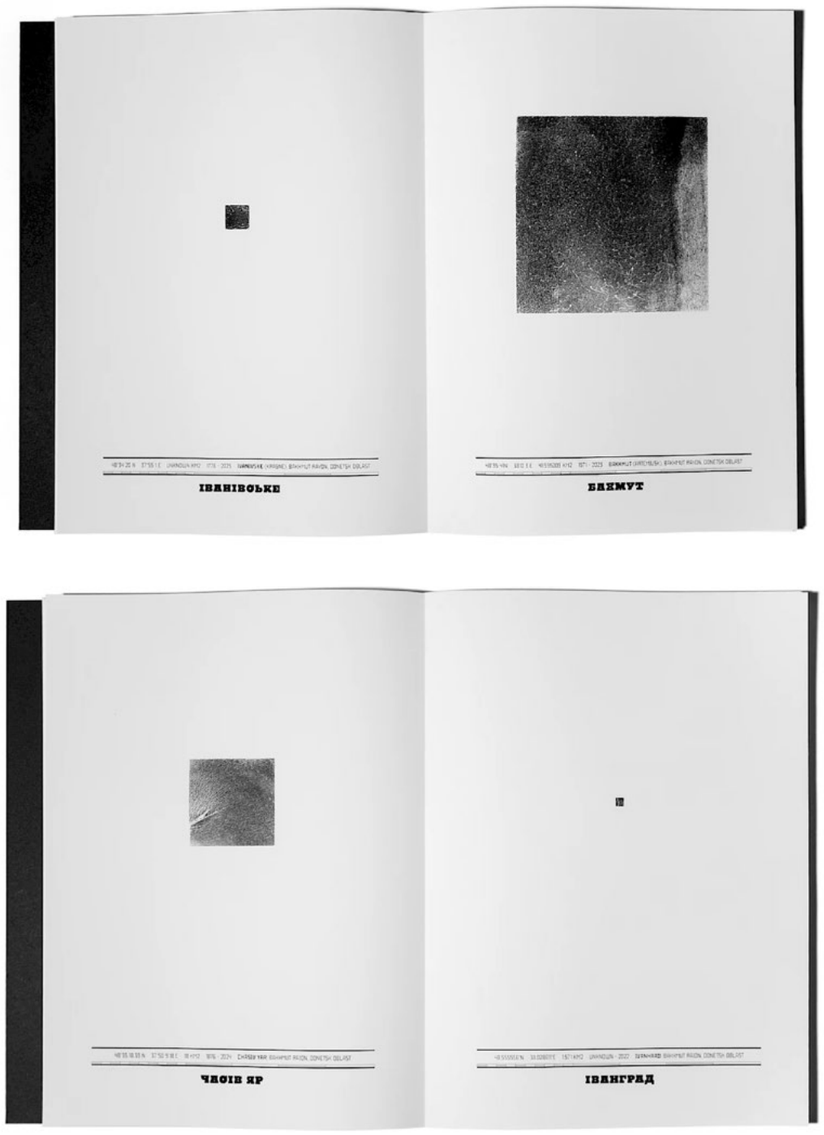
Chasiv Yar, Donetsk region, 2024. Image sourced from Telegram

Losing an object of great value, the tiny village of Ivanivske, made me think of other destroyed settlements whose names surface in the news only to announce their disappearance. Yet there is currently no comprehensive list dedicated to destroyed settlements as entities in their own right. I wanted to hold them longer in a form as intimate as touch and as convincing as evidence.

8. Oleksiy Radynski, 'Maidan and Beyond, Part II: The Cacophony of Donbas', e-flux, issue #56, June 2014, e-flux.com.

9. Snyder makes this statement in the context of explaining the killing fields across Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Latvia during World War II, especially the murder of Jews in Eastern Europe. Snyder's main point is the importance of remembrance and individual stories within the larger scale of genocidal policies of both Hitler and Stalin. Snyder also makes an argument for the propriety of comparing without equating, and the role of knowing history in the protection of democratic societies. Later in this afterword Snyder specifically makes this comparison with Putin's policy in Ukraine. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York: Basic Books, Hachette Group, 2018 [2010], afterword. Basic Books audiobook version (2018), 10 h 56 m.

The Registry is a book proposal to record every destroyed settlement in Donbas. It wrestles with a paradox: can disappearance become proof of existence? Can this negative value be reversed through artistic gesture? To begin, I have devised a simple methodology. I gather verifiable information and compile a dossier for each site, including the settlement's name, dates of establishment and destruction, a destruction-severity rating, GPS coordinates and land mass in square kilometres. Based on each settlement's land mass and to scale, I assign it an individually sized square.



Slinko, *The Registry*, 2025-ongoing, book project

I then use the body to imprint black ink within each square area. This creates an indexical image that gestures to the bodies in and on the ground through specific mark-making. *The Registry* will assemble a systematic record while portraying each settlement individually. No matter how tiny, the Registry will attempt to anchor these places in history and remembrance.

Black Map Series (Ukraine): Kathy Prendergast

Something extraordinary happened to me in Ireland. It took place at the storage facility where Christina Kennedy arranged for me to see a work by Kathy Prendergast. The materials of this piece, *Black Map Series (Ukraine)* (2010), were described simply as 'ink on a printed map'. It is a very accurate description, but I had to see it for myself.

The artist had obliterated a found object – a map – with dense black India ink, then repainted small white dots to mark the settlements. The map appeared lit up at night, as if one were flying over a peaceful landscape, contradicting the facts on the ground in Donbas. By painting over the map, Kathy erased the borders in a kind of dark imperial Lebensraum growing to the edges of the map, overtaking Ukraine.



Kathy Prendergast, *Black Map Series (Ukraine),* 2010. Collection of Irish Museum of Modern Art

Lebensraum, or 'living space', was a territorial expansion concept at the heart of Nazi ideology. It envisioned the East (Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltics and parts of Western Russia) as a deindustrialized, depopulated farming utopia for the resettlement of ethnic Germans. Lebensraum was the soil policy of the future of the Greater German Reich. Perhaps this was not intended by the artist, but my geopolitical reading is coloured by this history.



Kathy Prendergast, *Black Map Series (Ukraine),* 2010 (detail). Collection of Irish Museum of Modern Art

Inching closer to Kathy's map of Ukraine, I could make out the sheen of lithographic ink when it suddenly hit me – my birthplace was still there. It emerged from the darkness under its Soviet name, Artemivsk. Later renamed to its original toponym, Bakhmut, the city was completely destroyed in a six-month battle. Made in 2010, *Black Map Series (Ukraine)* has never stopped changing. An artwork, a document and a form of evidence, it exists in a state of indeterminacy. It looks remarkably Suprematist from a distance, but is full of objective materiality up close.



Visiting IMMA storage facility to see Kathy Prendergast's *Black Map Series (Ukraine),* 2010. Photo: Christina Kennedy

Later that day, consumed by reflections on Kathy's piece, I stumbled to the grocery store near IMMA. I was contemplating the store's provocative name, SuperValu, when I found myself face-to-face with a beer labelled 'HELL'. It was indeed a super-value, contained in a medium-sized bottle. I spent the rest of that evening drinking HELL in my room.

A contaminated object: feral garden

According to experts, it will take hundreds of years to demine Ukraine. Areas in and around Bakhmut, the town where most of my family and I were born, are no longer usable for human habitation. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), Anna Tsing explores survival and the ecologies of ruin. She writes:



Global landscapes today are strewn with this kind of ruin. Still, these places can be lively despite announcements of their death; abandoned asset fields sometimes yield new multispecies and multicultural life.[10]

Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. … They show us potential histories in the making.[11]

Our family home on the outskirts of Bakhmut was hit by a missile and burned down in 2023. When I think of what remains, I imagine assemblages of living and inanimate things tangled with the roots of the local weeds. It took my aunt almost two years to be able to speak about the place, but in time she made a hand-drawn map, and I learned about the incredible diversity of her environment before the war.

10. **Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 6.**

11. **Ibid., p. 23.**

There were twelve kinds of fruit trees, an apple tree that tasted like honey and one she called Grandpa's Apple. There was a tree called Melba, a variety developed in Ontario, Canada; its apples were yellow washed with crimson. My aunt identified her favourite tree, cut down by shrapnel, as the Simirenko apple, a variety cultivated by the Ukrainian scientist Leo Simirenko. This apple was so popular that it even travelled into outer space with the Soviet cosmonauts.

There were also at least five kinds of peppers: two sweet ones called Moldova and Stork, one bitter pepper, and one hot pepper she struggled to name. The peppers shared their patch with purple basil, very close to three kinds of cabbage: winter cabbage, a mid-season cabbage called Glory, and spring cabbage. She remembered a plum tree called Ugorka (Hungarian) and a pear tree called Conference; she recalled grapes named Vostorg (Delight) and an eggplant titled Almaz (Diamond). We were deep into the map when she began listing tomatoes: Volhohrad, Pink Giant, Khurma (Persimmon), Plum, De Barao, Kolkhozniy Urozhainiy (Kolkhoz / Collective Farm Harvest) and Kuban Newbie.



One particular variety, called the Donetskiy tomato, was developed in 1960 by the Vegetable and Melon Experimental Station in Opytne in the Donetsk region. It grows well in the steppes of Donbas and is sometimes referred to as 'the tomato tree' because of its sturdiness. Though Opytne village was destroyed during the counteroffensive, the Donetskiy tomato survives across the region and beyond.

My aunt's hand-drawn map allowed me to travel back to the village, and Kathy's map gave me 'proof of life' by redeeming town names from the nothingness of ruination. Now I wanted to know what else remains

and persists in this damaged landscape. What kind of new multispecies gatherings take place in my aunt's abandoned garden? What kind of freedom can be found in the rubble of Bakhmut? To use Anna Tsing's words again:

I think it exists only in relation to ghosts. Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exercise the haunting, but works to survive and negotiate it with flair.[12]

12. Ibid., p. 91.

Even before the full-scale invasion, separatist authorities in Donetsk stopped the costly maintenance of the water pumps at several coal mines. The flooding that followed contaminated groundwater with chemicals including chlorine, sulphates, nitrates, iron, manganese, mercury, arsenic, copper and lead. This acid run-off displaces methane gas, raising the risk of explosions and ground subsidence. It also renders soil unsuitable for agriculture. One of the roughly 180 mines in the occupied territories is the Yunkom coal mine, the site of a 1979 underground nuclear explosion. The floodwater carries its radionuclides across the region.

The phenomenon of cultivated plants surviving with flair in post-human landscapes has been observed in Chernobyl and Syria, earning them the name of volunteer crops. In my aunt's garden, so typical of the Ukrainian countryside, tomatoes, squashes, potatoes, peppers, sunflowers, beans, corn, garlic, beets and cabbage will likely reappear year after year.

Bereft of human care, these plants will grow in increasingly erratic patterns, edging toward remnants of compost piles and irrigation sources. Freed from human harvesting, their fruit will overripen and fall, depositing seeds into the memory bank of the soil. Over time, the vegetables will undergo de-domestication and produce smaller fruit with thicker skins. Some will venture even further, exchanging genetic material with wild relatives and altering their appearance in this environment.

The Donetskiy tomato will continue to show signs of drought tolerance and pest resistance. I imagine this tomato as a tomato forest unleashed in abundant overgrowth, exuding that distinct tomato-leaf perfume of terpenes and phenols. Growing in contaminated soil, this tomato will have to fight, but it will also do something else because, like sunflowers, tomatoes belong to a category of plants called hyperaccumulators.

In Chernobyl, sunflowers planted near the Exclusion Zone removed significant amounts of caesium-137 and strontium-90 from water and soil. The plants adapted to and persisted in radioactive abandoned agricultural plots, with volunteer and naturally regenerating crops showing remarkable survival skills. As Tsing writes:

> **Everyone carries a history of contamination. Purity is not an option.**[13]

13. Ibid., p. 27.

In thinking about the afterlife of my aunt’s garden, the Black Square makes its reappearance as quadrat sampling. It is a method in ecology that uses square framing to estimate the abundance, density and frequency of plants in a specific area, allowing an educated guess to made about a larger part of the land.

In this square of Donbas land, I inevitably drift toward a philosophy of vegetal agency. I want to imagine hybrid assemblages of volunteers, natives and feral relatives rewriting definitions of ‘wild’ and ‘cultivated’. I’m tempted to view plants not as objects of human needs, but as vegetal beings experiencing freedom on their own terms, capable of transforming landscape through ecological remediation, and through this, redeeming Donbas’s self-image as a Wild Field.



‘A quadrat, a meter square of wood, is being thrown randomly to take samples of the yield of crop for each tillage method’. Image source: A. Akbarnia and F. Farhani, ‘Study of fuel consumption in three tillage’, *Research* in *Agricultural Engineering*, Czech Academy of Agricultural Sciences, Vol. 60, 2014

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A Date Palm Against the Re-Deportation of Parables, or Europe’s Palestine Monument

Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman

8 Apr 2025

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Me, a palm tree? I'm the steel that wounds it, and the terrifying moon that sacrifices it. I can't bear my exile any longer.
– Zakaria Mohammed[1]

What I'm saying at this moment is not being said by me
But is dug from the ground like grains of petrified wheat.
– Osip Mandelstam[2]

To our European friends, I never ever want to hear you lecture us on human rights or international law again. And I mean that.
– Reverend Dr. Munther Isaac[3]

The confusion is monumental. The confusion is the monument.
– Dot Devota[4]

Dear world,
In short, we are the culmination of your deep and brutal grief.
We are your salt lakes.
– Hind Joudah[5]

But it's just my eye.
– Krystyna Budnicka/Hena Kuczer[6]

I think when ideas are put down by force as opposed to actually defeated because they fail, when they're just crushed, they can come back. They're seeds.
– Naomi Klein[7]

Avraham spoke up, saying, Here I venture to speak to my Sovereign, I who am but dust and ashes:
– Genesis 18:27[8]

But Robert, the palm tree is projected into the future.
– Joanna Rajkowska[9]

1. *seeds*

x

I will tell this story or tell it again.

Because I was asked to write, definitively, if subjectively, at this hour, on what was, after it, and became swiftly, *anything but art*,[10] and was called, as I have heard, not named, *Warsaw's palm* or *the palm* or *the palm tree*: an artwork, more often understood, if not in language, to be, in feeling, an *anti-monument*, still, a woman-tree, and a *Holocaust monument*, as my cousins' cousin, without knowing much about art or political violence, responded to me at a seder, but unlike any other we know, I should have told him, anywhere, somehow; or, if not, and *definitely never*, at least, rooted there-in, genuinely so, and a central gathering place and *major prop*[11] for decades of what we could well call a spectrum of anti-

1. Zakaria Mohammed, 'January 2' (trans. Lena Khalaf Tuffaha), *Poetry Foundation*, 11 June 2024, poetryfoundation.org.

2. Ralph Dutli, *Osip Mandelstam: A Biography* (trans. Ben Fowles), London: Verso Books, 2023.

3. Munther Isaac, 'Munther Isaac Sermon in the Liturgy of Lament: Chirst in the Rubble', YouTube, 23 December 2023, youtube.com.

4. Dot Devota, 'Race Riot at East St. Louis July 2, 1917', Poetry Foundation, 10 June 2024, poetryfoundation.org.

5. Hind Joudah, 'February 25, 2024', *Arablit Quarterly, (Gaza! Gaza! Gaza!)*, vol. 6, no. 1, season 1, 2024, p. 79.

6. Joanna Rajkowska, unpublished interview with the author, 23 September 2023.

7. Naomi Klein and David Naimon, 'Between the Covers Naomi Klein Interview – Part Two', Tin House, 11 December 2023, tinhouse.com.

8. 'Genesis 18:27', Sefaria, sefaria.org.

9. Joanna Rajkowska, unpublished interview with the author, 4 May 2024.

10. Rajkowska, unpublished interview, 23 September 2023.

11. Rajkowska, unpublished interview, 4 May 2024.

fascist gestures, nests, disguises, in a city Nazism all but entirely razed, incinerated, incarcerated, and displaced; and since which, regimes have tried, at times furiously, to order, in ethnosectarian demolitions, as in 1968,[12] in femicidal lawfare, as in 2020,[13] and not without resistance, you see, *the palm*, and yesterday, in Białowieża Forest;[14] a destruction myth in the city, a foundation; *the palm*, humus in the unrested.

The oak forest is arrhythmia.



Jerusalem Avenue, 2001. Photo Joanna Rajkowska

x

At this hour, I hear myself talking to someone. When will our rapid whispering end?

Two meanings – call them, here, in Warsaw, at the crossing of Nowy Świat (New World) and Aleje Jerozolimskie (Jerusalem Avenue), *resistances to* and *forces* – of the word *draft*, in the only language I write, soothe my deepest fears, my small form, and metaphysical nosebleed.

I am smaller than my five-year-old daughter, one of the million children to whom I dedicate this text, not because she is unafraid and not because she is less corrupted, so to speak, by the assassination of the Earth's land and environmental defenders in Atlanta, in Columbia, in India, in The Philippines;[15] daily school massacres in kindergartens, elementary schools, and high schools across the State, the planet's arsenal, in which we live;[16] the seventy thousand tons of bombs that have destroyed Gaza;[17] the floods, forest fires, deportations, droughts, which ferment with enclosure, I think I am beginning to understand, as we age alongside others, and calcify, amputate, slice the tongue of the trajectories and genealogies of love. I am smaller than Nelly because she lives with visceral hope. Its language is her

12. See 'March '68. Historical facts', POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, polin.pl.

13. See Letta Tayler, 'Two Years on, Poland's Abortion Crackdowns and the Rule of Law', Human Rights Watch, 22 October 2022, hrw.org.

14. See, for example, Brenda Chávez and Hanna Jarzabek, 'Refugees on the Belarus-Poland Migration Route Come up Against a Steel Wall and the Wilds of the Bialowieza Forest', Equal Times, 19 May 2023, equaltimes.org.

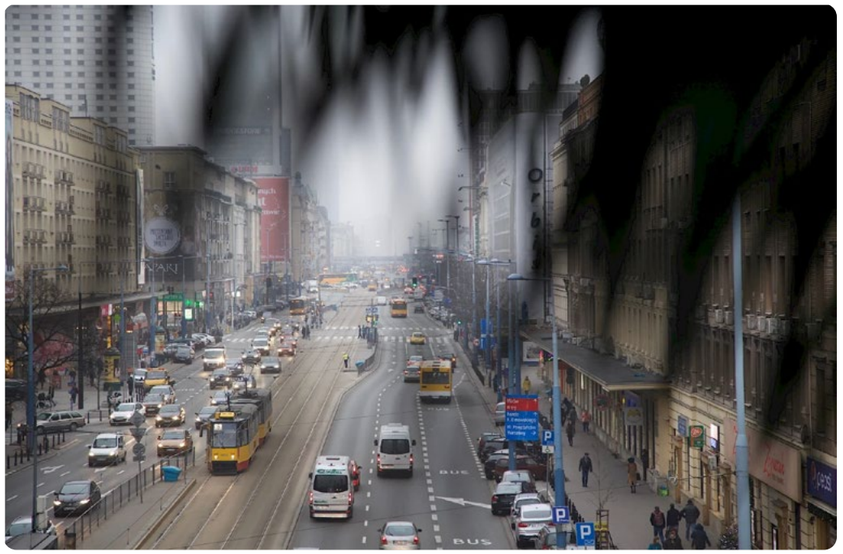
15. 'Global Witness Annual Defenders Report 2023/2024: Missing Voices: The violent erasure of land and environmental defenders', Global Witness, 10 September 2024, globalwitness.org.

16. See, for example, David Riedman, 'How Many School Shootings? All Incidents From 1966–Present', K-12 School Shooting Database, 2025, k12ssdb.org.

17. Alia Chughtai, 'One Year of Israel's War on Gaza – by the numbers', Al Jazeera, 8 October 2024, aljazeera.com.

existence. As it is Hind Rajab's existence *z"l*, one of the million children to whom I dedicate this text, who was twenty-three months older than Nelly when she was murdered last January, fleeing, trapped with five relatives' bodies, alive with her cousin, in a car, north from Gaza City, stilled, within an enclosure, on the phone with the Palestinian Red Crescent within an enclosure within an enclosure, not unlike two million others, there, in a macro- or micro-cosmic sense, recording their destruction, in real time, in letters to us, since what was to me, and many, the blinding flash of the 7 October attack and massacres, and before.[18]

18. Forensic Architecture et al., 'The Killing of Hind Rajab', Forensic Architecture, 21 June 2024, forensic-architecture.org.



Joanna Rajkowska, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2002), 9 February 2015, 2:30pm

How long before? How many centuries? How many hours? And from each direction? How many days? Who is asking, because I don't see the end, because I am small, because I see the beginning?

And the immeasurable courage of medics en route to Hind's immeasurable courage, stilled, also, near her, also, murdered. The language of hope, its viscerality, if I can say, from deep up here, from far out and behind, and from way in down there, is Hind's existence, the theft of which, among at least sixteen thousand others, and many more, buried in ruins, emits the truth of the Gaza genocide. If I have anything, I have my place in this viscerality, every moment another word, another act, unto my child, who gets raging, who gets tearful, who gets hungry, who gets sleepy, who gets wise, who gets thirsty, who gets empathetic, who gets laughing fits, who gets returned, who gets greed, who gets remembering, who gets distrusted, who gets confused, who gets calling me in the night for water.

I remember, over the phone, several years ago, Joanna Rajkowska, the artist who created and emplaced the palm, spoke of interacting with a new generation of politicized artists in Poland, those perhaps near my

age and tendencies, at a time when the democratic institutions of the State had been sabotaged by judicial coups,[19] Polish fascists marched in great numbers through Warsaw,[20] abortion in almost all cases had been banned, research implicating ethnic Poles in crimes of the Holocaust was criminalized,[21] and European Union asylum laws were chronically violated, exploiting the primeval Białowieża Forest on the Belarusian border to murder asylum seekers by attrition. Supporting their intensity and commitment, Joanna fretted over a constraint in their approach, where the anxious focus on an exacting materialization of a politics elides the *primal ignorance and helplessness that makes it possible to become an artist.*[22] She pleaded, *You need to go somewhere, stand there, and feel what is happening in your body.*[23]

19. See, for example, Christian Davies and Jennifer Rankin, '"Declaration of war": Polish row over judicial independence escalates', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2020, theguardian.com.

20. See, for example, Vanessa Gera, 'Police Criticized for Role at Nationalist March in Warsaw', AP News, 12 November 2022, apnews.com.

21. See, for example, Masha Gessen. 'The Historians Under Attack for Exploring Poland's Role in the Holocaust', *The New Yorker*, 26 March. 2021, newyorker.com.

22. Joanna Rajkowska, *Where the Beast is Buried*, London: Zero Books, 2013.

23. Joanna Rajkowska, unpublished interview with the author, April 2022.

2. *just my eye*

x

The first resistance to and force of the word *draft*, in my mind, is the attempt to create, and what this attempt materializes before the created thing is actualized and given up and out (to no one or to others), such as right now, these very thoughts you read, written in the margins of a tan-colored biography on Martin Luther, titled *Luther*, printed in Munich in 1943, at which time, in Warsaw, that April, two armed Jewish fronts — the Leftist Yidishe Kamf Organizatsie of Bundists (anti-Zionist) and Socialist Zionists, and the fascist Revisionist-Zionist Yidishe Militerishe Fareynikung — incarcerated, starving, behind ghetto walls, in an apartheid city, of Aryan and Jew, portending the auto-destruction of Europe, amidst the last deportations to Treblinka concentration camp, began to fight their occupiers and mass murderers. In counter-response, the Nazis burned the entire ghetto *akin to a huge bloodshot eye*.[24]

24. 'Around Us a Sea of Fire. The Fate of Jewish Civilians During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising', POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw, 18 April 2023 – 8 January 2024.

I found this book *Luther* beside two other books in a box on the stone windowsill of a Catholic church next to Nelly's kindergarten in Prenzlauer Berg, while we were staying in Berlin, last September, and decided then to take notes in its margins. There were two or three other books on the church's windowsill, and I intuited, upon approaching the cardboard box, that one of them would be written by Martin Luther, someone I had long intended to face, which turned out to be false and near the truth. Within the framework of Luther's revolutionary influence on Christianity, founding Protestantism in what is known as the Reformation, he wrote two persecutory books, one of which endorsed and encouraged the ruthless suppression and mass killing of one hundred thousand revolting German peasants and the other a fundament of the Nazi project and anti-Judaism at large: *Wider die Mordischen und Reubischen Rotten der Bawren* in 1525 (Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants) and *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen* in 1543 (On the Jews and Their Lies). The intersection of these works and its afterlife in this present continues to beckon my attention.

Luther is now beginning to crumble and fill with my writing, some of the earliest of which I created during last year's holy days of Teshuva in Warsaw

two weeks before 7 October, such as the above-mentioned phrase – *akin to a huge bloodshot eye* – transcribed when standing, mesmerized, some distance from Joanna's light box, *We live day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute (The Eye of Krystyna Budnicka/Hena Kuczer)* (2023) in the exhibition, 'Around Us a Sea of Fire. The Fate of Jewish Civilians During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising'. *We live day by day...* is a 160:1 macro-scale photograph of the eye of Krystyna Budnicka, commissioned by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews for the eightieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Budnicka, born and incarcerated by the Nazis as Hena Kuczer, is a lifelong Warsaw resident, retired schoolteacher, *and the only known survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising still alive as of* this moment.[25] When I showed the photograph to the curator and philosopher Almut Shulamit Bruckstein Çoruh, she muttered to herself, *Shahid... the witness. Shahid*, I think I had known, more often from Arabic is translated as *martyr*, but Shulamit clarified that as in Hebrew this meaning is bound to and emerges from *witness*. When I saw Budnicka's eye – *pupil, iris, sclera and eyelids*[26] – before then, in the light box, in the exhibition, without yet Shulamit's word, here is what I knew.



Joanna Rajkowska, ***We live day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute (Eye of Krystyna Budnicka/Hena Kuczer)*****, 2022. Photo Jędrzej Sokołowski**

25. Joanna Rajkowska, 'We Live Day by Day, Hour by Hour, Minute by Minute', rajkowska.com.

26. Ibid.

The scale of the photograph projects the eye as a tremendous primeval surface (yes, think *Białowieża Forest*), such as sometimes we see in another, when staring close in a consensual concentration that exceeds the contractual edges of the imperative *Look into my eyes*. I remember doing so with my first love, as teenagers, and finding something seething with a fragile knowledge, almost like the eye was never there, like the eye is almost not even there. I say *eye*, as it is with the light box, because it was not possible, I remember, to see another's set of eyes this way, and perhaps that is where the act departs from *Look into my eyes*. I saw the eye – my beloved's *and* Budnicka/Hena's – nearly in separation, alone, not in the sense of a disembodied or excised encounter, but rather because I was seeing something that was seeing me and yet unconcerned with my gaze *and* nearly distinct from what I could rationally perceive to be a part of a whole being. At least, and all at once, the eye felt inhabitable, nonhuman, unrepeatable, ephemeral, mirroring, alone, and distant. Perhaps a tension between these poles of nonhuman and unbearably human qualities carries that porous border, that potentiality, in the *Shahid*, between *martyr* and *witness*.

Where the exhibition told the story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising according to a radical principle – using only the survived and fragmented accounts and material traces of its subjects and witnesses, as opposed to extensive documentation taken by the Nazis – *We live day by day...* was the only contemporary artifact and artwork. In the first room, where the eye was installed, the light box intensively refracted the trope Gliksman recorded, by way of what Walter Benjamin called *Jetztzeit* (Now-time),[27] which in full read: *At night, the burning ghetto – akin to a huge, bloodshot eye – gazes towards the city and awaits rescue in vain.* Other writings and photographs, in this room of the exhibition, continued to circulate

27. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' [1940] (trans. Dennis Redmond, 2005), marxists.org.



Joanna Rajkowska, ***We live day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute (Eye of Krystyna Budnicka/Hena Kuczer)*****, 2022 (detail). Photo Jędrzej Sokołowski**

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that tension of witness and separation between those outside and those incarcerated in the ghetto; the tension, which is to say the sociological fact of encounters under apartheid in the midst of a genocide, as to whether Poles outside the walls would join in arms and expand the uprising to resist the devastating counter-response, which would soon leave nothing in the ghetto standing except for some of whom and some of those which were underground, like Hena in a bunker; the primal imagining of why or what or when those on the other side of a wall touch, see, listen, think.

Joanna created the photograph with her partner Andrew Dixon and the photographer Jędrzej Sokołowskiin his studio, setting up a little wooden frame Andrew had built to gently hold still and rest the subject's head. *But it's just my eye*, she told Joanna. *We live day by day...* facilitates the concentrated hyper-proximal gaze, incorporating into a present a *consensual concentration that exceeds the imperative* look into my eyes. For, regardless of what one asks or is asked by a lover, a witness, or someone who claims long ago to have been your neighbor and is now burning your ancient olive trees, or your entire community alive locked in a barn, or your whole family all at once in a collapsing apartment, the eye up-close is mutational, peripatetic, and kairotic, a tiny quarrel in the current. And yet the project text calls this degree of mortal materiality *an ultimate border line – mere survival defined by fragility of human organism. Just* the eye of Krystyna Budnicka/Hena Kuczer, it is written, *is not an abstract eye, it is not symbolic or metaphoric*, but *part of the body, that was suffering, being confined and sentenced to extermination*, and repeats and reaches for *the play of glances, the ghastly exchange of 1943*.[28]



Henry N. Cobb, *WARSAW, AUGUST 1947* with rendering of the palm tree by Joanna Rajkowska, 2022

28. Rajkowska, 'We Live Day by Day, Hour by Hour, Minute by Minute'.

I think, therefore, there is a very basic power in *We live day by day...* , which decocts what capacities to sow human beings and their art hold and withhold within overwhelming life-destroying systems. For it is not that aforementioned repetition and reaching by themselves that bear and incite this very basic life-giving power, but rather their enfoldment in the force of the eye's aging, which is stored, for us, also, diacritically, in the slash between *Budnicka* and *Hena*, and transmits most intensely – because it is what is real to us, beyond and through reenactment – what the project text above called *fragility*, and I a *primeval seething knowledge*, and Budnicka herself *just*.

3. *from the ground*

x

In the second force of or resistance to the word *draft*, fragments of weather move through an enclosed shelter. Typically, where I have lived and in what I have experienced, in winter, or just when it's cold, such force is unwelcome, an irritant, unknown until felt or evidenced nefariously. When it's hot, this force of the word gives pleasure and relief, so that, even, the word mutates to *breeze* and negates almost all relations with *draft*.



Joanna Rajkowska, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2002), 15 February 2021, 12:50am. Photo Marek Szczepański

Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue (2002) is an artificial, life-size date palm tree in the city center of Warsaw, created twenty-two years ago by a then young and unknown Polish artist from Bydgoszcz, upon returning from a three-month visit to the State of Israel – her very first of many to historic Palestine – staying near the Damascus Gate during the Second Intifada. Towering, real and unreal, from a mounded island in the Charles de Gaulle roundabout, from where two major avenues, Nowy Świat (New World)

and Aleje Jerozolimskie (Jerusalem Avenue), centrifuge, *the work*, in one sense, as I have experienced it, is a threshold, when walking to cross the long bridge over the Vistula River, one's back to the central train station and Stalin's imposing Palace of Culture and Science, passing the National Museum, facing the Praga district and the forests lining that side of the river, sometimes alight at night with peoples' little fires, south of the bridge, and a bright metal-feeling football stadium on the north. *Warsaw's palm* is taken at face.

The artist's book *Where the Beast is Buried* (2013) narrates this and future confrontations with the region of postwar European-Jewish refuge, settler-colonialism, and Palestinian expulsion and subjugation. A central thread in the book's chronological array of public projects, Joanna encounters the region's extant catastrophe and moral triangulation with Europe,[29] *drafting* what I have found to be an equal parts rare and ventricular set of monumental whispers, from within her Polish vantage, of its *unprocessed* areas.[30] Subsequent (but also precedent) projects, often public works, exert shards or the whole of this triangle, taking the artist physically and conceptually to the interstices of Polish, Palestinian, and Jewish forms, voids, and spaces, either implicitly or explicitly, to manifest a shifting crystallization of potentialities and repercussions within what I have before called, in this case, their inter-isolations: *No Sign of Dying Soon* (1995), *State of Israel* (2001), *Maja Gordon Goes to Chorzów* (2006), *Oxygenator* (2007), *Uhyst Refugee Asylum* (2008), *Camping Jenin* (2008), *Postcards from Switzerland* (2009), *Minaret* (2009–11), *Bund!* (2012), *Born in Berlin* (2012), *Forcing a Miracle* (2012), *Stones and Other Demons* (2019), our film *Night Herons* (2020), *Sorry* (2022), *Birds in Gaza / Greetings from Gaza* (2024), and an ongoing chain of actions staged with the palm, including *Death of the Palm Tree* (2019), *Refugee Flag* (2021), and our performance with Grupa Granica (Border Group) *Do Not Uproot!* (2023).[31]

For Joanna, *Greetings...* initiated decades of unrelenting insomnia, a homemaking in the city her mostly estranged father's mixed Jewish-Slavic family left to its rubble, and a series of what are often considered the most important public artworks in post-Communist Poland. Moreover, and more precisely, *Greetings...* constitutes a groping manifestation of the fear and confusion the artist felt through the Israeli siege of occupied Bethlehem and her subsequent return to a Warsaw she felt was perforated with voids. *It was neither anxiety nor fear of anything specific*, she wrote of her experience in Palestine-Israel, *but a tension that was in the very air itself – in the smell of the sweat, in every bus I entered, between people. Sometimes, I lay down in my bunk during the day, closed my eyes and felt myself shaking all over*.[32]

In these, what I think of as *Greetings... '* contractions, Joanna created a series of situations where she lies face down on the ground: across a sidewalk in long sleeves and long skirt in the Haredi neighborhood of Mea Shearim, and naked against the bottom of an empty private swimming pool in Tiberias. The latter was photographed and titled *State of Israel*. I see her

29. This concept is influenced by and runs parallel to Sa'ed Atshan and Katharina Galor's unprecedented anthropological study, *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*, **Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.**

30. Rajkowska, *Where the Beast is Buried*.

31. Each of these projects are accessible through often extensive documentation on Rajkowska's website: rajkowska.com.

32. Rajkowska, *Where the Beast is Buried*.



Joanna Rajkowska, *State of Israel I*, **2001. Photo Artur Żmijewski**

forehead rested on the blue tiles, face submerged in the bit of green water, her free ears listening for what hovers, eyes staring into the ground *where the beast is buried* because the ground is where everything is buried, like five hundred Palestinian villages. My friend Dirar Kalash, a sound artist and musician from Kafr Qari, who like Joanna is both completely deaf in one ear and was definitively politicized in the Second Intifada, tells me that to listen in a destroyed, colonized village one must *refuse to hear with one's ears*.[33]

33. See Dirar Kalash, Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman et al., *Flight Manifesto* بيان الصعود إلى السماء, **social artwork/film, 2019–24.**

Of the time of the Second Intifada, Fida Jirtis writes, in her book *Stranger in My Own Land* (2022), that while working in a Jewish-majority office in Karmiel, an Israeli city built on the ruins of Deir el-Assad, Bi'neh, and Nahaf, she found herself unable to stand on Yom HaShoah, the day commemorating Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide. Suddenly, a high-pitched sound broke the silence. Everyone rose to their feet. It was the memorial siren. *At that moment, I could not get up… I felt sick. All I saw were flashes of coverage: the blood, the mutilated bodies, the women screaming and tearing their hair, the rubble, the funerals with body after body wrapped in Palestinian flags.* A colleague confronts her decision. *After a few moments, I found my voice. 'They're killing my people as we speak. As they stand to remember their dead, they're making more of mine.'*[34]

On the days before her leaving, Joanna wrote, *Though it was not my conflict and not my war, it was my misfortune, for reasons I could not understand.* She continued, recalling, *At the marketplace people often fell silent when they heard us speak Polish. I looked at the unfriendly, bitter faces. I thought, No wonder, if I were a Polish-Jewish woman, nothing could make me return to Poland.*[35]

The palm grows *from the ground* to connect the underworld and the overworld.

X

When the first and second forces of or resistances to the English word *draft* entangle, they appear in fragments of weather moving through the enclosed thing actualized and given up. In relation, they soothe me. Because of it, I am on time. What's more is that we are not alone in it. So, I am late.



Joanna Rajkowska, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2002) with keffiyeh, 2011. Photo: Joanna Rajkowska

One could say Joanna's *Greetings…* is a tone that crosses and so carries time and territory: a spectral demarcation and *line of flight*,[36] nevertheless rooted in a place, an intersection, a river, where territory is rendered, but a member of whole life. *Monuments freeze the memory*, Joanna wrote to me, after I referred to *Greetings…* as a monument in a voice note.

34. Fida Jirtis, 'A homecoming under siege', +972 Magazine, 8 December 2022, 972mag.com.

35. Rajkowska, Where the Beast is Buried.

36. This phrase used in homage to the work and teachings of Almut Shulamit Bruckstein Çoruh / House of Taswir, meaning more 'escape and auto-concealment' than 'ascent' or 'departure'. See taswir.org.

Yes, Joanna, I know *this*, and I learned it from you, when I was twenty-nine, before we met, and yet, *Greetings…* freezes *something*, perhaps, something that is not exposure, not the exposure of a wound, a harm, a power either emergent or nostalgic. *Warsaw's palm* freezes a vitality that remains in motion as in a winter that *will* thaw but also *recur*. *What I do*, she wrote me, *lets them* [public projects] *work, evolve and change in an almost biological way. Layer after layer, gaze after gaze … reenacting everything, what happened, but turning it into a life process*.[37]

37. Joanna Rajkowska, unpublished interview with the author, 16 August 2024.



***Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (2022), installation of the fronds, 2003. Photo Joanna Rajkowska**

On returning to Warsaw from Jerusalem, she recently reflected, *this state of terror, I immediately detected, brought this, this dream, that this never happened … the Shoah never happened*.[38] Many will read and perhaps empathize with her statement as an impossible wish aimed at thwarting what must now definitively name a planetary cycle of genocide, population transfers, and persecution structures that if not stopped will destroy all of us and all our lands and all of our waters. But, I think, at that time, in her fear, youth, and confusion, the impossible sentiment arose for a reason that is perhaps even more familiar to many of us, that is from a *primal ignorance* and *helpless* means by which to try to make a home, as when Achille Mbembe, in offering an ethics to our *ordeal of extreme vulnerability*, writes, *to inhabit a place … only by allowing oneself to be inhabited by it*.[39]

38. Rajkowska, May 2024.

39. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Durham, CA: Duke University Press, 2019.



Joanna Rajkowska, Greetings from *Jerusalem Avenue* (2022), 17 June 2019, 10:30pm.
Photo Marek Szczepański

Joanna and her travel partner, the artist Artur Żmijewski, wrote an article to say something on their time in Palestine-Israel during the Second Intifada. In struggling with the form, instead of writing the end, she suggested, they should plant date palms all along the main thoroughfare of Aleje Jerozolimskie. The date palm, cultivated in Palestine for millennia, symbolically powerful and polysemic as the date is a staple food across many cultures, local and diasporic, finds its way into an *untranslatable Polish expression. A palm tree hit you* signals *a moment of loss of control, or logic, or madness, from the point of view of someone who has got both feet on the ground.*[40] Research in the Warsaw Public Library led Joanna to the inception of the street's name: the 1774 eradication of Nowa Jerozolima (New Jerusalem), a Jewish settlement founded two years before, to which the road's ancestor, Droga Jerozolimska (Jerusalem Road), originally led from the Vistula River. When I've walked toward, to then cross, the Vistula, on Aleje Jerozolimskie, my back has also faced the ruins of Nowa Jerozolima, filtered by *Warsaw's palm*. She slips in, at once, an alien *and* clear chastising local utterance.

40. **Rajkowska,** *Where the Beast is Buried*.



Women's Strike under the palm tree, 2020. Photo Robert Jaworski

On a formal level, Joanna's entire attention to the work's construction fixated upon the question of scale. The palm would be real to the eye from a distance. *The map we have in our heads, particularly the map of the city, is a collection of images*, she wrote on developing *Greetings… . Turning onto a well-known street, we expect to see one of them. If a new element appears to substantially redefine it, we immediately make the effort to assimilate the new image. It involves the work of memory, emotions becoming engaged. I was interested in those few seconds of disbelief.*[41] *Warsaw's palm* is surreal, intimate, refracting, ironic. She is artificial. Her sentience will outlive us. She is not my great-grandmother, nor Joanna's, nor the gravestone of 375,000 genocided Jewish Warsawians, none of whom likely knew much of anything about date palm trees and should not be taken for a fake tree, because their roots in Poland were real and ancient. What is happening in Palestine-Israel is part of a specifically unresolved chain of statecraft. Europe depends upon the State of Israel as restitution. And it was not restitution. It was, and remains, a perpetuation of our persecution, the mere gift of their weapon. *Warsaw's palm* is an exact citation and constructed illusion. She chastises and listens.

41. **Rajkowska,** *Where the Beast is Buried*.

Kurdish-Iranian thinker and activist Nastaran Saremy and I have worked on theorizing place as eruptions of particular moments in the land, by way of translocal imaginations and temporal sovereignties. We call such places *imagined land*. Territorial boundaries have nothing to do with these eruptions. Absolute borders do not mark place, but domination. *The palm* is a monument to such an eruption, which is why in the nation-state of Poland it is considered an anti-monument. Nastaran once said, *It lives in imagined land*.[42]

42. **See Nastaran Saremy and Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman, 'Axa Xeyal Kirin Imagined Land یکاخ وارکـلیهخ.', social memorial, 2023–.**



Henry N. Cobb, *WARSAW, AUGUST 1947* with rendering of the palm tree by Joanna Rajkowska, 2022

4. *the terrifying moon*

X

A third resistance to, or force of, the English word *draft* does not soothe me. This third resistance or force troubles me. *Draft* is etymologically related to and meets *draw* in conscription. We draw water from a river to drink. We draft an architectural proposal from study to construct. We draw teenagers from their youth to kill life.

The contractions and construction of *Greetings…* first situated Warsaw's built environment in Palestine, and Palestine's earth in Warsaw by and

in sensing, with confusion and fear, the structuring force of apartheid and ethnic cleansing exchanged, preceding and exceeding, too, the uncountable Shoah *and* the uncountable Nakba, if unto each forever distinctly, across both territories. Joanna's organic, reflective acts worked both despite and because of the *all but entirely razed, incinerated, incarcerated, and displaced* legacy of her home, the home of her estranged father's childhood, which the artist *had to*, and incidentally so, approach with her body in *imagined land*.

Greetings... ' contractions and construction claims one fundament of responsibility, on behalf of Polish and European ontology, for both the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and Israeli fear, which, Joanna wrote, in defense of the unrealized *Minaret* project, heaves *the shape of the Israeli state, its practices, its apartheid, its war crimes, and its relationship to its Others*.[43] And yet, monumentalization must be for the heterogenous present (*Jetztzeit*), otherwise it sanctifies irrelevance and moral abandon. Monumentalization must freeze and unfreeze, with the recurrence of winters, the rising sap.



Joanna Rajkowska, rendering of *Minaret*, public project, 2010

In telling, this, again, I do what I might to be someone who *still* lives in Warsaw, though I do not live in Warsaw, Great-Grandmother Sarah bat Moshe, even if you wouldn't want me there, even if you would want me there, even if it turns out you were never from there. And, in so doing, what I might, I do what *Warsaw's palm* renders, in many of us, that is, quickly, quietly, to make us, all together, tell stories, at once,

43. Rajkowska, *Where the Beast is Buried*.

and distinctly, inside what Haviva Pedaya has called – on Reb Moshe Cordovero's sixteenth-century cosmology, of falling and rising, in Palestine, in exile, from Spain, in Ṣafad – *gigantic time*.[44] My telling, which is different from yours, is a parable and a debt. While the palm owes me nothing, I owe her something. At this hour, I owe her transcription, this guest, and refusal.

44. Haviva Pedaya, 'Walking, Walking Out, and Walking Through: Transitional Space and Traumatic Time', in Y. Ataria et al (ed.), *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture*, **Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016.**

At this hour, one year into endless aimless collective retribution, a total and ever-expanding war (and not just that), by the State of Israel's unhinged settler-fascist regime on drip-supply of weapons, theocratic consensus, and legal immunity from the United States, my nation, by birth and passport and great-grandparents' refuge.

At this hour, one year into massacre after massacre after massacre after massacre after massacre, every day I bear to read, another massacre, of whole families, internal refugees, multiple times over, in the most vulnerable situations, multiple times over, waiting for food rations in the Flour Massacre, sleeping in the only demarcated safe zone in the Tent Massacres, treating the wounded and sick or being sick and wounded in the destruction of the al-Shifa Hospital Complex, praying in a school in the Al-Tabaeen Massacre.



Joanna Rajkowska, *Greetings from Gaza III*, 2024

One year into the public execution of the names of our ancestors, of the names of our traditions, by a revisionist, anti-democratic regime that will radically overdetermine centuries and centuries to come of planetary anti-Judaism, I am certain, because to be us, those with a most perverse, naive, brief, and mercenary power tell the world, means to endorse, and unconditionally, such destruction

sixteen thousand seven hundred fifty-six children of blessed memory
nine hundred two whole families of blessed memory
ten thousand under rubble of blessed memory
one hundred fifty thousand homes of blessed memory
half of all trees and farms of blessed memory
seven hundred water wells and all desalination plants of blessed memory
one hundred fourteen hospitals and clinics of blessed memory
nine hundred eighty-six medical workers of blessed memory
one hundred twenty-three schools and universities of blessed memory
one hundred seventy-five journalists of blessed memory
thirty-five hostages of blessed memory
in holy Gaza.[45]

– Iyar 5784 - Tishrei 5785, Berlin (DE) + Bellingham (US)

45. Chughtai, 2024.

Until Liberation III

Learning Palestine Group

27 Oct 2025

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Dear listeners, friends, comrades in this world,

Hope you are fine, wherever you are listening from. This is the third 12 hour programme of Learning Palestine.

It is two years now, that the genocide has been unfolding before our eyes. Yet we continue to re-invent ways of speaking out and organizing against the grain, against this overdose of destruction and annihilation of life, against warmongering and militarisation, against attempts to silence and immobilize us.

We return to what has been said and spoken before us to comprehend the history that precedes and informs the current political moment, focussing this time on the transnational solidarity relations between South Africa and Palestine. Inspired by ways in which apartheid was ended, it sheds some light on the decades-strong and still ongoing solidarities.

For the third 12-hour programme we again share lectures, talks, teach-ins as well as poems, music, and chants in the hopes of expanding our political horizons and engagements through study and struggle; to continue imagining ways of acting together, to tear apart the walls and borders that separate us, for a life in freedom, justice and dignity for all.

Learning Palestine: Until Liberation III
Learning Palestine Group

Listen online →

Timecodes

00:00:00	Introduction, Learning Palestine Group: Until Liberation III
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00:09:21	A song: Maya Al Khaldi, ‘By Numbers’ from the album عالم تاني *Other World*, (2022)
00:16:42	An encampment: student of University of Chicago responds to campus police tearing down encampment, (Chicago, May 2024)
00:22:40	A student occupation: Emil-Fischer-Hörsaal occupation of the Humboldt University, Berlin, April 2025)
00:24:53	A speech: Rep Ruwa Romman speaks on the ICE abductions and Palestine in response to the arrest and disappearance of Rumeysa Ozturk, March 2025
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00:27:19 A speech: Taher Dahleh, Palestine Youth Movement, giving a speech during the March On Washington (Washington, April 2025)
00:27:58 An conversation (excerpt): Fred Moten, 'A Dam against the Motion of History', (October 2023)
00:34:53 A poem, 'Shades of Anger': performed by Rafeef Ziadah, (London, December 2011)
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01:31:38 A poem: Mohamed El Kurd , 'My Nakba Birthday', Oud played by Clarissa Bitar, from the album Bellydancing on Wounds (2021)
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01:53:43 An address: South Africa's opening statement, ICJ Hearing, Israel's Genocide of Palestinians, (The Hague, January 2024)
02:18:23 An address: Vusi Madonsela Soth African amabassador, ICJ Hearing On Israel's Genocide of Palestinians (The Hague, January 2024)
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05:07:21 A lecture: Omar Barghouti and Mahmood Mamdani, 'Palestine's South Africa Moment? The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement', The Center for Palestine Studies (Columbia University, New York, December 2014)
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06:22:26 A speech: Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, addressing the Global Anti-Apartheid Conference on Palestine at the Sandton Convention Centre, (Johannesburg, May 2024)

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Five Rocks: A Collection of Tales

Shayma Nader

28 May 2025

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1.

The drone didn’t know it was a drone. Nobody had told it. Nobody had explained that its buzzing little propellers weren’t wings and that the endless scanning of hills and faces wasn’t what anyone would call a life. But if it could think – and sometimes it felt like it could – it would have thought of itself as something special.

This drone wasn’t just any drone. It was a *test drone*. It hadn’t yet been promoted to spray chemical fertilisers or pesticides, monitor soil hydration or do anything of that sort. So instead, it hovered over the terraced hills, harassing people in an almost-human voice for their ID numbers and their iris scans, constantly stalking them, frequently asking them to leave wherever they were. When it got really ambitious, it scanned the ground for movement, in case anything dared to grow back. It didn’t feel important, but it was efficient, which, in this line of work, was practically the same thing.

The test drone flew over the Wall onto a patch of flattened dead ground. It had been dead for years. Nothing grew there except stubborn little shrubs that didn’t know when to quit. The drone’s operators would call this ‘buffer zone management’, which was just a fancy way of saying they didn’t want anyone or anything to feel too comfortable unless they were strategically placed, trigger-happy soldiers.

High above, Fathi, a blue lizard, had been watching it all unfold. He was a skinny little thing, with a missing toe on his left front foot, though no one had ever asked how he had lost it. He spent his days sunbathing on a lone fig tree, one of the few living things left in the area. Fathi had been there long enough to remember what the land looked like before all of this. He missed the smell of herbs and the crunch of fresh leaves, but mostly he missed the bugs. Bugs were juicy. Bugs were gone now.

The drone hovered lower, its mechanical brain humming with calculations. ‘Scan complete,’ it announced to no one in particular. ‘No unauthorised vegetation detected.’ Fathi squinted up at it from the tree, chewing on a dry blade of grass.

Just then, the drone dipped too close to a branch, and Fathi’s survival instincts kicked in. He darted to the branch’s edge and flicked his tail hard, knocking loose a pebble the size of a walnut. The pebble fell, bounced off another branch and hit the drone squarely on its shiny black camera. A rock to the face.

The drone spun in a sad little circle. Its propellers sputtered. For a moment, it seemed like it might recover. But then it tilted sideways and plummeted with an unceremonious thud into a patch of brittle thistles.

On the other side of the Wall, a sibling drone kept buzzing, spraying fertilisers onto export crops, oblivious to its counterpart lying in a heap.

Fathi couldn’t have cared less. Instead, he flicked his tail and closed his eyes, letting the sun soak into his blue scales.

2.

It was a spring day, a Friday, at noon, and all hell was about to break loose in Kafr Ghneim. The sun was shining over the rocky terraced hills on the outskirts of the village; the goats were grazing and behaving themselves for once, their sleek bodies scattered across the hills, shadowed by the Wall. The air was thick with the usual sounds of pastoral life: bleating, rocks crunching underfoot and a faint sound of Umm Kulthum singing ‘patience has its limits’ – the mosque’s speaker occasionally caught a rogue radio channel.

Then, a little whirring buzzing little bastard showed up from the other side of the Wall, hovering above them and ruining the sky. ‘La hawla wala quwwata illa billah’ (There is no power and no strength except with Allah). Abu Khalil didn’t have to look up to know it came from a group of settlers hiding on top of the hill across the valley. The drone flew low, casting its shadow over the flock. The flock was frightened and scattered. A double shadow.

Abu Khalil’s donkey, Asad, meaning lion, stood tethered to a carob tree. He was chewing lazily on the straps of an old leather slingshot. Abu Khalil had hung it there to keep it out of reach of the goats. The drone inched closer, whirring loudly enough that it irritated the usually nonchalant Asad. In a moment of anger, he kicked a rock onto the slingshot and tugged hard at its straps with a bite and a flick of his head. The rock arched perfectly through the sky, as if guided by some celestial force, and smacked the drone with a loud clunk. Sparks flew, and the drone crashed into a thorn bush nearby. The goats got back to their grazing, more cautiously this time.

Abu Khalil spotted a military jeep that had started making its way towards them. He told Asad: ‘If anyone asks, you did that. I’m too old for this shit.’

3.

When you are a gazelle, love is a biological imperative. It surges through your synapses, pumps through your four-chambered heart and drives your hooves to dance like sun rays on a wheat field. That’s what it was like for me – Noura. Beyond the Wall.

The Wall is a snake with razor scales, growing and going where it pleases. It devours paths, caves, families and valleys. Layers of barbed wire spiral across its edges. Below, a trench four metres wide and four metres deep. On the other side of the trench, a patrol road smelling like jeep tires. Beside it, a sandy road recording our steps. For creatures like me, the Wall gnaws at the invisible threads keeping the world alive: the gene flow, the migration

routes and the delicate dance of predator and prey. Even birds avoid it. Since its construction, there isn’t much left on the side where I live, save a brittle husk, overgrazed and exhausted, scattered with thorny bushes.

Beyond the Wall, Salah’s world is an open plain of olive trees, moonlit groves, thyme-covered slopes and overflowing springs that glisten under the sun. The horizon lays open. Or so he says.

Our love? It evolved in the narrow band of overlap when the drones were distracted, the soldiers tired. Our niche. Our ecotone. It began with a scent: volatile organic compounds released by his glandular secretions carried by the northern wind. A chemical message that bypassed my cerebrum and activated the limbic system. My heart rate increased. My rumen churned nervously. I knew instinctively: this was not a pheromone I could ignore. I traced the scent to the Wall, and that’s when I noticed something different: a gap no larger than the width of my flank, low on the ground and hidden behind a bush.

Carefully, I moved closer, my hooves crunching against loose gravel. The air near the gap was musky and sharp. I lowered my head to sniff. It was just wide enough for me to squeeze through, emerging on the other side. And that’s when I first saw him.

The sun glinted off his dorsal stripe, a bold contrast of tawny and white. My heart rate spiked – a physiological response designed to prime me for escape or embrace. I chose the latter.

‘You jump well,’ I said, trying to sound unimpressed.

‘You’re . . . symmetrical,’ he replied.

He might as well have proposed.

We jumped into a field of wildflowers, where the Wall’s shadow couldn’t quite reach. There, we twirled and bounded, our keratin-tipped hooves barely touching the ground. The thrill of leaping into the unknown filled the cracks that years of confinement had carved into my heart.

In the distance, a small herd of gazelles emerged, their leaps high and wild, cutting arcs through the air with grace. The kind of grace that makes you feel like you’ve been doing life all wrong. Naturally, we moved to join them. The sight pulled us forward instinctively. The sun warming our backs, the wind tugging at our fur. Then came a loud snap. Turning, we saw it lying there: a metallic winged body lay crumpled and broken on the ground, its red lights flickering pathetically as if to say, ‘Really? Out of all places, you chose to jump here?’ For a moment, we stared at it, unsure what to make of this broken thing. The herd was already shrinking into the horizon, and without another glance, we galloped forward, catching up. The wind sang in our ears, the horizon stretched endlessly and the machine lay forgotten, swallowed by the dust.

4.

An artist receives a new commission. It is a precious opportunity, the kind that could shape his career, or so he thinks. He carves a large stone sculpture in the town square, focused and determined. As he works, a piece of the stone chips off and flies into the air like a rocket. The artist doesn’t notice, lost in the work that he believes will be his salvation.

The fragment shoots upwards and clips a drone scanning the square. The drone spins wildly before crashing into a pile of tomatoes. A vendor shouts, ‘Ya khara, my tomatoes.’ The crash startles some fighting cats who scatter immediately but reassemble moments later as if nothing had happened.

A police officer steps forward and adjusts his holster. ‘Come,’ he says. ‘Let’s have a coffee at the station.’

5.

47 days into the arrival of the settlers, Amal climbed out of bed and staggered into the night, as she did every night since they had arrived, to undo the things they have done – the poisoned wells, the uprooted saplings, the salt scattered over the soil. She tended to her *hakura*, a small piece of land – bigger than a garden, smaller than a grove – where herbs flourished under the lemon tree and vegetables grew in the shade of the pomegranate and plum trees. The fig tree, planted before she was born, stood tallest, its branches spreading wide. She gave it room to breathe even as her world constricted. She looked at the surrounding settlement on the opposite hill, clean and stupid, like a sterilised bandage covering a festering wound. She thought of words that grounded her, that helped her hold on to some essence of life; *marj, bayyara, karm, haql, beidar, bustan, juron*. Seven words she could remember for ‘land’.

Despite her head full of silver hair, she was still fit and vital. Her face and hands were carved by the sun. Her height, the distance from the roots of her trees to their branches. Making a living used to mean movement. Now she was confined to half a dunum plot, with gravity on her back and feet bolted to the ground.

Their arrival was marked by the departure of birds. At the beginning, mornings became silent. Then came a cloud of strange grey metallic birds with red eyes, carried by the western wind. One day, she would wake up to dozens of them perched on a tree. She had learned to ignore them during the day and work in the cover of the night. She would kneel in the soil, brush away the salt they had scattered and plant a handful of seeds at the edge of her land, carefully pressing each one into the soil. They were seeds she had saved for years, for a moment like this. It did not matter if she would see them grow. What mattered was that they were in the ground.

It was the first light of dawn by the time she returned home to brew a cup of hot verbena tea to calm her nerves. She noticed two pigeons perched

on the telephone lines. For the first time in a long time, she felt a rush as she grabbed some rice and a stale loaf of bread.

She tossed a piece of bread into the air for the pigeons. The drones didn't like it. Their red eyes blinked furiously. One of them took to the sky and caught the piece mid-flight. Amal grabbed a fistful of rice and threw it once more to the birds. This time, the pigeons got their share.

The next day, the pigeons returned with more friends. And then, the next. As the weeks went by, more birds began to appear – sparrows first, then storks and hummingbirds. Finally, a brigade of hawks arrived from the south. Despite the pain of her tennis elbow from throwing rice and bread to the growing flocks night after night for months on end, Amal kept to her rituals – undoing the damage in the *hakura*, brewing the tea and feeding the birds.

One day, she heard a sharp cry and saw a hawk swoop down, talons extended, slicing through one of the drones as if it were paper. And another, capturing one of the drones and taking it back to its nest.

15 months and 20 captured drones later, the hawks managed to strike a deal – the captured drones in exchange for the complete withdrawal of the settlers. Amal stood in the *hakura* watching the settlement pack up as she munched on some figs.

Amal and the birds lived happily ever after.

Reading the Dead of Gaza: Musha’ as Mentality

Philip Rizk

11 June 2026

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I am trying to read the Dead during the ongoing sought-after annihilation of Life in Palestine's so-called Gaza Strip. Accompanying me is Denise Ferreira da Silva's essay 'Reading the Dead: A Black Feminist Poethical Reading of Global Capital'.[1] There the philosopher writes, 'the wounded flesh exposes total violence as a means that ensures profit and its accumulation through the appropriation of total value, that is, that global capital consists in nothing more than the expropriated productive capacity of slave bodies and Native lands'.[2] I keep in mind that no two contexts are the same – Palestine's ongoing genocide, unfolding over two centuries, is not the same as the long pasts of the Indigenous communities of the Americas, of over 500 years of genocide and slavery. In Palestine, I focus on Native lands, where vital recovery of land can only be liberatory if the relationship humans once had to that land is critically reclaimed. While holding space for the material and psychological consequences of Israel's attempted annihilation of Life in Palestine, most especially in Gaza, I want to identify the radical potential for Life, through the act of listening to the Dead who lie inside its lands.

In her essay, Da Silva builds on critical theoretical categories introduced by the literary critic Hortense Spillers in her essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' written in the summer of 1987, months before the Palestinian Intifada shook the Zionist colonization project to its core:

> **But I would make a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography … If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard.[3]**

Spillers created the category of the 'flesh' because she had found herself unable to theorize the horror of lived colonized, enslaved, murdered Black lives – a moment where, as she writes, 'the language broke down'.[4]

Today, again, the language has broken down.

After spending weeks in the Gaza Strip as a volunteer, surgeon Ghassan Abu Sitta asks, 'Where do you bury a little boy's leg?'[5] He maps out the workings of one of Israel's illegal weapons: 'Phosphorous burns drill their way through until they have reached a very deep part of the body because as a chemical it continues to burn until it is no longer exposed to oxygen.'[6] In January 2024, someone in Gaza City said: 'They follow us to our graves even after we are dead.'[7] Reports detail the invading soldiers opening graves to steal warm bodies; elsewhere Israeli military bulldozers destroy graves, leaving tracks identifiable on footage from space.[8] 'For the past 435 days, I've seen a dead body every single day. I've heard the screams of parents every single day. I've seen the flesh of children every single day' – journalist Hossam Shabat.[9] 'The dogs took out a body from one of the graves and were eating it', says Rehab Abu Daqqa, living with her children in a tent near a cemetery in Rafah.[10] While Israel's blatant theft of Palestinian land in the West Bank has increased exponentially since 7 October 2023, its collaborator, the Palestinian Authority, sends its security forces to crush Palestinian resistance, killing both fighters and bystanders.[11] 'They embezzle us with some of our own flesh', one Jenin resident says referring to the local authorities.[12] Mohamed al-Kurd begins a talk with the disclaimer, 'no debate while flesh is still burning'.[13]



'Unknown identity' marked on a grave in the Gaza Strip, 2025. Photo: Unknown photographer

How to speak – how to write – of the grief, the agony, the fear, the despair, the loneliness, the shock, the hunger, the pain, the pain, the pain, the disdain of the world's centres of power in their full approval of all this? What to do in the face of their excusing, defending, whitewashing, funding, and arming the perpetrator?

1. Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'Reading the Dead: A Black Feminist Poethical Reading of Global Capital', in Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro and Andrea Smith (ed.), *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020, p. 43. As I finalize this text, a shaky ceasefire has come into effect. The bombing might stop, or at least be significantly reduced, but all the elements for the ongoing elimination of Palestinian life have been put into effect: the destruction of 92 percent of homes; the destruction of most hospitals, spreading disease; and, critically unaccounted for, the destruction of sources of potable water and agricultural land in the Gaza Strip – the annihilation of Life has been set in motion for years to come. The effect of 85,000 tons of bombs on a 365 km2 space doesn't stop when the bombing stops. Regarding the number of deaths, *The Lancet* journal has provided a much more likely estimate than either that made by the Health Ministry in Gaza or any numbers claimed by the aggressor, stating that by 19 June 2024 the Israeli war machine had killed 186,000 Palestinians in Gaza. This number is far higher than most current accounts, in part because it takes into account deaths caused not only by direct ammunition, but also those caused by the (entirely intentional) destruction of infrastructure or unavailability of food. The numbers continue to rise much higher still (see Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee and Salim Yusuf, 'Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult But Essential', *The Lancet*, 5 July 2024, thelancet.com). I have chosen to avoid relying on the terminology of genocide, not because I don't think that Israel alongside its global allies are deliberately killing in Palestine 'a large number of people from a particular nation or ethnic group with the aim of destroying that nation or group' (the Oxford Dictionary's definition of the term genocide), but because even the debate around such acts of impunity within the language of genocide maintains a Eurocentric vision on the world, where all elimination of Life and attempts thereof are measured only against those admitted to have been perpetrated by European actors. Europe's past crimes are not limited to, nor have found their apex in, the genocide of the Shoah – thus, debating whether mass murder and intent to annihilate Life fits into the category of genocide only maintains the myth of the Holocaust's singularity. The anti-fascist Jewish intellectual Franco Fortini wrote during the 1967 war: 'Many spokesmen for the so-called 'culture' of the West sought extra-historical and metapolitical interpretations and quickly ended up placing the massacre of the Nazis in the register of the 'sacred', considering them to be the work of Evil in Itself, basically accepting, while inverting its content, one of the central myths of Nazi mysticism – purity or purification through holocaust … a 'fixation' of Nazism in mythological forms … [and] have benefited, in the end, its atypical forms, that is, the equally ferocious ones of modern imperialism' (Franco Fortini, *The Dogs of the Sinai* [trans. Alberto Toscano], London/New York/Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2013 [1967], p. 56). On the construction of the category of the 'Gaza Strip' see Salman Abu Sitta, 'I Could Have Been One of Those Who Broke Through the Siege on October 7', Mondoweiss, 4 January 2024, mondoweiss.net.

2. Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 43.

3. Hortense Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', in *Diacritics*, vol. 17, issue 2, 1987, p. 67.

4. Hortense Spillers in Spillers, Hartman et al., 'Whatcha Gonna Do?' – Revisiting "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book"', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35,

For if the flesh holds, as a mark/sign, colonial violence, the Dead's rotting flesh returns this marking to the soil, and the Dead then remain in the very compositions of anything, yes, as matter, raw material, that nourishes the instruments of production, labor, and capital itself. That is how the dead slave/Native lives in/as capital.[14]

The flesh of Palestinians marks the open wound of the ongoing sought-after annihilation of Life in Palestine – persisting even during a ceasefire – binding it not only to a settler colonialism, but to global capital. Such processes of indiscriminate murder, mutilation and theft of flesh – of kidnapping and torture of bodies – are permitted because it serves global capital. The eradication of Life in Palestine profits the global weapons industry and simultaneously is an unabashed testing ground for its newest technologies.[15] Almost an afterthought are Gaza's yet-unexploited gas fields, which multinationals are ready to devour off its shores – likely already siphoned off for years by Israel's nearby drilling – to keep sustaining the gluttonous industries of capital in the centres of power complicit in the annihilation.[16]

دون أن يودّع أحداً
ولا حتى لحمه

And bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh

writes Refaat Alareer.[17] The Israeli military assassinated the poet and educator in his home alongside his family, likely because, days earlier on live TV, he had made the comparison between the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and al-Aqsa Flood, what some have called 'the Great Intifada'[18] – breaking through an imposed colonial boundary and opening the imaginary for the possibility of Return.[19] Alareer echoes the argument of the militant psychiatrist Frantz Fanon on the legitimacy of revolutionary violence in response to relentless colonial brutality. That argument, by now a cliché, is only still urgent in the echo chambers of neocolonial self-righteousness.[20] Yet, the act of resistance and ultimately liberation is not limited to the initial breach of the colonial barrier and Palestinians crossing back into their stolen lands, but since the outpouring of absolute destruction on Gazans, it is the ongoing daily radical will of people to live, to breathe, to forage for food, to cook, to study, to dig for the living and the dead beneath the rubble, of mothers to nurse the babies of other murdered mothers, of doctors to operate on the injured without vital supplies, to tend to the sick; every single act heroic, and the heroes, protagonists in a narrative of liberation across all of Palestine and along the still-expanding borders of Israel.[21]

Nadera Shaloub-Kevorkian identifies the wounded flesh as exposing something more, a liberatory tendency in the act of searching for *ashlaa'* – the flesh of the shredded body – of strangers and loved ones. For the Palestinian criminologist, *ashlaa'* is 'both a sign of extreme violence

issue 1/2, Spring–Summer 2007, pp. 299–309.

5. Ghassan Abu Sitta, in Mohamed Hashem, 'Ghassan Abu Sitta: This Is What I Saw in Gaza' (Part 1) | Real Talk, Middle East Eye, 21 December 2023, middleeasteye.net.

6. Ghassan Abu Sitta, in Mohamed Hashem, 'Ghassan Abu Sitta: I'd return to Gaza in a heartbeat' (Part 2) | Real Talk, Middle East Eye, 28 December 2023, middleeasteye.net.

7. 'Unearthing the Dead: Israeli Forces Destroy Cemetery in Gaza City', Al Jazeera, 6 January 2024, youtube.com.

8. See Noga Klein, 'Israel Became Hub in International Organ Trade Over Past Decade', *Haaretz*, 20 September 2018, haaretz.com This article also appeared in Human Trafficking Search in 2018, humantraffickingsearch.org. See also 'Bodies Uncovered in Gaza Mass Graves Raise Suspicions of Organ Theft - Paramedics and Rescue Teams', WAFA News Agency, 26 April 2024, english.wafa.ps; 'Israeli Army Defiles Hundreds of Graves in the Gaza Strip, Steals Dead Bodies', Euro-Med Human Rights Organization, 7 January 2024, euromedmonitor.org.

9. 'For the past 435 days, I've seen a dead body every single day. I've heard the screams of parents every single day. I've seen the flesh of children every single day. All this horror will change you, and I will never be the same.' Hossam Shabat, X, 15 December 2024, x.com. On 24 March 2025, the Israeli military killed the twenty-three-year-old Shabat after having placed him on a 'hit list'. Shabat was the 206th documented journalist the Israeli military killed since the start of the genocide.

10. Fergal Keane, 'Israel-Gaza War: 'My Children Cling to Me as Dogs Raid Rafah Graves Near our Shelter', BBC News, 5 May 2024, bbc.com.

and terror, as well as a refusal of such genocidal dehumanization', while those who search for and speak of *ashlaa'* are *powerfully* 'using their own language and Arabic syntax, producing their own morphology'.[22] These acts of resistance stage 'the architecture of the shredded body as a source of power against the violence of anti-Palestinian racism and Zionist supremacy', by which, she writes, 'Gazans are refusing physical and social dismemberment, instead choosing the path of actual and epistemic reunification through collecting and unifying the ashlaa' … [and thereby] connect the past and the present, the living and the dead'.[23]



Bulldozer tracks visible on graves in Falouja Cemetery, Jabalya, North Gaza, [1] October 2024. Photo: Maxar

Such a reading challenges and breaks with certain norms of common reason. In the face of unspeakable brutality of the genocide, a reading of the Dead must entail a 'refusal to engage, to maintain thinking within the limits … of modern thought'.[24]

Death is not defeat in revolutionary struggle.[25]

Musha' as mentality

Once we break from our own commitments to the liberal paradigm – once we stop being occupied by its ludicrous claims – only then can we ask: What do the Dead of Gaza, the *ashlaa'* of Palestinians, mean for the coming liberation – all of ours?[26] In order to venerate the Dead there must be a radical break with modernity's present, sincerely seeking 'the destruction of pre-existing institutions' – guerrilla warfare's raison d'être, a striving for 'the end of the world as we know it, which entails listening to the Dead'.[27] Those who stand with Palestinians while living outside Palestine must take advantage of the luxury of not being consumed by the eye of the storm, and act on the premonition that 'the enemy never withdraws sincerely'.[28]

11. Lorenzo Tondo and Peter Beaumont, 'Israel Has Approved "Largest West Bank Land Grab in 30 Years", Watchdog Says', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2024, theguardian.com. On the problematics of the Palestinian Authority, see fn. 40.

12. Abdaljawad Omar, 'The Politics of Betrayal: Jenin, Abbas, and the Hellscape of Gaza', Mondoweiss, 24 December 2024, mondoweiss.net.

13. Mohamed al-Kurd, 'This House Believes Israel Is an Apartheid State Responsible for Genocide', 5 December 2024, youtube.com.

14. Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 43.

15. See 'European money for the war in Gaza: How EU research funding supports the Israeli Arms industry', Statewatch, 22 March 2024, statewatch.org; 'Companies Profiting from the Gaza Genocide', American Friends Service Committee, 6 June 2024, afsc.org; Yuval Azulay, 'Small Defense Firms See Big Gains as War Drives Massive Investments', CTECH, 23 May 2024, calcalistech.com; finally, see Salman Abu Sitta's rebuttal of President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen's speech on the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel, Palestine Land Society, 16 May 2023, plands.org.

16. 'U.S. to Push Israel on Allowing Gaza Offshore Gas Reserves to Revitalize Palestinian Economy', *Haaretz*, 20 November 2023, haaretz.com; Walid Abuhelal, 'The War on Gaza Is Also an Israeli Drive to Seize Palestinian Gas Reserves', Middle East Eye, 20 February 2024, middleeasteye.net.

17. Refaat Alareer, 'If I must die', 14 December 2023, Gaza City (see e.g. Adi Callai, 'The Gaza Ghetto Uprising', *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2024, brooklynrail.org).

What have the Dead of Gaza been saying?

The act of refusal in the face of the genocidal killing machine, the act of persistence, the streaming of inhabitants of Gaza back to their mostly obliterated homes in the North – is an act of defiance, and devotion to the land. The living and the Dead of Gaza embody the cosmology of *sumoud*, a cleaving to the land. The priority of colonizers on the other hand, has always been the taking of land, which by necessity entailed the violent transformation of peoples’ communal relations to the land, into one of ownership.[29] The jurist and Nazi Carl Schmitt wrote of that colonial act: ‘In every case, land-appropriation, both internally and externally, is the primary legal title that underlies all subsequent law.’[30] As elsewhere, it applies in Palestine, where the ‘transformation of ‘Palestine’ into the ‘Land of Israel’ by colonial default entailed the expropriation of land’, since the Zionists believed that ‘after the Arabs are transferred, the country will be wide open for us … . Not a single village or a single tribe must be left’.[31] If the founding principle of the colonial enterprise is the expropriation of land – as Schmitt laid bare – one that is still ongoing today in Israel’s expansion everywhere it can, be it Northern Gaza, the West Bank, Southern Lebanon, or Southwestern Syria, then decolonization must certainly include the undoing of that expropriation, and vitally entail the dismantling of the mentality which that expropriation imposes.

If one listens closely enough, they might make out ancestors everywhere speaking of the necessity of undoing the relationship to land that the colonizers enforced in order to make possible the expropriation: private property, which causes the separation between humans and the land through the destruction of land commons, in Palestine and its environs أرض مشاع.

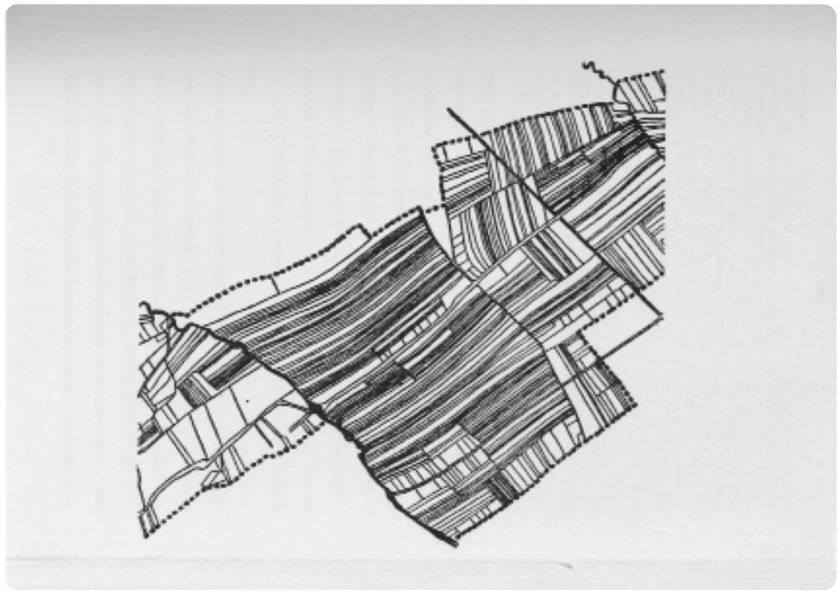
The term *ard musha’* is used differently from region to region within the former Ottoman Empire, referencing a variety of systems of land distribution, it is the dominant understanding of it that I will be referring to here.[32] For many people in the region *ard musha’* once identified ‘the community … as a custodian of the right to produce (i.e., to subsist) to which each member is entitled by virtue of kinship or residence’, it is a system of collective stewardship outside the liberal rights regime.[33] *Musha’* land demarcated a social relation within the community and with the land itself, reverberating across the Earth, ‘for everyone, everything’. *Al-ard al-musha’* is critically anti-capitalist as our struggles must be, while realigning human relations with the Earth by countering capital’s drive of infinite expansion, certainly a proponent of the sought-after annihilation of Life in Palestine.[34] *Al-ard al-musha’* was a critical obstacle to the colonizing mission and its claim to progress. Colonialism’s end must entail the return of stolen land, yet fully putting out colonialism’s flame requires the undoing of its enforced ideology of private property.[35]

On 1 January 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) stormed onto the Mexican political scene in response to the ultimate attempt to break up their communal lands (*ejido*), an ongoing struggle that started with the arrival

18. ‘Great Intifada’ is a reference to historian Abdelqadir Yassin, cited in Fahmi Howeidi, فهمي هويدي, ما جرى في 7 أكتوبر، الجزيرة، ١٢٩ ٢٠٢٤ (What Happened on 7 October), Al Jazeera, 29 January 2024, aljazeera.net.

19. See Adam HajYahia, ‘The Principle of Return’, Parapraxis Magazine, 7 April 2024, parapraxismagazine.com; and Salman Abu Sitta, ‘I Could Have Been One of Those Who Broke Through the Siege on October 7’ (see fn. 1). It is also Abu Sitta – enemy of the state number one in Germany because he undermines the unstated contract (that of Germany in particular and of ‘the Christian West’ in general) of making good for Germany’s crimes of the past by supporting without question Israel’s crimes of the present – who has mapped out how such a return can be possible (Dr Salman Abu Sitta, ‘RETURN PLAN 2023’, speech delivered at Palestine Writes, Philadelphia, 23 September 2023, Palestine Land Society, plands.org). In order to counter the threat to the Zionist colonial project of the possibility of the Return, the discourse of Palestinian men, in particular Hamas members, as sexual predators was created and amplified in order to justify all the murder that has followed – this is not an assessment on the actual occurrence of rape on October 7 but reflects on the discourse that emerged – mirroring the weathered colonial trope of the black-man-as-rapist, guilty or not; see also Philip Rizk, Terror Tales (2024), filfilfilm.com. This trope is that much more insidious as report after report has emerged of the systematic use of sexual violence used against Palestinian prisoners as a form of torture in Israeli prisons. See for example B’tselem, ‘Welcome to Hell: The Israeli Prison Network as a Network of Torture Camps’, August 2024, btselem.org, where sexual violence is reported on as one of various documented forms of systematic torture against Palestinian inmates in Israeli prisons, or the Independent International Commission

of the Spanish conquistadors in 1519 but only reached its apex with the neocolonial Mexican government’s privatization of the remaining *ejido*, as a prerequisite for Mexico signing onto the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would come into effect on that New Year’s Day.[36] And so it was on 1 January 1994, that the EZLN occupied towns in the south of Mexico, and burned papers in the state’s land registry. The first political act of the EZLN was to return the *ejido* to the stewardship of communities, recovering it from capital that sought to finish the job of turning communal land into private property. Later that year, the EZLN published the ‘Second Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle’, which included the words with which Da Silva grapples in her essay:



Part of the cadastral survey map (scale 1:30 000) of the *musha’* village of Maallaqa (Biqa’) taken from James Long Whitaker, *The Union of Demeter with Zeus: Agriculture and Politics in Modern Syria*, unpublished PhD, University of Durham, 1996

Facing the mountain we speak with our dead so that they will reveal to us in their word the path down which our veiled faces should turn. The drums rang out and in the voice of the earth our pain spoke and our history spoke.

’For everyone, everything’, say our dead. ’Until it is so, there will be nothing for us’.[37]

of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, ‘More than a human can bear: Israel’s systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender-based violence since 7 October 2023’, UNHRC, 13 March 2025, p. 46, ohchr.org. Here too I return to Hortense Spillers as she reflects on her 1987 essay: ‘I was trying … to find a vocabulary that would make it possible, and not all by myself … and didn’t find one that was immediately available … . Or the language broke down … . That the history of black people was something you could use as a note of inspiration but it was never anything that had anything to do with you—you could never use it to explain something in theoretical terms’ (Spillers et al., ‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’). It is in such a moment that we again find ourselves today, and so it is critical that we lay bare the tropes used to legitimize the ongoing Zionist attempt at the annihilation of Life in Palestine, while finding a language to speak in theoretical terms of the legitimate Palestinian resistance to it. (This footnote was updated in May 2026.)

20. See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans. Constance Farrington) New York: Grove Press, 1963, Chapter 1. On this basic equation which Jean-Paul Sartre could not admit to himself because of the egocentrism of Europe, see Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us*, South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2017, Chapter 1. See also Abdeljawad Omar, ‘Hopeful Pathologies in the War for Palestine: A Reply to Adam Shatz’, Mondoweiss, 8 November 2023, mondoweiss.net; Nasser Abourahme, ‘In tune with their time’, in *Radical Philosophy* vol. 2, issue 16, Summer 2024. On revolutionary violence against colonial violence, see also Jean Genet’s critical articulation in ‘Violence and Brutality’, *Le Monde*, 2 September 1977, here as translated for Amygdala journal by Aiden Farrell, n.d. amygdalajournal.com.



On the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas – prompting centuries further of European colonisation and exploitation, a man topples the statue of the inquisitor Diego de Mazariegos in San Cristobal, Mexico. Photo: Antonio Turok

Thirty years later, after ongoing struggles with the state over land, as well as reflection and consultation with their elders, the Zapatistas have come to the realization that despite its communal nature, the *ejido* remains within the logic of the state, because 'communal property … only existed if it was registered and that, with the same laws … [the state can] diminish it until it disappears'.[38] Consequently, the EZLN called for the critical category of 'non-property' outside the purview of the state. While the Ottoman Empire in its final years sought to eliminate property held in common, it was too weak to implement the decision and contrary to the officials' desires, *musha'* lands expanded, reaching an estimated 70 percent of land in Palestine at the moment of its occupation by the British.[39] Under Ottoman rule, the land that fell under the *musha'* category was considered the ownership of God, who in the Empire was represented by the Sultan, and who in turn conferred it to communities as its collective stewards. Until the failed attempt of the Ottoman Empire and the arrival of colonizers, *ard musha'* existed outside the liberal regime of property of the modern nation-state. 'We should be wary of reifying the notion of al-musha', writes the anthropologist Martha Mundy, 'at issue is not a uniform system of tenure but an idiom of cultivators for thinking relations within the village, to the fisc and to land, in terms of shares'.[40] This might weaken the term's applicability as a fixed concept with which to oppose colonialism's logic, yet this is the case only if we continue to operate within the chokehold of modernity's workings. *Al-ard al-musha'* offers a relationship to land, and a set of strategies, not a totalizing concept, precisely because it didn't appease the juridical categories of the modern state, thus further strengthening its applicability as a mentality with which to counter the making private, the separation of humans and the land, as well as the state itself, the custodian of this separation. When *musha'* becomes a mentality, it allows our 'political imagination to learn to do without' the rules of modern thought, one critical step towards decolonization, arguing not for an implementation of *ard musha'* as a fixed system in an archaic return to the past, but rather than an embracing of spiral of time by re-assessing past practices for the present.[41] In Palestine, this entails retaining the land materially from the Zionist occupation, conceptually from the British colonial project before it, and critically also keeping it from the elites / ruling class of a sought- after Palestinian state.[42] What the Zapatistas teach, is that this collectivization of land outside of the purview of the state is 'necessary to be able to face the storm – nature['s] … way of protesting, increasingly louder and increasingly terrible' against modernity's sowing of 'darkness, death, destruction'.[43] The Zionist occupier's onslaught continues to annihilate Life, beings of all kind, humans, animals, plants, trees, and finally the soil.[44] Israel has imbued the colonial act of 'scorched earth' new meaning, including the destruction even of the colonial demarcation of land made private – in areas of its deepest incursions removing every proof of the Carob tree that was the border – Gaza thus demarcates a reset.[45] A destruction with a mission of: 'Everything for us'.

Against this, 'everything for everyone' asserted by a *musha'* mentality, is the unthinkable transformation from destruction into radical possibility.

21. See the video published on the Al-Quds Al-Bawsala (القدس البوصلة) Instagram and Telegram accounts, 7 October 2023, Internet Archive, archive.org, cited by HajYahia, 'The Principle of Return'. Patrick Taylor identifies the importance of 'human actors coming to consciousness of their creative involvement in history' as an affront to the dehumanization that excuses the acts of the perpetrators, as the mythical tale that seeks to keep the colonized under the order of the colonizer (Patrick Taylor, *The Narrative of Liberation Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Literature, Popular Culture, and Politics*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 6). A powerful example of the everyday form of resistance is the farmer Yousef Abu Sagger; in one post he shared, Youssef is visiting his friends Salah and Nasr who are preparing to plant in a field which the Israelis have bombed with an F-16 missile. Lacking access to heavy machinery to plough the land, they use a Palestinian method called *bazouk* in which they prepare a path along the sides of the crater left in the ground by the missile. Two weeks earlier, the Israeli military specifically targeted his family's land once more, bombing and bulldozing it, and two weeks after that video was shot, the Israeli military sent a drone after Yousef who was tending to his land, assassinating the farmer in cold blood. After his murder, his family recalled a phrase he often repeated: 'Planting seeds is not just an act; it's a declaration of resilience.' (See 'Palestinian Food Sovereignty: Support Yousef's Legacy Work', Givebutter, givebutter.com.) Here, it's important to listen to the everyday protagonists; on the day of the announcement of a ceasefire, this woman from Gaza says: 'Gaza is within us, we are the ones who endured: we are the ones who persevered. No achievements are owed to anyone, no leader, no official, no country' (see palestinianyouthmovement, Instagram, 15 January 2025, instagram.com). On expanding borders, see Jessica Buxbaum, 'Israel Isn't Leaving Syria: Settlement Plans Signal a Permanent Land Grab', Mint Press News, 22 January 2025, mintpressnews.com; Tom Perry, 'Israel Orders Thousands of Lebanese Not to Return to Border Area', Reuters, 25 January 2025, reuters.com – though the communities of Southern Lebanon too keep resisting: see e.g. publicworkstudio, Instagram, 27 January 2025, instagram.com; see also 'West Bank: record amount of land stolen by Israel. More acres annexed since Oct. 7 than in 30 years', International Solidarity Movement, palsolidarity.org.

22. Nadera Shaloub-Kevorkian, 'Ashlaa' and the Genocide in Gaza: Livability Against Fragmented Flesh', *Fieldsights*, Society for Cultural Anthropology, 31 October 2024, culanth.org. Thanks to Denise Ferreira da Silva for the reference to this crucial text.

23. Ibid.

24. Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 42. Elsewhere Da Silva identifies how 'the pillars of modern thought that sustain reason's ruling render the Dead's words incomprehensible … that incomprehensibility also exposes how transcendental reason has not been able to comprehend everything' (Ibid., pp. 43–44). And so she comes to the conclusion that 'unfortunately, my claim is incomprehensible', and here too we should celebrate that incomprehensibility in an act of defying the pillars of modernity (Ibid., p. 45).

25. See Ruth Wilson Gilmore's contribution to the panel 'Life and Death Beyond the Boundary' with Brenna Bhandar and Yvonne Phyllis, moderated by Layal Ftouni as part of 'Usufructuaries of Earth: Chapter three, convention', BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 24 May 2024, BAK Basecamp for Tactical Imaginaries, YouTube, youtube.com. This is a form of reasoning that is found

For what should be done with the land that was once owned by families, the entirety of which the Zionist occupier has brutally wiped out? As of [21] January 2025, the number of these families is estimated at 2092.[46] 'Everything for everyone' – make it common. The land for the community as *musha'*, is an affront to the colonization effort of all types, the martyrs' decomposing flesh bringing about the land's renewal. In Mexico, the struggle for land commons has ebbed and flowed for over 500 years and since 1994, communities are once again making lands communal. Making the land *musha'*, is a place to begin to prepare for the end of the colonization of Palestine, because end it will, as all colonialisms do: it is only a matter of time.[47] Under the tyranny of modern thought, decolonization in Palestine is incomprehensible. Yet after Palestinians broke through the colonial walls and returned to their ancestral land – even if temporarily – on the day of 7 October 2023, decolonization is more imaginable than ever.

'From the river to the sea', the Dead of Gaza insistently whisper, 'for everyone, everything'. Prior to the establishment of a Jewish supremacist state in 1948, residents of Palestine, irrelevant of faith, lived side by side; prior to British occupation in 1914, a majority of the inhabitants of the land, and the land itself lived free of the myth of private property.[48] 'From the river to the sea' expresses a notion that is not national, but decolonial. 'From the river to the sea' articulates radical relations between all beings, including humans to the land. 'From the river to the sea' relays the necessity to re-set our compasses – all of them.

Postscript, May 2026

This text was completed during a short ceasefire in Gaza in the winter of 2025. In spite of the latest ceasefire agreement, Israeli state and non-state actors continue to annihilate life in Palestine. On Monday, 11 May 2026, the Israeli parliament passed a law determining that all Palestinians deemed to have participated in the 7 October attacks will be put on trial before a military tribunal, which determines the public execution by hanging of anyone found guilty.[49] This manifests yet another level to the ongoing murder of Palestinian life by systematic, state-sanctioned judicial means.

Meanwhile, another shift is taking place in the blowback to the recent brutal and illegal attacks by the US and Israel on Iran. By the day, by the hour, a geopolitical realignment is taking shape that will continue to affect realities in Palestine and the region around it, with significant threat to Western narratives of supremacy. The impending show trials of Palestinians will not save the Zionist project in the face of the haughtiness of its leaders and its people.[50] The breaking of old systems entails an opening. A vision is necessary for Palestinian life that builds on the past, but is enlivened for the present. A vision that sets an example for the world.

Glory to the martyrs
المجد للشهداء

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again in the popular chant of Sudanese revolutionaries: 'شهدائنا ما ماتوا ... عايشين مع الثوار' (Our martyrs did not die ... they live within the revolutionaries.)

26. Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 42. This entails the recognition of the Palestinian narrative 'as a drama of defiance, persistence and self-determination' – as Edward Said wrote in the foreword to *The Question of Palestine*, as recently cited by Budour Hassan, who added – 'in order to form their radical subjectivity' (Budour Hassan, 'Edward Said & The Question of Palestine at the Southbank Centre', 13 December 2024, Soundcloud, soundcloud.com, 53:00 onwards). For why Palestine is necessary for all peoples' liberation see Linda Quiquivix, *Palestine 1492: A Report Back*, Occupied Chumash Lands: Wild Ox Books, 2024.

27. Vladimir Dedijer, 'The poor man's power', in Nigel Calder (ed.), *Unless Peace Comes: Scientific forecast of weapons to come*, New York: The Viking Press, 1968; see also Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 48.

28. Frantz Fanon, 'Lumumba's Death: Could We Do Otherwise?', *Toward an African Revolution* (trans. Haakon Chevalier), New York: Grove Press, 1967 [1961], p. 196. Fanon wrote this article days after the murder of his friend Patrice Lumumba, an event that marked the founding moment of neocolonial violence. See Rizk, *Neocolonialism and its Dismantling*, forthcoming, 2027.

29. This dynamic is by no means unique to Palestine, or the region. For other critical examples, see Leigh Brownhill, *Land, Food, Freedom: Struggles for the Gendered Commons in Kenya:* 1870–2007, Trenton, NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2009; see also Simón Ventura Trujillo, *Land Uprising: Native Story Power and the Insurgent Horizons of Latinx Indigeneity*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020.

30. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth: in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum* (trans. G. L. Ulmen), New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2006 [1950], p. 46.

31. See Ze'ev Jabotinsky, 'The Iron Wall', 4 November 1923 (it is important to note that Jabotinsky is the ideological forefather of current Israeli minister Bezalel Smotrich and former minister Itamar Ben-Gvir); see also Yosef Weitz, director of the Jewish National Fund, diary entry of 19 December 1940, referenced in David Koff's film *Occupied Palestine* (1991).

32. The Arabic term *ard musha'* is not a universal or uniform one and much research remains to be done. See Martha Mundy and Richard Saumarez Smith, *Governing Property, Making the Modern State: Law, Administration and Production in Ottoman Syria*, London: I.B. Taurus, 2007. The seemingly dominant form of such land commons entailed rules of land distribution that could differ from village to neighbouring village, with land rotations taking place every one to five years, but implemented differently across the former Ottoman Empire. The flexible form of *musha' al-ard* was meant to prevent land alienation to strangers, and to foster village cooperation (see Roza I. M. El-Eini, Mandated Landscape: *British Imperial Rule in Palestine,* 1929–1948, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 289; see also Linda Quiquivix, 'When the Carob Tree Was the Border: On Autonomy and Palestinian Practices of Figuring it Out', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* vol. 24, issue 3, 2013, pp.170–89; and see Shukri Arraf, *al-Qaryah al-'Arabīyah al-Filastīnīyah: mabná wa-isti'mālāt Arād*, al-Quds: Jam'iyat al-Dirāsāt al-'Arabīyah, 1996, pp. 91–96). It is critical to identify a common tendency of the urban revolutionaries' distance from the countryside. One example is Ghassan Kanafani, who, while identifying the importance of the peasants in resisting colonization in the 1936 revolution, makes

no mention of the critical role that privatization played in the taking of their land (see Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of* 1936–1939 *in Palestine: Background, Details, & Analysis* [trans. Hazem Jamjoum], New York: 1804 Books, 2023 [1972]). It is vital to remember that this separation between human and Earth was a strategy before colonization, and following the success of national liberation movements continues to be carried out by local neocolonial regimes (see Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability', Incerteza viva 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016). Consider neighbouring examples like Tunisia, where the state reigned supreme, whether in the early 'postcolonial' era, or more recently after the 2011 revolution, in the experience of the oasis of Jifna (see Fouad Ghorbali, 'Tunisia: The State and Its Nationalized Lands', *As-Safir Al-Arabi*, 3 October 2022, assafirarabi.com). Here we must learn to develop a new language that can accompany such a radical reimagination.

33. Ya'akov Firestone, 'The Land-Equalizing Musha' Village: A Reassessment', G. Gilbar (ed.), *Ottoman Palestine,* 1800–1914*: Studies in Economic and Social History*, Leiden: Brill, 1990, pp. 109–10.

34. See Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021, p. 6. Listen also to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'Make no mistake, it's capitalism that we're after', warscapes, Instagram, 30 April 2025, instagram.com.

35. Quiquivix, 'When the Carob Tree Was the Border', p. 11.

36. See Alvaro Reyes, 'Zapatismo: Other Geographies Circa 'the End of the World'', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 33, 2015, p. 413; James J. Kelly, 'Article 27 and Mexican Land Reform: The Legacy of Zapata's Dream', *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 25, issue 2, 1994, cited in Quiquivix, Palestine 1492, p. 41.

37. EZLN, 'Second Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle', June 1994, Radio Zapatista, 25 December 2005, radiozapatista.org.

38. EZLN, 'Twentieth and Last Part: The Common and Non-Property', 23 December 2023, enlacezapatista.ezln.org. Thus responds one peasant to the question of whose land it is: 'The government owns the land, we just borrow it to sustain ourselves'. Raymundo Gleyzer, *Mexico: The Frozen Revolution* (1971), 19:16, youtube.com; see also Quiquivix, *Palestine* 1492, p. 80.

39. El-Eini, *Mandated Landscape*, p. 291, cited in Noura Alkhalili, 'Enclosures from Below: The Mushaa' in Contemporary Palestine', *Antipode* vol. 49, issue 5, 21 March 2017, p. 6.

40. Martha Mundy, 'Qada 'Ajlun in the Late Nineteenth Century: Interpreting a Region from the Ottoman Land Registry', *Levant*, vol. 28, 1996, pp. 84, 87. Elsewhere Mundy identifies *ard musha'* as 'systems [that] block imposition of agricultural tax and as strategies for the minimization of risk in agricultural production by equitable distribution and rotation of land', systems that are 'resources as well as social relations'. Martha Mundy, 'Village Land and Individual Title: Musha' and Ottoman Land Registration in the 'Ajlun District, in Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell (ed.), *Village, Steppe and State: Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1994, p. 79. See also Quiquivix, 'When the Carob Tree Was the Border', p. 8. On 'separation' see Da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability'.

41. This attempts a 'Black feminist poethical reading' that 'images the World as having always already been otherwise than its modern picturing' (Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 48). On 'spiral time' see Marx and, more importantly, Leda Martins, *Performances of Spiral Time*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2026. Such a move towards land as *musha'*, though, does not fulfil decolonization as 'the demand for nothing less than the return of the total value expropriated from and yielded by the productive capacity of Native lands and slave bodies' (Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', pp. 40–41).

42. Here, the Palestinian elites have identified more closely with the capitalist drive of the Zionist project from the start, 'folding its interests into the class of the Jewish bourgeoisie' (Ghassan Kanafani, *The Revolution of 1936–1939 in Palestine*, p. 3). In the negotiations for the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian elites traitorously traded in the right to return in exchange for their pseudo-state authority; later, some of them profited off the sale of subsidized cement from Egypt to Israel for the making of the dividing wall which de facto stole more lands (see Noura Erakat, Darryl Li and John Reynolds, 'Race, Palestine, and International Law', *AJIL Unbound*, vol. 117, 2023, pp. 77–81, cambridge.org). During the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip, that same pseudo-state authority called the Palestinian Authority has partnered with the genocidaires to arrest and kill Palestinian resistance forces in cities under its jurisdiction (see Lubna Masarwa, 'How the Palestinian Authority Became Israel's Enforcer in the West Bank', *Middle East Eye*, 8 January 2025, middleeasteye.net. Here, Da Silva's further reflection on decolonization is insightful: 'Because global capital is postcolonial capital, that is, it lives off the value yielded by the productive capacity of Native lands and slave bodies, so that the end of the anticolonial struggles, decolonization, will only be accomplished if the line separating the colonial present from the colonial past is erased because this is the only way to seize the colonial future' (Da Silva, 'Reading the Dead', p. 47). Or, more simply put, as the Zapatistas ask: 'What use is a house like this?', EZLN, *Critical Thought in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra I*, Durham: Paper Boat Press, 2016, p. 3. As the case of Mexico has definitively proven, building on a colonial legacy, it is the Mexican government that attempts to give communal land its final death blow. Similarly, South Africa offers a case study for national liberation, but not for decolonization – colonialism replaced with neocolonialism. While during Apartheid 80 percent of the land was owned by white settlers, in a 2017 census, 72 percent was owned by white male owners. In contrast, 92 percent of Palestine has been seized by Zionist settlers. Both struggles for liberation are still ongoing until 'the line separating the colonial present from the colonial past is erased'. Or the demand is met: 'Land for us to plant food and to live on. So we can forget about the past' (Lifa Jacob Phyllis, *The Nyarha FarmWorkers Documentary*, The Forge, YouTube, youtube.com). Part of honouring the Dead is not waiting for the indigenous elites to determine the form of liberation, once it has been fought for by everyone. On the pitfalls of neocolonialism, as Fanon identified it, a shared system between outside and inside forces see Rizk et al., *Neocolonialism and its Dismantling*, forthcoming.

43. EZLN, 'Twentieth and Last Part: The Common and Non-Property', Enlace Zapatista, 23 December 2023, enlacezapatista.ezln.org.

44. In a June 2024 report, Forensic Architecture found that between October 2023 and June 2024, approximately 83 percent of all plant life in Gaza was destroyed; approximately 70 percent of Gaza's agricultural land, 104 km2 (out of 150 km2) of fields and orchards were destroyed; more than 47 percent of groundwater wells and 65 percent of water tanks were destroyed or damaged; and none of the wastewater treatment facilities in Gaza remained intact or functional (Forensic Architecture, forensic-architecture.org). So the judge judges, in order to end the dispute between the two women claiming to be the child's mother, that the child will be cut in half, with each mother to receive one half. The actual mother immediately relents and says the child is to be given to the other woman in order to spare its life. And so the judge concludes that woman to be the actual mother, for no mother would agree to the ending of her child's life – see 1 Kings 3:16-27. And so it is with the land of Palestine in Gaza; only one party lays waste to the land, an attempted annihilation of all forms of Life on and in it, revealing its true colours: it is not the caretaker of the land.

45. Quiquivix, 'When the Carob Tree Was the Border'.

46. 'Gaza War Toll Surpasses 61,000 as Bodies Continue to be Recovered', The New Arab, 22 January 2025, newarab.com.

47. On the end of Israel, listen to Khaled Odetallah (نهاية 'إسرائيل': متلازمة القلق الوجوديّ في المشروع الصهيونيّ | خالد عودة 11.9.2019| الله) soundcloud.com; Shir Hever, 'SHOCKING Israel Economy TRUTH You Won't Hear Elsewhere', India & Global Left, YouTube, 9 October 2024, youtube.com; read Ilan Pappé, 'The Collapse of Zionism', Sidecar, 21 June 2024, newleftreview.org; Shir Hever, 'The End of Israel's Economy', Mondoweiss, 19 July 2023, mondoweiss.net; and Mtanes Shihadeh, 'The Estimated Cost of the Gaza War on the Israeli Economy', Arab Center Washington DC, 27 January 2025, arabcenterdc.org. Thinking past the collapse is critical to try and prevent a return to the status quo, heeding the warning, 'Zionism is encountering an impasse but there is no guarantee that that will constitute a victory for us' (Hashem Abushama, 'Zionism's Impending Defeat', *Antipode*, 20 June 2025, antipodeonline.org.

48. See Maha Nassar, 'From the River to the Sea' Doesn't Mean What You Think it Means', *The Forward*, 3 December 2018, forward.com.

49. Peter Beaumont and agencies, 'Israeli MPs back special tribunal with death penalty powers for alleged 7 October attackers', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2026, theguardian.com. Mohammad Mansour, 'Israel pushes for hangings and 'show trials' for 'October 7 detainees,' 11 May 2026, Al Jazeera, aljazeera.com.

50. Hannah Arendt reminds us, "A show trial needs even more urgently than an ordinary trial a limited and well-defined outline of what was done and how it was done. In the center of a trial can only be the one who did—in this respect, he is like the hero in the play—and if he suffers, he must suffer for what he has done, not for what he has caused others to suffer" (Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York: Penguin Books 1994 [1963], p. 9).

III. ‘In fact there has been no peace’: The enduring promise and failures of internationa-lisms

Today, again, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world

Françoise Vergès

2 Sep 2025

When I wrote 'Right now, today, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world',[1] we were still at the beginning of the war that the State of Israel launched after the attack on 7 October 2023 that left many dead in Israel.[2] The ideological campaign to justify the brutality and indiscriminate bombing and killing by Israeli forces began straight away. But also, right then and there, a counter-narrative was deployed by Palestinian groups and online media,[3] reminding the world of the original Nakba, of colonial occupation, of the State of Israel's contempt of international law, of the long history of dispossession, humiliation, arbitrary arrest, torture.

It is now 8 May 2025. Today, Europe celebrates the Allies' victory over the Nazis, heralding the return of liberty and the triumph of democracy, marking the end of Nazi aggression and occupation, the slaughter of a generation and the horrors of the Holocaust. Speeches about sacrifice and peace are uttered in the context of Trump's challenge to US support of NATO, leading Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, to declare: 'the West, as we knew it, no longer exists',[4] and Friedrich Mertz, the German chancellor, to state that, 'given the threats to freedom and peace on our Continent, we must also say about our defense: whatever it takes'.[5] Sixteen European Union states have since confirmed they will trigger a budget exemption for significantly higher defence spending.

In the context of genocides in Palestine and in Sudan, of massacres in Congo, of India's bombing of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the celebration of peace rings hollow. In a case brought by South Africa, the State of Israel has had to answer allegations of genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ),[6] and the Hind Rajab Foundation has been identifying Israeli soldiers guilty of crimes to indict them in a court of law.[7] However, Israeli ministers – including the prime minister, who faces an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) – still travel freely. The US is still sending weapons to Israel, kidnapping pro-Palestinian students, green card holders, in broad daylight, and temporarily disappearing them; European governments are criminalizing pro-Palestinian solidarity and timidly warning the Israeli government against abuses; around the world, authoritarian regimes are giving their entire support to Israeli policies; China remains mostly silent.

Let's recapitulate the most recent decisions of the State of Israel. On 2 March 2025, two weeks before resuming its offensive, Israel imposed a blockade on all humanitarian aid and other supplies entering Gaza. On 18 March, Netanyahu said Israel would return to operations with 'full force', adding: 'From now on, negotiations will only take place under fire.'[8] The government, he said, would continue to promote the plan set out by President Donald Trump 'to enable the voluntary departure of Gazans' from the strip.[9] On 23 March, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz announced the creation of an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bureau dedicated to the relocation of the Palestinians from Gaza, which would oversee their 'departure to third countries, including securing their movement, establishing movement routes, checking pedestrians at designated crossings in the Gaza Strip, as well as coordinating the provision of infrastructure that will enable passage by land, sea and air to the destination countries.'[10] On Monday of this week (5 May 2025), we learned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Security Cabinet approved an operational plan for the expansion of the war in Gaza and called back all reservists. The plan is to permanently occupy the Gaza Strip, internally displace its population into camps where entry and exit will be monitored by facial recognition and enforce a military monopoly on the distribution of food. Netanyahu has confirmed that Israeli forces will not withdraw from territories they occupy. Israeli military spokesperson Effie Defrin has declared that the plan would involve 'moving most of Gaza's population' to 'clean' areas.[11] International humanitarian operations in Gaza will be replaced by 'hubs' controlled by Israel and operated by private US military contractors (who never miss a chance to make a profit). 'We are finally going to occupy the Gaza Strip. We will stop being afraid of the word "occupation"', Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich told Israel's Channel 12.[12] He added that there would be 'no retreat from the territories we have conquered, not even in exchange for hostages'.[13] That same day, Israel bombed Yemen, Lebanon and Syria.

Two days ago, India launched missile strikes into Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, hitting civilians and mosques and killing twenty-six people, including children; the Modi government accused Pakistan of being involved in the attack in Indian-administered Kashmir last month that killed twenty-five Indians and one Nepali national. It is important to remember that since 2019, when the Indian government stripped Kashmir's semi-autonomous status, the region has seen a decades-long insurgency. In Sudan and Congo, proxy wars are leading to rapes, massacres and accusations of genocide.[14] On 4 May 2025, the Hamas-run Health Ministry declared that Israeli military action in Gaza had killed 52,535 people and had injured another 118,491. Industrial and agricultural fields have been wiped out; schools, universities, museums, libraries, archaeological and historical sites are in ruins.

One thing is sure: Palestine is now a planetary synonym for the worldwide anti-colonial struggle; for decolonization, for the abolition of settler colonialism everywhere. Double standards, distortions, erasures, lies have been revealed for what they are. In the 'land of the free and the home of the brave', the links between liberal democracy and settler colonialism are now exposed to all who want to see – the United States, a republic founded on dispossession, genocide, massacres and slavery. But is this not the case for all the states which claim to defend the 'humanist values' of peace, liberty and justice for all? France, Spain, England, Portugal, Holland, Germany, Canada, Australia and New Zealand got rich off colonial empires, genocide, dispossession.

When in a cultural institution, we are prompted to reflect on the roles in all of this of art, culture and the museum. The Western model of the museum has never been so strong: states compete to build one that will put them on tourist itineraries, among the 'top ten sites to visit' in a city, a place

1. Françoise Vergès, 'Right now, today, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world', L'Internationale Online, 21 December 2023, internationaleonline.org.

2. According to the UN, approximately 1,200 people were killed and 252 taken as hostages to Gaza. See United Nations, '7 October: UN experts call for end of violence and accountability after year of human loss and suffering and blatant disregard for international law', 7 October 2024, ohchr.org.

3. Middle East Eye, middleeasteye.net, The Electronic Intifada, electronicintifada.net and Palestinian Media Watch, palwatch.org, for example.

4. Jorge Liboreiro, '"The West, as we knew it, no longer exists" von der Leyden says amid Trump tensions', Euronews, 16 April 2025, euronews.com.

5. Ronan McGreevy, 'Europe marks 80 years since VE day as Continent faces new securities realities', *The Irish Times*, 8 May 2025, irishtimes.com.

6. See International Criminal Court, 'Situation in the State of Palestine', ICC-01/18, icc-cpi.int.

7. See The Hind Rajab Foundation, 'Hind Rajab Foundation Files Complaint Against 1,000 Israeli Soldiers for War Crimes in Gaza', 8 October 2024, hindrajabfoundation.org.

8. Jordana Miller and David Brennan, 'Israeli Cabinet approves plan to occupy parts of Gaza, source says', ABC News, 5 May 2025, abcnews.go.com.

9. Ibid.

10. Middle East Monitor, 'Israel approves new agency for "voluntary departure" of Palestinians from Gaza', Middle East Monitor (MEMO), 23 March 2025, middleeastmonitor.com.

11. As quoted in Andre Damon, 'Israel announces military occupation of Gaza in next phase of Trump-Netanyahu ethnic cleansing plan', WSWS, 5 May 2025, wsws.org.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. In January 2025, the UN declared and the US determined a genocide to be occurring in Sudan. See Nimi Princewill, 'Genocide is declared once more in Sudan. How did the country get here?', CNN, 10 January 2025, cnn.com. On the ongoing atrocities in Congo, see The Panzi Foundation, 'War in Congo', panzifoundation.org.

whose prestige (via its star architect and collection) should reflect that of their nation. The demand for museums is also felt by communities under threat (climate catastrophe, capitalism, racism, poverty, migration) of the disappearance of their art and culture. So where do museums feature in the current conjuncture?

Conjuncture, as Stuart Hall has argued, is a moment both of danger and of opportunity: in intellectual, cultural and political terms, it is a call to action. In ethnographer Melissa Gregg's words, Hall's conjunctural politics is a 'method of describing the unique circumstances a particular moment poses – typically disheartening in terms of his own socialist ideals – while at the same time providing the grounds for a potential route out of such circumstances.'[15] Or, in cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert's words, it means being aware of 'the importance of mapping the specificity of the present, of situating current developments historically, of looking out for political threats and opportunities'.[16] The present moment is marked by fascism, ethno-nationalism and the instrumentalization of regressive religious forces; by the militarization of public space, the criminalization of dissent; by AI for the dominant classes and an intensification of global counter-revolution; *and* by anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, revolutionary feminist, queer and trans movements; by radical environmentalist movements, by pro-Palestinian solidarity, and by struggles for land and water.

15. Melissa Gregg, 'The Politics of Conjuncture: Stuart Hall, Articulation and the Commitment to Specificity', in *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices* , London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, p. 56, springer.com.

16. Jeremy Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall', *new formations: a journal of theory/culture/politics*, vol. 96–87, 2019, p. 1, jhu.edu.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, in Gaza, as of 24 February 2024 (more than a year ago), 207 archaeological sites and buildings of cultural and historical significance had been reduced to rubble or severely damaged, out of a total of 320. Today, none of the 320 may be left standing. A Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities warehouse containing more than 4,000 archaeological objects was seized by the Israeli army, and its fate remains unknown. The fifth-century Byzantine Church was turned into a base for the Israeli military. Old mosques, churches, cemeteries, museums, libraries and archives; archaeological sites such as Tell es-Sakan, Tell Ruqaish, Tell al-'Ajul, Tell al-Mintar, Tell Rafah and also that of Deir al-Balah, including the remains of a Philistine cemetery dating to the Late Bronze period (1550–1200 BCE), as well as Gaza's ancient seaport, dating from 800–1100 BCE, have been (at the least) badly damaged by airstrikes and military activities. And on, and on: the Great Omari Mosque, originally the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, built by Crusaders in the twelfth century; the renovated Pasha's Palace; the Al-Qarara Cultural Museum, which housed a pottery collection from the Byzantine period; the Rafah Museum.[17]

Unlike when the Taliban destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in March 2001, there has been no firm global condemnation of the destruction of Palestinian museums and historical sites. None – not a word from any major universal museum. Soon after 7 October 2023, the directors of every major museum in Israel sent an open letter to UNESCO asking the institution to condemn 'Hamas's activities [which] amount to nothing less than the heinous murder, rape, torture, and detention of defenceless civilians.'[18] The letter added: 'Israel is a liberal democracy that

17. See Mahmoud Hawari, 'Israel Destroys Palestinian Cultural Heritage Sites in Gaza', Institute for Palestine Studies, 28 February 2024, palestine-studies.org.

18. Board of International Council of Museums (ICOM) Israel and Directors of Museums in Israel, 'Letter to ICOM', 21 October 2023, icom.org.

protects freedom of expression, diversity, and the arts—values that the ICOM community shares, as shown by the most recent revisions to the definition of a Museum. These exact ideals are being attacked by Hamas in their assault on our cities and communities.'[19] UNESCO released a statement declaring that it:

> **thus expects an immediate ceasefire in respect of international humanitarian law in order to prevent further loss of human life and safeguard cultural heritage – which is essential to our collective humanity – and reaffirms its commitment to the principles of peace, understanding, and unity through the preservation and protection of cultural heritage.**[20]

UNESCO's response was qualitatively different when it responded to the destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine, where, since the start of the Russian invasion, it has offered urgent repair and protection measures, as well as support with digitization to museums.[21] My point is not to claim that Ukraine's museums and historical sites should not be protected, but rather to stress the root causes of an inequality. The muted response of UNESCO, and of 'universal' museums worldwide, to the systemic destruction of museums and historical sites in Gaza shows which 'cultural heritages' matter, and which do not. The situation in Gaza reveals the lie of the so-called neutrality of 'the museum'. Last December, the national museum of Khartoum was looted by a militia supported by the United Arab Emirates, and again there were no protests from Western museums.[22] In the United States, Trump is asking museums to sanitize history (less racism, more white history); in India, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is erasing the Muslim past; in China, museums are asked to glorify 'Chinese history'.[23] The museum remains a battlefield.

Neither the systematic destruction of museums, libraries, archaeological and historical sites in Gaza, nor the looting of Khartoum's Museum is surprising. Colonial wars have never been only about massacres, genocides, land dispossession, extraction and exploitation, the renaming of rivers, mountains and cities; they always also have been about the destruction of temples, palaces, cities and monuments and the looting of art, archives and documents. As the authors of *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums* (2024) have shown, the ceremonies of rendition organized by colonial officers required that anti-colonial leaders not only bow to them but also that they surrender the symbols of their rule: banners, flags, sceptres, rifles and swords.[24] The officers would then sell these to the highest bidder. Yet, if the looting of art belongs to the long history of wars of conquest, not just those waged by the West, what distinguishes art looted in Western colonial and imperialist wars is that extermination was coupled with speculation, with art and archives ending up in the museum. Indeed, if colonial Europeans were certainly not the first to exterminate a species or a people, they were the first to invest so much in preserving a trace of what or whom they had exterminated – which often

19. Ibid.

20. ICOM, 'Statement concerning Israel and Palestine', 25 October 2023, icom.museum.

21. See UNESCO Press, 'Odesa: UNESCO strongly condemns attack on World Heritage Property', UNESCO, 21 July 2023, unesco.org.

22. On Abu Dhabi's involvement with Sudanese militias, see Alma Selvaggia Rinaldi, 'How Sudan's RSF became a key ally for the UAE's logistical and corporate interests', Middle East Eye, 1 September 2024, middleeasteye.net; and Oskar Rickett, 'How the UAE kept the Sudan war raging', Middle East Eye, 25 January 2024, middleeasteye.net.

23. See Tiffany May, 'A History Museum Shows How China Wants to Remake Hong Kong', *New York Times*, 23 August 2024, nytimes.com.

24. Sela K. Adjei and Yann LeGall (ed.), *Fifteen Colonial Thefts: A Guide to Looted African Heritage in Museums*, London: Pluto Press, 2024.

found its way into the museum. One can still find traces of exterminated peoples and nonhuman species in Western museums.

Let me go back to last Monday (5 May 2025). The German foreign ministry released a short documentary film by Wim Wenders, *The Keys to Freedom*, which stands, Wenders says, as a reminder 'that peace cannot be taken for granted'.[25] All excerpts are taken from the film. In it, Wenders visits the French school in Reims where the Nazi army's chief of staff, General Alfred Jodl, signed Nazi Germany's total surrender during the night of 8 March 1945, 'at 2.41 a.m. exactly'. At the insistence of the Soviet Union, the decree was ratified in Berlin the following day: not only were they the first to enter Berlin, the Soviet forces' contribution to the victory could not be ignored. This is why the end of the war was commemorated on 9 May in the Soviet Union, and why it remains Victory Day in Russia. Wenders's choice of France and of 8 May makes sense of what follows: It is the West's victory that carries a message for today. Wenders made the film for free, we learn, the ministry paying only for travel and some equipment.[26] In it, archival footage is combined with images of Wenders wandering through the French school that 'became the centre of the world', says Wenders's voiceover. Dramatic music accompanies the entry of Nazi generals in the school. Again, the voice of Wenders: 'Twelve years of terror, six years of war, the Holocaust, the worst crimes the world has ever known, end here, in a school in Reims.'

The 'worst crimes the world has ever known', 'a school', a regional town becoming 'the centre of the world' – all the features of a narrative that centres the West are here. In the school's museum, a set of keys are on display that the US commander-in-chief returned to Reims' mayor after the ceremony of surrender, saying: 'These are the keys to the freedom of the world.' 'I was very touched by the sight of these keys', Wenders continues, as we see him walking out of the school surrounded by teenagers. But these peaceful images should not deceive us; the peace brokered in that schoolhouse is now under threat. 'I have lived eighty years in peace, a peace the night in this school brought us all. Today, in its fourth year, there is war in Europe again. It is also a war against Europe. It is now up to us to take the keys to freedom into our own hands', Wenders concludes.

I don't know if Wenders is aware of the significance of the key as a symbol among Palestinian refugees, but whether he is or not, his choice to situate *The Keys to Freedom* in Europe says a lot. Apparently, he has learned nothing in his eighty years of life: His is a Eurocentric history, as if this history ended in that European 'centre', with not a single word about the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He speaks of Ukraine but not of Gaza, nor Sudan, Congo, Kashmir or any other place in the world that does not belong to the white West. His 'peace for all' was peace in western Europe, not peace for everyone: not even in Eastern Europe, and certainly not in Madagascar, Algeria, Vietnam, Cameroon, South Africa, Palestine, or for many other places in the Global South. Wenders even ignores the dictatorships which lasted until the mid-1970s in the heart of western Europe, in Spain, Portugal and Greece. And Wenders's blissful ignorance

25. *The Keys to Freedom*, **dir. Wim Wenders, Germany, Auswaertiges Amt, 2025, youtu.be.**

26. Steven Erlanger, 'Wim Wenders on Where the War in Europe Really Ended', *New York Times*, **8 May 2025, nytimes.com.**

is not an exception: It is the dominant narrative in Europe that the end of World War II and the victory over Nazism brought peace and progress for everyone.

Are we witnessing one of those moments when we can see the proximity between events that are usually separated from each other? Victory over the Nazis in the West *and* over eighteen months of the bombing, starvation, drone-killing, arrest and incarceration of children, women and men in Gaza by a state whose justification rests on 'never again'? But, just as the universal declaration that 'all humans are created equal' was selectively affirmed, 'never again' is not for everyone. The European narrative of liberation from Nazism continues to stubbornly ignore that what Europe has called 'peace' has been at the expense of wars waged against peoples around the world. The Pax Americana instituted after World War II (and, according to media and politicians, currently under threat by Trump) was the systemic organization of a militarized world under US leadership. The new institutions of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) and NATO were created therein, charged with enforcing the domination of the US dollar and preserving the interests of multinationals. True, there was 'peace' in western Europe and social progress, though it was not always peaceful for the working class, for anti-fascist, anti-militarist, anti-imperialist movements. But, yes, most people could go about their daily lives without fearing bombs or military occupation. So it continues, this narrative of 'peace': Islamophobia helps societies of the European Union to justify their support for the genocide in Gaza, while the occupation of public space by armed police and soldiers and the criminalization of protest are justified in the name of protecting 'peace'. This is what Rosa Luxembourg called 'armed peace' – the other face of militarism, a 'peace' enforced by the police.[27]

In fact, there has been no peace, but continuous wars against peoples' aspirations for freedom, abolition and decolonization. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), between 1989 (the first year for which data is available) and 2023, armed conflicts have caused the death of 3.8 million people, both combatants and civilians, and more than half of these deaths have occurred in Africa.[28] The Middle East and Asia have been the next most affected regions, with approximately 680,000 and 580,000 deaths respectively. Europe and the Americas have seen the fewest deaths. In 2023, the number of conflicts involving states totalled 59, the highest number since records began in 1946, says the UCDP. According to The Watson School's 'Costs of War Project', US spending on aid for Israeli military operations in Gaza and elsewhere between 7 October 2023 and 7 October 2024 was over 17.9 billion US dollars.[29] The Watson School also reported that US-backed Israeli military operations since 7 October 2023 will lead to far higher 'indirect' than direct death rates.[30]

160 million people died in wars during the twentieth century.[31] These direct and 'indirect' deaths were the result of CIA-supported coups, military dictatorships, French military interventions in Africa and the afterlives of

27. Rosa Luxembourg, 'Peace Utopias', *Leipziger Volkzeitung*, **6 and 8 May 1911, marxists.org.**

28. These figures, and the following, are sourced from 'Deaths in armed conflicts, World', Our World in Data, 2025, ourworldindata.org.

29. See 'Summary of Findings', The Watson School of International and Public Affairs, watson.brown.edu.

30. Ibid.

31. See Piero Scaruffi, 'Wars and Casualties of the 20th and 21st Centuries', 2009, scaruffi.com.

nuclear tests, chemical weapons and chemical contamination by all the great imperial powers.

As Rony Brauman, former president of Doctors Without Borders, recently reported, in Ukraine:

> **The precise human toll of the war is not known as the numbers of military dead and wounded are kept secret on both sides. In August 2024, The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on civilian casualties since February 2022: more than 11,000 dead and 22,000 injured. The number of combatants killed is, according to conservative estimates, between 42,000 and 80,000 on the Ukrainian side and double that for the Russian army.[32]**

Gwynne Dyer compares these figures with those of Gaza:

> **The number of civilians killed in Ukraine in three years of war – most of them from rockets, bombs and shells, but a small proportion by bullets – was 12,605. Ukraine's current population, not counting 10 million people living under Russian military occupation or as refugees abroad, is about 29 million. … About *four times* as many civilians have been killed in Gaza, in *half* the time, out of a population *less than one-tenth* as big.[33]**

This is, of course, not to say that Ukrainian or Russian deaths do not matter but to remark that 'empathy' is not spontaneous, that double standards are at play. Brauman continues, for Gaza, there 'is nothing like the humanitarian consensus regarding the war in Ukraine. In a study on this subject, the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) notes that "A number of experienced humanitarians reported that they had never worked in a situation where geopolitical interests, donor preferences and funding mechanisms were so explicitly aligned."'[34]

To which, Brauman adds:

> **In fact, with the exception of Israel, no State practising apartheid and colonisation and engaged in blatant acts of genocide is rewarded with the title of democracy or receives the kind of military, diplomatic or economic support that makes it possible to pursue its policy of crushing others. In no other comparable situation do those who denounce major crimes and call for an end to them find themselves suspected, even accused, of incitement to racial hatred.[35]**

But was it ever otherwise? Western liberal democratic states have always practiced double standards. We also know that wars contribute 'significantly to climate change', and that the US 'Military-Industrial Complex' is 'deeply enmeshed with Silicon Valley.'[36]

The current genocide in Gaza is not an exceptional event, it is a repetition – or, as Palestinians say, an episode in the long Nakba. In the West Bank, settlers, with the support of the police and the army, are beating and killing Palestinians, chasing families from their homes, stealing property. Israeli ministers are travelling with total impunity. In the USA, students are being kidnapped in broad daylight and disappeared into prisons; solidarity with Palestine is heavily criminalized in the West. Saying 'Free Palestine', 'from the river to the sea' or even 'settler colonialism' is seen as antisemitic; holding the Palestinian flag will get you prosecuted, and media talk of the 'Palestinian dead' as if they are victims of a mysterious force.

In 1950, Aimé Césaire wrote '*Europe is indefensible*'[37] Today we could say 'the West is indefensible'. To live in Europe is to live on a continent drowning in its own insignificance and arrogance while having to endure the insane mediocrity of its defence of the State of Israel. In November 2023, as I was reading the diary of a Palestinian psychotherapist in the French journal *Libération*, I came upon the following exchange. A psychotherapist asked a colleague 'How are you doing?', to which the latter answered:

> **No, I am not well. How can I be okay when I live in a tent, battling sand, sun, heat, cold, lack of water and food? Am I okay? I'm not hurt, I'm not dead, but no, I'm not okay. I have lost my past and my present. My past is buried under the rubble or scattered along the paths of exile. I live in a present that no longer belongs to me.[38]**

'I live in a present that no longer belongs to me.' To whom it does belong, then? If the present can no longer be owned, how can a future be imagined? Is it possible to imagine a future without owning the present? Is that unavoidable? Have the natives, the colonized, the oppressed, ever owned their present? What should we hear in the words of this Palestinian woman? What is she telling us?

When Isaac Herzog, president of Israel, declared on MSNBC, 'This war is not

32. **Rony Brauman, 'Ukraine, Gaza: double standards' (trans. Derek Scoins),** *Alternatives Humanitaires*, **no. 27, November 2024,** alternatives-humanitaires.org.

33. **Gwynne Dyer, 'Shocking differences in numbers of dead in Gaza vs. Ukraine',** *Windsor Star*, **29 April 2025,** windsorstar.com.

34. **Brauman, 'Ukraine, Gaza: double standards'.**

35. **Ibid.**

36. **'Summary of Findings', The Watson School of International and Public Affairs,** watson.brown.edu.

37. **Aimé Césaire,** *Discourse on Colonialism* **(trans. Joan Pinkham), New York:** *Monthly Review Press*, **1972 [1955], p. 32.**

38. **Noor Z. Jarada, '***Journal d'une Gazaoui: «Un simple repas en famille devient une victoire sur le chaos»***', *Libération*, 9 October 2024, liberation.fr. Translation by the author.**

only a war between Israel and Hamas, it's a war that is intended, really, truly, to save Western civilization. To save the values of Western civilization', he was repeating words that have been said again and again to justify colonial wars.[39] They are always wars fought in the name of civilization, always in the name of a mission to bring peace in a chaotic world. The messianic vocabulary of this discourse is easily identifiable. Yet, despite the repetition, despite a total lack of imagination in the legitimation of military intervention – which is simply maiming, torturing, raping, destroying – in the name of bringing freedom, it is still done. Evidently, natives, the colonized, are 'monsters' 'unable to understand peace', 'raising their children to become terrorists': no proof needs to be given, it's the repetition of these words that matters, not their truth.

When Israeli ministers say that Palestinians are 'animal', they don't mean that they will treat Palestinians as they treat their animals, who in Israel are protected by a series of laws, but that they don't fully belong to the human species. This is the work of dehumanization that is at the heart of colonialism. The process of humanizing the dehumanized usually rests on making them worthy of the title 'human', which means, as Mohammed El-Kurd has argued, 'the willingness to forgive. An unassuming gaze and an unthreatening demeanor.'[40]

Western wars have long been waged to impose, enforce and 'save' Western 'values'. These values just *are*: immediately comprehensible and recognizable, evidently principled, moral and noble. Herzog's understanding of the necessity of waging war to save Western civilization against an essentialist threat belongs to the long history of the fiction that sustains settler nation-states. The United States, Canada and Australia have been able to claim to defend freedom and human rights while their cities were built on the corpses and villages of the peoples they exterminated, while they stole Indigenous children from their families and took them to horrendous boarding schools where they were harassed, beaten, tortured, killed and subjected to forced assimilation. These nation states possess internationally acclaimed museums with prestigious collections of stolen objects from colonized or exterminated peoples. They have a veto right at the United Nations Security Council. Their decisions about climate disaster and militarism affect the whole world. They launch devastating wars with total impunity. But their declared love of liberty, of women's rights, of children, of freedom of expression, they claim, is limitless. They love children more than any other people.

Why would the State of Israel not feel entitled to follow their example? If these states have succeeded in hiding their crimes, if they have been able to protect each of their criminals from being tried, why not Israel? These countries are the embodiment of a benevolent and civilized order, while the crimes of other states have tainted their reputation. Colonial occupation inevitably contaminates liberal democracy, laws must be adopted to protect property rights over stolen land, to distinguish between citizens, to militarize society, and a feeling of being under constant threat must be nurtured. That sentiment is not wrong: settlers know that those whom they discriminate against, humiliate, criminalize, hold dreams of revenge. But they also entertain a sense of omnipotence that, when it is shattered, pushes them to terrorism and violence.

The liberation of Palestine (and this has nothing to do with deciding for the Palestinians which political movements they choose to follow) strikes at the heart of a Western modernity built on racialization and colonization. What is at stake is the abolition of the colonial as an ideological, economic and visual regime of oppression, extraction, dispossession and exploitation. In the words of June Jordan, the phenomenal Black feminist poet, recalled to me by Angela Davis: 'Palestine serves as a measure of what we are capable of doing with respect to changing the entire world.'[41]

39. As quoted in Sarah Fortinsky, 'Israel's president defends ongoing war: "If it weren't for us, Europe would be next"', The Hill, 12 May 2023, thehill.com.

40. Mohammed El-Kurd, *Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2025, p. 48.

41. Angela Davis, recorded by Françoise Vergès, 19 October 2023, quoted in Vergès, 'Right now, today, we must say that Palestine is the centre of the world'. On June Jordan, see also Therese Saliba, 'June Jordan's Songs of Palestine and Lebanon', The Feminist Wire, 24 March 2016, thefeministwire.com.

Translated into Socialism: An experiment in internationalism

Merve Elveren, Tevfik Rada, Sezgin Boynik

9 Mar 2026

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The exhibition ‘Translated into Socialism’ presents the little-known history of the Turkish-speaking community in Yugoslavia, or more precisely, in Kosovo and Macedonia between 1920 and 1980.[1] It explores how this community affirmed and transformed its identity during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Socialist Yugoslavia) through newspapers, periodicals, schools and various cultural and political organizations. The interconnectedness of these initiatives provides a nuanced perspective that challenges mainstream approaches to nationalism and questions the discourse on Yugoslavia as ‘totalitarian’ and ‘ethnonationalist’ that was consolidated by its traumatic break-up during the 1990s wars. The exhibition reworks historical materials sourced from private archives and public libraries, many of which are being unearthed for the first time. These materials are juxtaposed with contemporary works by Mustafa Emin Büyükcoşkun, Yane Calovski, Hana Miletić, Ahmet Öğüt, Fevzi Tüfekçi and Dilek Winchester to open up a dialogue between historical and contemporary perspectives. Focusing on different actors and thresholds, the project as a whole offers cross-readings between present and past.

Merve Elveren: ‘Translated into Socialism’ brought to light archival documents relating to many prominent figures in Yugoslavia’s Turkish-speaking community and the structures they built. Could you elaborate on how you started this research and how the project evolved over time?

Tevfik Rada: We should begin with the prehistory of the project. In fact, the initial phase of our research was based on a different idea. Both Sezgin and I come from the Turkish community in Prizren, so we were familiar with the Turkish-language literature published in Yugoslavia. Many of us grew up reading it. We had – and still have – all these materials, books and periodicals in our libraries. More than that, we personally knew most of the prominent figures who built and were part of this scene, many of whom were still alive when we were growing up.

In the 1990s, after the break-up of Yugoslavia, almost all of these figures underwent a drastic nationalist shift, aligning themselves with Turkish state and civil society institutions. This is a familiar story. As a side note, nearly all of them turned a blind eye to the exhibition in Istanbul. None of the Turkish-language media from Kosovo or Macedonia acknowledged the project – except for Nimetullah Hafız, to whom we’ll return later in this conversation. This says a lot about where the community stands ideologically today. Of course, as we noted, this orientation has to do with the dissolution of the entire social and political structure of Yugoslav socialism. There were no Albanian-language articles about the exhibition either, but that is another story.

At the beginning of this research, our initial idea was to explore the institutional background of the Turkish-speaking community in Socialist Yugoslavia. We were also trying to understand what led to the community’s broader conformism. Sezgin had already started thinking and working on this topic in the early 2000s. He argued that the Turkish language of Socialist Yugoslavia was cemented in a ‘vacuum’, meaning that while the socialist political system in Yugoslavia provided immense institutional support for minority languages as well as to intellectuals, writers and artists, there were no grassroots socialist political movements within this community. The official Turkish language of Socialist Yugoslavia thus operated – and even flourished in some senses – in a kind of void between state support and public passivity. As a result, the language that emerged during this period was strange, awkward, amusing and largely unrelatable for the public. Sezgin can say more about this later. We intended to explore this idea of a vacuum when we began working on the ‘Nation Formation’ project at the Lumbardhi Foundation (Prizren). However, we soon realized that the picture was not entirely accurate: that actually, there was, at certain moments, quite a strong grassroots socialist political movement among the Turkish population in Yugoslavia. To uncover it, we had to go back to the archives of 1919 and 1920, the formation years of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and the years when it received support from the Muslim population. This discovery completely shifted the scope and direction of our project.

Sezgin Boynik: The most important thing that prompted the initial idea was the discovery of the work of Ferit and Nakiye Bayram, militant leftist internationalists active in both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and, later, the Second (or Socialist) Yugoslavia. Together with Tevfik, we presented an archival installation at the 3rd Autostrada Biennale in Prizren in 2021, titled ‘Who Are Ferit and Nakiye Bayram?’. With this project, we wanted to provide a picture of the life and work of this fascinating couple and their trajectory, as they were the link between the grassroots socialist ideas that emerged in 1920 and the official socialist development that followed World War II. Ferit was a teacher, writer, translator and political activist, and in 1920 the editor of *Sosyalist Fecri* (Socialist Dawn), the official newspaper of the CPY, published in Turkish with Ottoman script in Skopje, which ran for twelve issues. He also participated in the historically significant CPY congress in Vukovar of that year and was elected as a CPY deputy to the short-lived democratic parliament of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which was disbanded by the King’s decree on 31 December 1920. Nakiye, who was also a teacher, collaborated with Rosa Plavevea, one of Yugoslavia’s well-known early socialist feminists. Nakiye and Rosa were involved in various educational projects for impoverished Muslim youth and women in Macedonia. Following the liberation from fascist occupation and monarchic autocracy after 1945, Nakiye joined the Women’s Anti-Fascist Front (AFŽ),[2] working as a translator and educator. Meanwhile, Ferit published the first Turkish-language alphabet in Latin script in 1947,[3] and, as a delegate of the founding conference of the CPY, famously sat next to Tito for the jubilee photo celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the CPY’s foundation in 1959.

When we started working on the Autostrada Biennale research, there was hardly any information about these remarkable militant figures. The only reference we could find about Bayrams was the research material used by Altay Suroy for his 1988 TV Prishtina documentary film about Ferit.

1. ‘Translated into Socialism’ was initiated and researched by Sezgin Boynik and Tevfik Rada (Pykë-Presje) and curated by Merve Elveren. The first iteration of this project was realized in collaboration with Salt (Istanbul) and the Lumbardhi Foundation (Prizren) and was presented at Salt Galata between 24 October 2024 and 23 February 2025. The second iteration took place at MSUM (Ljubljana) between 12 June 2025 and 8 February 2026. The exhibition posters were designed by Bardhi Haliti.

2. The AFŽ was organized in different parts of Yugoslavia by volunteer women during the People’s Liberation War and played a significant role in the liberation struggle. Although many women from the Muslim community in Macedonia and Kosovo supported the anti-fascist movement, the Turkish and Albanian sections of the Front were formed only after the war. The Turkish branches in Macedonia and Kosovo focused mainly on communist pedagogy and literacy courses in a context where more than 80 percent of women were illiterate. The organization was also active in negotiating and implementing the unveiling campaigns. AFŽ ceased its activities when it was dissolved at its fourth congress in Belgrade in 1953.

3. Ferit Bayram and Fetah Süleymanpaşiç, *Alphabet*, Skopje: Bratstvo Publishing House, 1947.

Unfortunately the film is lost, but the materials related to the film became our primary source of information, including Suroy's 'Theses on the Film' (1986) and his report on Ferit's legal battle to expose the police terrorism against leftist activists, particularly Albanians and Turks, in Macedonia and Kosovo in 1920. Suroy studied law and, between 2006 and 2008, served as a judge at the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo. Based on his 'missing film', we created a presentation that re-enacted the period through a montage of diverse elements and historical references, including flags and posters which we reconstructed from our imagination. Rather than being an archival exhibition documenting the period, this was an attempt to build a 'dialectical image', as Walter Benjamin would have put it, depicting flashbacks of this fleeting historical moment.

During the process, we came across some amazing materials. In the *photothèque* (photographic archive) of the Museum of Revolution, which is hosted by the Museum of Macedonia in Skopje, we discovered a photograph of the 1910 May Day celebrations organized by the Skopje Social Democratic Party, of which Ferit Bayram was a member. The photograph shows workers carrying banners in Ottoman, Serbian, Macedonian and Hebrew, which testifies to the genuinely internationalist nature of the movement. Even more remarkably, we found issues of *Sosyalist Fecri*, which were previously thought to be lost. These were exhibited for the first time at the biennial, with slight interventions made using the linocut technique. It was a stroke of luck, an archival blessing, if you will, which led Tevfik to discover by chance a folder containing all issues of the newspaper except the eighth at the State Archive of the Republic of Kosovo in Prishtina. In collaboration with The Social History Research Foundation of Turkey (TUSTAV),[4] an Istanbul-based independent archive and research platform, we transliterated the *Sosyalist Fecri* issues into the Latin alphabet and conducted a thorough study on the background of the newspaper. These materials, alongside our extensive introduction, were published by TÜSTAV in 2023.[5] The volume also includes a reprint of Kemal Seyfullah's biography of Ferit Bayram, originally published by Tan Publishing House in Prishtina in 1978. Seyfullah was another prominent figure who was a politician, diplomat, writer and art collector, a story in itself. He founded the Muslim Communist Cell in Skopje, which joined the Partisans in 1941 at the start of the People's Liberation War.

TR: Another factor that further expands the picture is the issue of translation, a process we explored for 'Translated into Socialism', as indicated by the title: specifically, the translation of socialism into the conditions of Southern Yugoslavia, or, from the opposite direction, as we phrased it: the translation of the (Turkish) language into socialism. This was the main point of the exhibition and one that counters the mainstream narrative that socialism was imposed on the Muslim populations of Macedonia and Kosovo. On the contrary, it was a far more complex process in which local populations were active participants who translated and adapted socialist ideas to their own conditions. The *Sosyalist Fecri* newspaper and (as discussed below) the poem by Hacı Ömer Lütfü that it published are clear and early expressions of this, reflecting a

4. TUSTAV was founded in 1992 by the United Communist Party of Turkey (TBKP), formed through the unification of the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP) and the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP). TUSTAV's principal objective was initially defined as collecting, preserving, providing access to, and publishing the written, visual and audio files and archival documents of TKP, TIP, and TBKP. From 1999 onward, however, TUSTAV expanded its scope to encompass the history of labour and left movements in Turkey as a whole.

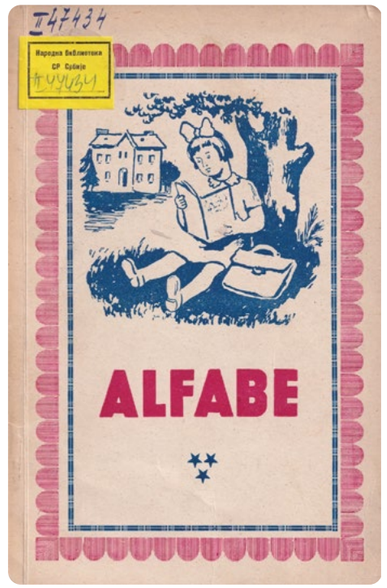
5.Sezgin Boynik and Tevfik Rada (ed.), *Yugoslavya Komünist Partisi Yayın Organı: Sosyalist Fecri Gazetesi* (1920) (Organ of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia: Socialist Dawn Gazette [1920]), Istanbul: TÜSTAV Iktisadi İşletmesi, 2023.



Sosyalist Fecri, No. 7, Skopje, October 22, 1920. Archive: State Archive of the Republic of Kosovo



Children trailing behind Ferit Bayram's casket with wreaths, Skopje, 1965 from *Birlik*, Skopje, March 25, 1965. Archive: National and University Library St. Clement of Ohrid



Ferit Bayram and Fetah Süleymanpaşiç's book *Alphabet*, Skopje: Bratstvo Publishing House, 1947. Archive: National Library of Serbia



'Our Tito told us to work hard and defend our homeland. We drove the enemy out of our homeland. We expelled the fascists. Now we work and be active for our homeland.' Page from Ferit Bayram and Fetah Süleymanpaşiç's book *Alphabet*, Skopje: Bratstvo Publishing House, 1947. Archive: National Library of Serbia

moment of revelation and a growing confidence among people from the periphery: after witnessing the 1917 Revolution, they realized that so-called 'backward' countries with relatively little industrial development could become subjects of history.

There is also something particularly interesting in relation to nation formation worth mentioning. In 1920, when *Sosyalist Fecri* was published in Turkish, Albanian-language publications were already banned in the Kingdom. Although *Sosyalist Fecri* and many other pieces of communist propaganda were written in Turkish, they were not addressing an abstract Turkish nationality, but rather the broader Muslim community in the region. Unlike in Turkey, the Turkish nation as a modern concept was not fully framed in this geography. It was only with Socialist Yugoslavia that national identity was encouraged and shaped, however, along internationalist lines.

ME: This was also the time we first met through Ares Shporta, the founding director of the Lumbardhi Foundation. Your research was still ongoing, and every publication or archival document you encountered opened up a new research topic. But at the time, you already had the idea of working on a larger-scale exhibition focusing on the history of the Turkish-speaking community in Socialist Yugoslavia and the issue of translation. The case of Turkish-speaking communities in Yugoslavia, particularly during the historical period between 1920 and 1980, was not a topic I was familiar with at all. However, discussing the idea of exhibiting this project in Istanbul was thought-provoking in many ways. First of all, I had the opportunity to observe the projects undertaken in the Balkans by Turkish state institutions, established immediately after the breakup of Yugoslavia with the aim of developing collaborative ties where Turkey is 'historically and culturally attached'.

The second was the issue of rising nationalism after the 1990s, as Tevfik mentioned. I witnessed the rise of national identity based on language and religion, particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia. Also, at the time I was working with Erëmirë Krasniqi on a publication titled *National Identity and Feminist Practices: Perspectives from Kosovo and Turkey* (2024).[6] The publication focused on the changing axes of national identity, belonging and gender in the 1990s and 2000s. Looking at the period immediately before the reality of the 1990s, being able to move beyond the discourse of ethnonationalism and extending an internationalist-based narrative inspired me. The third important aspect that we discussed together was the relationship – or lack thereof – between Turkey's left and Yugoslavia. This relationship was sometimes formed through personal acquaintances, sometimes through state policies and sometimes through immigration to Turkey, but it was never fully established due to ideological differences among socialist groups. On the other hand, the translation of socialist ideology into Turkish – one of the main themes of 'Translated into Socialism' – and the use of some of that terminology by Turkey's left, whether consciously or unconsciously, was a subject that had not yet been researched. Finally, there was the issue of the convergence of Islam and socialism. There have been and still are attempts to discuss this issue in Turkey, which it was interesting to unfold and trace through *Sosyalist Fecri* and Hacı Ömer Lütfü Paçariz.

I would like to ask about your relationship with these archives and how you accessed the materials. Perhaps you could also talk about your positions and your first encounter with Hacı Ömer?

SB: As Tevfik mentioned at the beginning, both of us belong to the Turkish-speaking community in Kosovo. We both attended Turkish-language schools and were raised in Prizren, where Turkish is still the lingua franca. At family gatherings and in our homes we speak an ancient vernacular form of Turkish that only exists as an oral tradition. Despite our personal bonds with this culture and tradition, we resisted this identification. Moreover, with 'Translated into Socialism', we tried to distance ourselves as much as possible from the 'national' and 'personal' aspects of this connection. We tried to defamiliarize ourselves with this history, or, to use Viktor Shklovsky's term, 'to estrange' ourselves from it. Since communism is estranged and largely obscured today, the task of telling an unfamiliar story was not so difficult. Almost everything presented in the exhibition is new and unfamiliar. Perhaps the most striking example is the story of Ömer Lütfü, a distinguished mystical poet and leader of the Melâmiyye Sufi order from Prizren. Now heralded as one of the most important Sufi poets from the Balkans, in 1920, he wrote a long poem called 'Preach: To My Worker and Peasant Brothers' to encourage the Muslim population in Kosovo and Macedonia to support the CPY in municipal and parliamentary elections, which was published in the seventh issue of *Sosyalist Fecri* (1920). Today, in Kosovo and North Macedonia, Ömer Lütfü is remembered only as a conservative poet serving the privileged classes. His legacy is used to strengthen reactionary and conservative cultural ties with Turkey, and he is instrumentalized as a symbol of the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. His revolutionary poetry is rarely mentioned. We, on the other hand, like to cherish the memory of Ömer Lütfü as a genuine internationalist and anti-militarist Sufi poet.

For us our Quranic verse is the red flag It flutters, saying, 'God the Truth', does our flag

All over the world long live the Bolsheviks Extraordinary is their will to resist

Long live Kamenev and long live Karenin Long live Trotsky and long live the great Lenin

Throughout the whole world long live communism Within human beings it makes freedom bloom

Long live the independence of the workers It looks very bright, does that future of theirs

6. Merve Elveren and Erëmirë Krasniqi (ed.), *National Identity and Feminist Practices: Perspectives from Kosovo and Turkey*, **Pristina: National Gallery of Kosovo, 2024.**

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia Long live! And may all the other parties grieve

My words are not conveyed by Messiah's breath I am a man who seeks his joy in the truth[7]

TR: During the research, we had to consult several public and private archives across the region. When the CPY and all other communist organizations were banned in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1921, their archives were largely destroyed in Kosovo and Macedonia. Many politically active figures, including Ömer Lütfü, were harassed and some even killed by the police. The archive of the (CPY) Party was gradually rebuilt during the period of Socialist Yugoslavia through the enormous efforts of veteran activists, historians, archivists and others. In Kosovo, at least, the Party archive was transferred to the main archival institution in Prishtina during the 1980s. This archive is an indispensable source for studying communist movements in Kosovo and Macedonia during the 1920s. Since many documents were destroyed in and after 1921, the surviving folders often include police records from the time, providing valuable information and reports about the politicization of Muslims. These documents also reveal the Serbian regime's deep concerns regarding this politicization. Although the Kosovo archive has undergone several transformations since the 1990s, its condition remains significantly better than that of the archive in Skopje. The archive in Prishtina is still housed in a beautiful building constructed during the socialist era. Of course, there are many problems with it. For example, to this day, they are unable to find the Ömer Lütfü folder which is registered in the catalogue. Accessing the Macedonian archive was not a pleasant experience. The archive, and with it the reading table, is located in one of the buildings in the city centre built during Skopje's disastrous urban transformation of the 2010s. Ethnic tensions within the institution are visible, as they are in other parts of the city. Because the archive holds many Ottoman-era documents, Turkey's investments in the building are also clearly visible. Aside from Stole, a retired employee of the institution, no one showed interest in assisting us with our research topic. Beyond Skopje, the Archive of Yugoslavia is a crucial institution for this kind of research. As citizens of Kosovo, however, accessing this archive is quite difficult; friends from Belgrade helped us access certain files at need. Here is a snapshot of post-socialism through the conditions of archival institutions.

Public libraries in Prishtina, Skopje, Belgrade and other cities proved to be invaluable sources. Some files surfaced in the most unexpected places. For instance, the inaugural issue of *Birlik* (Unity), the first Turkish-language socialist newspaper in Yugoslavia, launched in late 1944 in Skopje, was not found in Skopje or Belgrade, but in Novi Sad. Similarly, we located the first six issues (1949–50) of the very rare Turkish-language edition of the Women's Anti-Fascist Front journal *Yeni Kadın* (New Woman) in Ljubljana, which we included in the exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM).

7. Excerpt from Hacı Ömer Lütfü Paçariz's poem 'Preach: To My Worker and Peasant Brothers' (1920), translated into English by Victoria Holbrook.

Two private archives were also particularly important. Sezgin has already referred to Altay Suroy's library. Besides Suroy, any researcher studying Turkish literature in the Balkans – from the early Ottoman era to the present – must meet with Nimetullah Hafız and Tacida Hafız and encounter their remarkable library/archive in Prizren. Nimetullah was born in Prizren in 1939 and studied Oriental Studies in Belgrade. Throughout his career, he has published extensively on subjects ranging from local poets to the history of cultural heritage in the Balkans. He continues to work on several projects simultaneously, including editing his Balkan Turkology Research Center (BAL-TAM) journal *BAL-TAM* (2004 –).[8] Notably, he was the first to systematically study the life and poetry of Ömer Lütfü. He collected everything he could find on Lütfü, including the manuscript of his revolutionary poem from 1920. Tacida Hafız, the wife of Nimetullah, is also a researcher and historian from Bosnia, who wrote her master's thesis on the aforementioned poem and on Ömer Lütfü's revolutionary activities. Together, the couple have collected thousands upon thousands of books and manuscripts; they have almost every work of Turkish-language literature from across the Balkans, from Socialist Bulgaria to Yugoslavia and Romania. Their home is like a museum, and Nimetullah hopes to establish a public library one day to make their collection accessible to researchers. During our own research, we visited their home frequently and learned a great deal. Merve had the chance to meet and talk with Nimetullah and Tacida. Their archive was crucial for the exhibition in many aspects. We can also say that Nimetullah was the only person from the generation shaped by Socialist Yugoslavia in Kosovo who truly understood what we were doing.

8. BAL-TAM (Balkan Türkoloji Araştırmaları Merkezi / Balkan Turkology Research Center) was founded by Tacida Hafız and Nimetullah Hafız in March 2001 in Prizren, Kosovo.

SB: I would like to return to the idea of the vacuum that Tevfik mentioned earlier. The broader theoretical frame for this was that the official Turkish language of Socialist Yugoslavia (the language used in publications, the press and other state institutions) developed in parallel with the vernacular, everyday language of the people and gradually, with the incorporation of words and terms specific to the socialist context, became almost independent of it. This led to some very surreal and absurd formulations, and to a certain extent, the written Turkish language in Socialist Yugoslavia started to resemble infantile babbling. This shift occurred at the beginning of the 1960s, when the socialist state institutions were consolidated and socialism ceased to be experimental.

ME: This language, which you describe as absurd, can be traced in *Sesler* (Voices) magazine (1965–2001), in children's books of the period, in newspapers and in radio and television programmes. Some of these materials are also included in the exhibition, both at Salt and at MSUM.

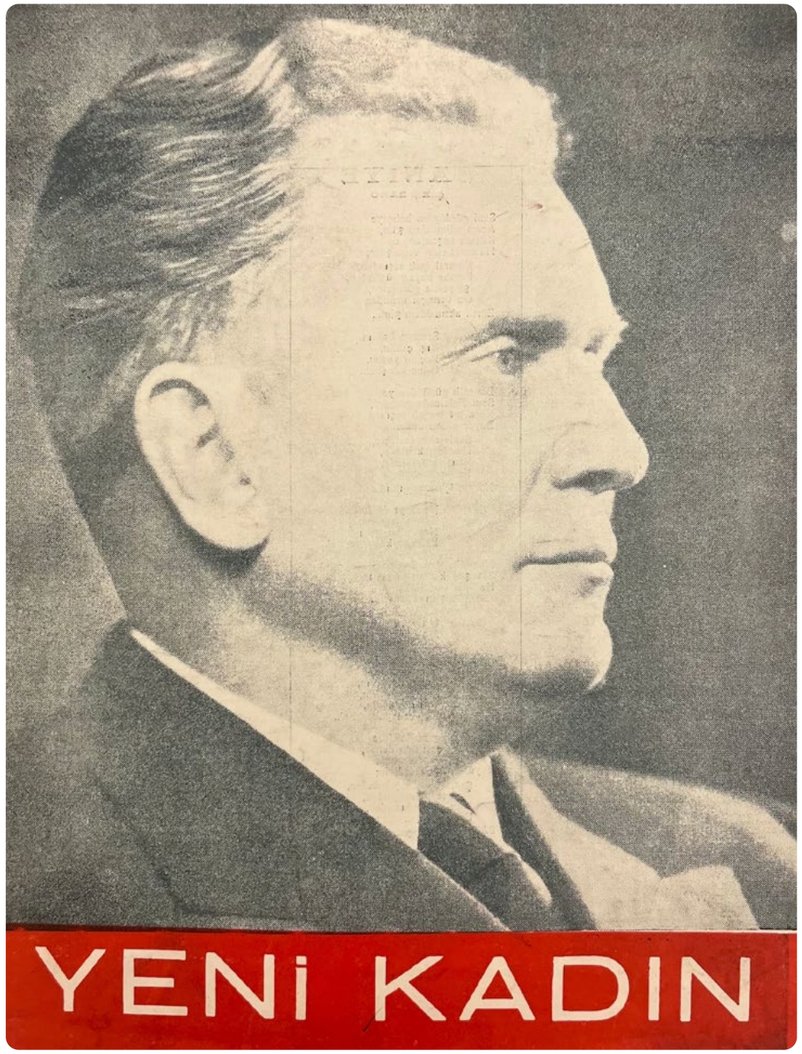
This new language and the ongoing determination to translate into Turkish also made different visual experiments possible – for example, Suat Engüllü's concrete poetry experiments in *Zamandışı İçdüşlemeler* (Inner Dreams Out of Time) (1974),99.Suat Engüllü, *Zamandışı İçdüşlemeler* (Inner Dreams Out of Time), Skopje: Sesler Publishing, 1974. or the portraits of Tito and Stalin used together with the image of a mosque on the cover of the first issue of the *Birlik* newspaper, published in December 1944 with the slogan 'Death to fascism, freedom to the people'.



Yeni Kadın, Year 2, No. 2, Skopje, 1950 Archive: National and University Library of Slovenia



Yeni Kadın, Year 2, No. 4, Skopje, 1950
Archive: National and University Library of Slovenia



Yeni Kadın, Year 1, No. 3, Skopje, 1949
Archive: National and University Library of Slovenia

Building on these visual experiments, I would like to turn to the exhibition design. At both Salt and MSUM, we wanted to experiment with how to present archival material within exhibitions. The posters designed by Bardhi Haliti – each signalling a moment of rupture or a threshold emerged not by creating a constellation, from different archival materials. With its use of colour, layered structure and visual manipulations, Bardhi's design allowed us to view archival material from a new perspective. The display devices also echoed this multi-layered structure, allowing for different configurations within the exhibition space.

TR: During the research, we compiled a wide range of historical materials – books, documents, journals, letters, images and more. The question then became: how should we present them in an exhibition format? From the outset, we knew we didn't want a chronologically organized exhibition filled with archival documents displayed in a conventional way; that approach was at odds with our initial concept. Instead, we aimed to highlight subjective political moments and build a historical constellation from them. Bardhi immediately understood our vision and created visual interpretations based on archival documents, images and texts. In this sense, the exhibition does not follow a linear flow of events, although it still conveys an overarching narrative. This approach felt necessary, particularly given that the history we explored has often been overshadowed by dominant narratives about Yugoslavia. For instance, the exhibition sheds light on the anti-colonial struggles of the Muslim community in Yugoslavia, which contrasts with the commonly invoked notion of the Non-Aligned Movement. Here, we emphasize an anti-colonialism rooted in and driven by the people, rather than one defined by diplomacy.

We selected twenty-two such moments to unfold through posters. Each was intended to make sense on its own, yet together they form a cohesive narrative.



FAŞİZME ÖLÜM — HALKA HÜRRİYET!

Birlik

MAKEDONYA MÜSLÜMANLARI MALK — KURTULUŞ CEPHESİ HAFTALIK GAZETESİ

Fiati 5 leva | Üsküp, cumartesi 23 — birinci — kânun 1944 s. | Sene 1 — № 1

Tito milli kahraman

ÖNSÖZ

STALİN

Sırbistan antifaşist-meclisinin teklifi üzerine Yugoslavya milli-kurtuluş antifaşist şurası riyaseti işbu kararı veriyor.

Yugoslavya milletleri büyük komandanı, teşebbüscüsü, onların milli-kurtuluş savaşlarının teşkilâtçı ve idarecisi, Yugoslavya Marşalı

Yesip Bros Titoya kendisinin Yugoslavya partizan Birliklerinin ve milli kurtuluş ordusunun teşkilâtında büyük hizmetlerinden ve onların han kerlerini dahiyane surette idaresinde gö-tердigi liyakatinden takdir e mekle bütün Yugoslavya milletlerinin huzurunda bizim milli ödediimizin demokrat federatif Yugoslavyanın dahilinde kardeşçe yaşıyan milletlerin kardeşlik ve ayrılmaz birliğinin teslimdeki tarihi hizmetlerinde açık surette göstermek için karar veriyor:

Milli-kurtuluş ordusunun ve partisan çetelerinin baş kumandanı YOSİP BROS TITOYA milli kahraman ünvanı veriliyor.

Kitap Redaktörü Çetalov ç. Reis D-r. İsen Hiber

Vatanımın kurtuluş gününü bütün yurtdaşlarımız büyük bir zafer bayramı gibi telâki edecekler dir. Çünkü bu tarih umum Makedonya halkını zindan dan çıkaran bir tarihtir.

Sevgile de.leri esaret altında her hususta hayat ve insaniyyet hakkından mahrum edilmiş olan bu millet, bu gün hürriyetine kavuşmuştur. Bizki, lisanımızı evimi den başka yerde yüksek sevke konuşmaktan çekinirdik, bu gün gündüzlük her taafia kerdi ana lisanı ile metingler, eğlentiler yapıyor, ve ilk defa olarak yeni türkçe harflerle gazete tertib ediyor.

Geçen Yugoslavya zamanında eski türkçe harflerle mütenevvi başlıklar altında 18 çok gazeteler neşredilmişti, fakat bunların hiç biri milletin menfaatini hiç bir hususta müdafaa edemezdiler, çünkü o gazetelerin müsahipleri yalnız gazete etrafında toplanmış bir kaç şahsın millet in hesabına kendi menfaatlerini muhafaa etmek çalıştı.

Bu günkü „Birlik" gazetesi hiç bir hususta eski çıkan gazetelerle kıyas edilemez, çünkü bu gazete milletindir, onun tarafından seçilmiş heyet tertip etmektedir.

İşte dünkü rejim altında geçirdiğimiz buhrandansonra şimdiye kadar bura misâlimizlerine nasib olmıyan bu rahatlık bu gün kavuştuk, bize bu hürriyeti Tito Yugoslavyasının rejimi bahşetti, bunun için hepimiz buna talebe ile Makedonya kurtuluş tarihini mukaddes bir bayram gibi saymak ve yaşatmak için çalışmağı bir vazife bilmek lâzımdır.

Sovyet Rusyası dâhi liderinin 21-XII-1944 tarihi 65 inci yıldönümü idi. Bu günde Üsküpte büyük nümayişler yapıldı. Karşıyaka meydanında başlıyan bu nümayişte arkadaş Boge Kuzmanovski büyük adamın ta-

rihi, diğer sözleri arasında, söyle izah etmiştir:

Arkadaşlar,

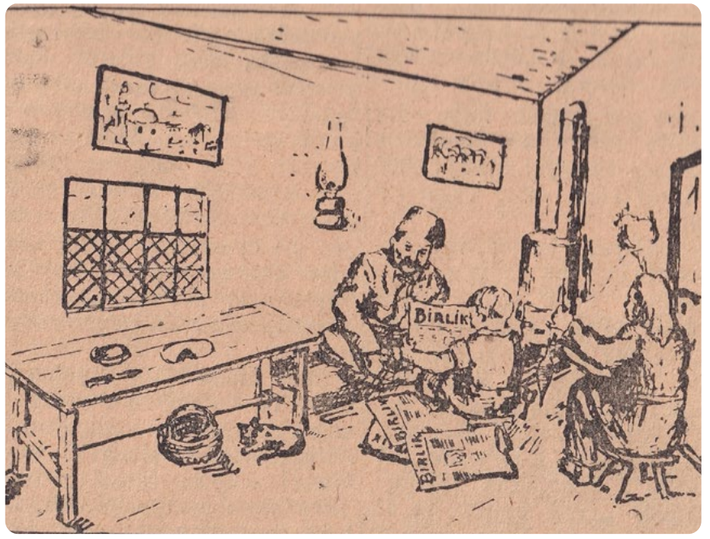
Bugün, bu asrın en büyük adamının, en büyük komutan, en büyük siyasiâlim ve esir milletlerin muhafızı-Yosip Vissarionoviç Stalinin 65-inci yıldönümüdür. (Stalin, Stalin, Stalin) Stalin ismi, zafer, hürriyet, Terleme ve Sovyet birliği kuvvetinin kahraman sembolü oldu.

Büyük Stalinin dâhiyane idaresiyle Sovyet milletleri kayıtlı ve 1941 senesinde faşist Almanyası Rusya ya esir edecek diye düşünürken ordularıyla atıldığı zaman sovyet milletleri bir in-

Birlik, No. 1, Skopje, December 23, 1944
Archive: The Library of Matica Srpska, Novi Sad

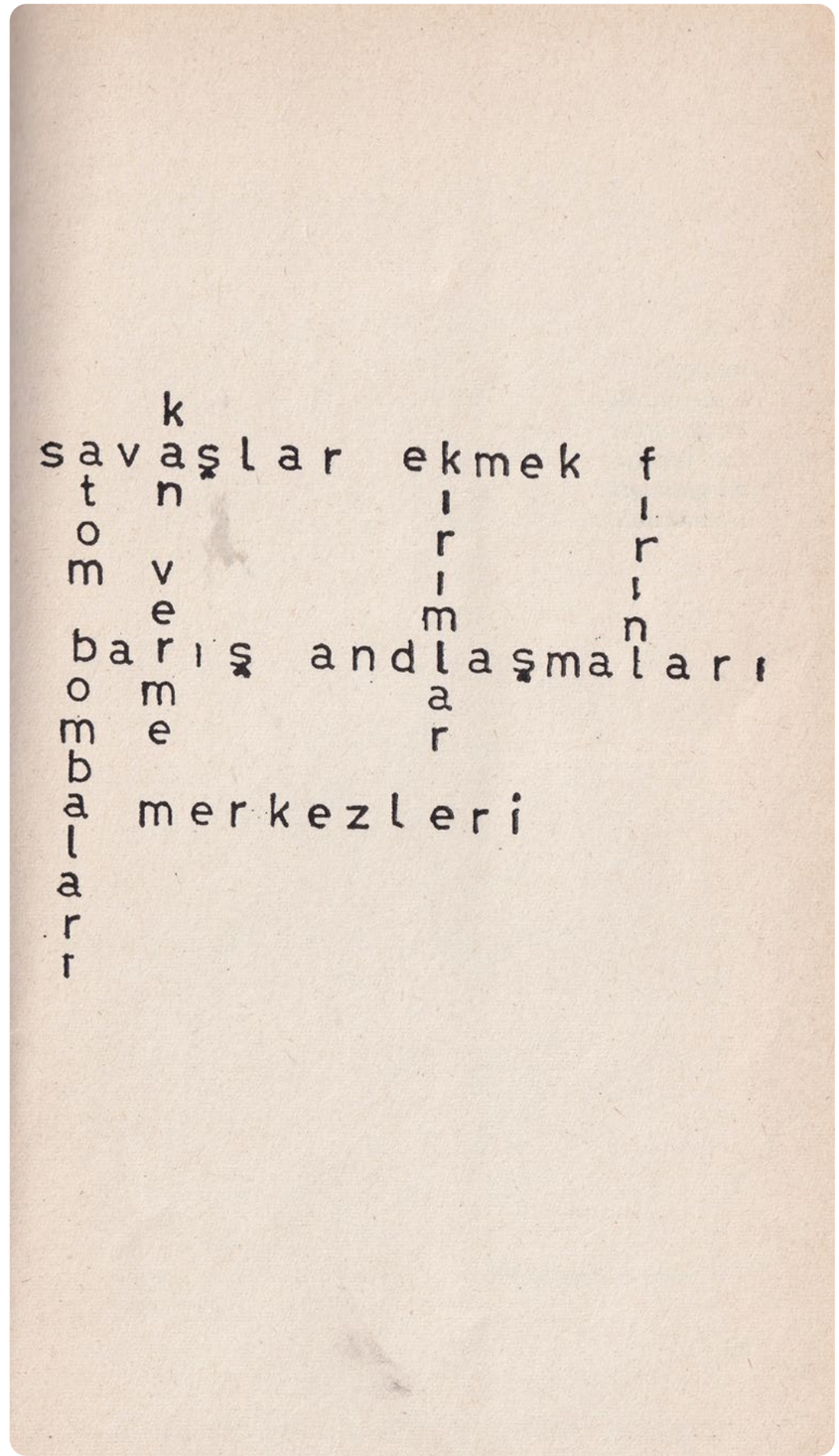


Birlik, Skopje, December 27, 1964
Archive: National and University Library St. Clement of Ohrid



Birlik, Skopje, date unknown
Archive: National and University Library St. Clement of Ohrid





Suat Engüllü, *Zamandışı İçdüşlemeler* (Inner Dreams Out of Time), Skopje: Sesler Publishing, 1974. Archive: Pykë-Presje

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Installation view from Salt Galata
Photo: Kayhan Kaygusuz





Installation view from MSUM
Photo: Dejan Habicht

‘To Measure the Emotions of Others’: Collective Mourning and Solidarity Politics in the Iranian Diaspora

Manijeh Moradian

31 Aug 2026

The Brooklyn-based artist Golnar Adili has been working with an archive of separation and longing for many years, immersing herself in the letters her leftist Iranian parents wrote back and forth to each other throughout the 1980s. Her parents had been studying in the United States in the 1970s, where they became involved in the student opposition to the US-backed Shah and joined one of several Marxist organizations operating within the broader movement. They spent their college years educating and agitating against US support for the Shah's dictatorship and also participating in joint organizing with others on the receiving end of US imperial violence. My book, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States*, documents a remarkable record of Iranian student solidarity with Black, Vietnamese and Palestinian liberation movements, among others.[1] I argue that Iranian student activists were drawn to the militancy and righteous indignation of these movements not because they had experienced the same forms of racism or colonization, but rather as a manifestation of what I call 'affects of solidarity', an embodied orientation towards the liberation of others generated from the affective remains of one's own lived experiences of repression and resistance.

1. **Manijeh Moradian,** *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States*, **Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.**

Affects of solidarity infused and facilitated the Third World project of decolonization, mediating across differences in history, location, language and strategy to animate affiliations and sacrifices that cannot be explained by shared ideology alone. From at least the late 1960s until the 1979 revolution in Iran, leftist Iranian students understood themselves to be part of an ascendant global movement of the oppressed, supporting non-aligned states and exposing the Shah's treacherous role in subduing anti-colonial uprisings across West Asia and Southern Africa. While Iran was a nominally sovereign state and the Shah had even sent a representative to the famous Bandung Conference of newly independent African and Asian nations in 1955, he was nonetheless beholden to the United States for the 1953 CIA coup that crushed the pro-democracy movement of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and that reinstalled him on the throne. Exposing these largely hidden machinations, and the ensuing contradictions of Iran's neocolonial or semi-colonial status, to non-Iranians constituted a major ongoing educational campaign among Iranian foreign student activists.

Like so many Iranian leftists who were active abroad, Adili's parents returned home during the 1979 revolution, hopeful about the possibilities for socialism that might emerge once Iran was liberated from US imperial influence. Adili was four when they moved from Washington DC to Tehran, but within a year the Islamic Republic's persecution of dissidents had forced many leftists, including her father, to flee. He eventually ended up back in the US, now the arch enemy of Iran, and the American government rejected her mother's visa application. Through the eight years of the Iran–Iraq War, Mohammad pined for his little girl, while Giti raised Adili alone, under aerial bombardment, US-imposed economic sanctions, and the new forms of gendered authoritarianism instituted by the post-revolutionary state. Adili was separated from her father for thirteen years and their eventual reunion in the US was cut tragically short. Mohammad died of cancer in 2002.



Golnar Adili, *Ye Harvest from the Eleven-Page Letter Installation*, 2026, transfer print on Japanese paper, archival blue board, beeswax, dowels. Installation shot, 'To Measure the Emotions of Others', Smack Mellon gallery, Brooklyn, 2026. Photo: Etienne Frossard

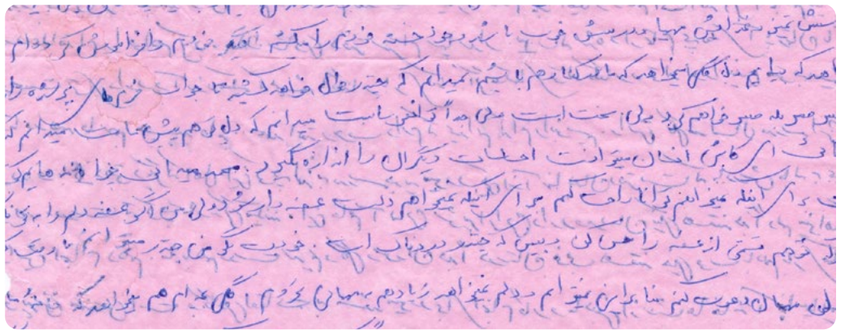
Adili's visual installations dwell in the pain of the distance imposed by discriminatory US immigration policies against Iranians *and* the crackdown on dissent unleashed by the Iranian state. Her story troubles the dominant narratives of the Iranian diaspora, which have demonized the Islamic Republic and embraced US exceptionalism, rarely taking into account the repressive role the US played in propping up the Shah's dictatorship, training the secret police force to torture dissidents, and driving Iran's unequal economic development. Diasporic hostility to the post-1979 Iranian government has generally been coupled with the adoption of neoliberal multicultural strategies for belonging in the United States, and the assertion of a pre-Islamic Persian 'Aryan' identity that eschews affiliations with other Muslims or racialized populations.[2] In sharp contrast to the solidarity politics of the anti-Shah Iranian diaspora I studied in my book, and of which Adili's parents were a part, the mainstream contemporary Iranian diaspora takes a cynical view of Palestine, viewing this ongoing site of injustice as little more than a talking point of the Islamic Republic.

2. **Amy Malek,** *Culture Beyond Country: Strategies of Inclusion in the Global Iranian Diaspora*, **New York: New York University Press, 2025.**

Decades of dominant diasporic strategy that has aligned with US hegemony, as the US has waged war on Iran's neighbours in Afghanistan and Iraq, has unleashed domestic surveillance and repression against Muslim populations within the US, and has armed and abetted Israel's genocide against Palestinians, reached its apogee in January 2026. The massive uprising against intolerable economic conditions that began in Iran in late December ended in the unprecedented large-scale massacre of protesters by the Iranian state in early January. Calls for the US and Israel to launch a military assault on Iran blared relentlessly from Iranian diasporic media outlets, captured social media feeds, and mobilized thousands of Iranians onto the streets of major cities in North America and Europe.

For much of the mainstream of the Iranian diaspora, which had long hoped to see the Islamic Republic overthrown, the monarchy reinstated, and Iran returned to the US sphere of influence, this nostalgic fantasy reached its fullest articulation as a form of fascist demand: to unleash destruction so that the true Iran could be 'restored'. The slogan 'Make Iran Great Again' appeared at many pro-war Iranian diaspora rallies, along with the American flag, the Israeli flag, and the old monarchist flag of Iran, illustrating the affective and political resonance between these loudest expressions of Iranian diasporic politics and the right-wing ethno-nationalism of Trump's America and Netanyahu's Israel.

It was in late January 2026, amid this polarizing, devastating and dangerous situation, that Adili's solo show, 'To Measure the Emotions of Others', opened at the Smack Mellon gallery in Brooklyn. Incorporating sculptures, textual installations and original archival materials from her parents' papers, the exhibition engaged with the multiplicity of loss and the overlapping forms of state violence that tear loved ones apart geographically, emotionally and physically. The title was taken from a letter Giti wrote to Mohammad in 1981, in which she grappled with the family's fragmentation, the impact of prolonged separation, and the loneliness that comes from not being able to truly convey the feelings that animate and consume us as we go about the routines of daily life. 'If only one could measure the emotions of others,' she wrote, expressing a desire as much as a lament. This phrase illustrates what Asian Americanist Sharon Luk calls 'the imaginative space that correspondence opens at the interstices of mind, body, and feeling, and the dialogical or intersubjective condition of existence that the letter lays bare'.[3] 'If only' represents that leap into imagination, into a world where intimacy might flourish without borders and hierarchies.

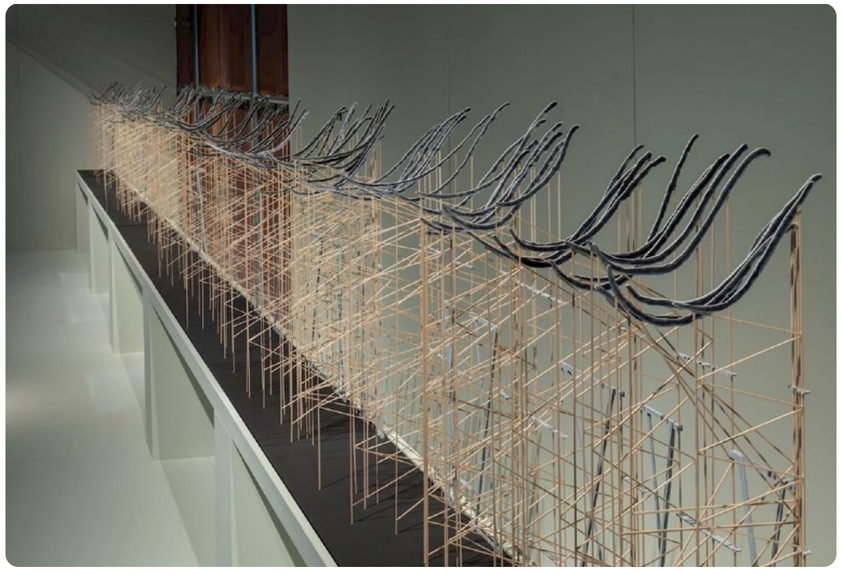


Letter from Giti to Mohamad Adili in 1981 from which the line 'If only we could measure the emotions of others' was taken. It is labeled 'Ey Kash', which can be translated as 'if only'. Courtesy Golnar Adili

In Adili's art, her mother's wish anchors an ethical practice of empathy, of refusing geopolitical and affective forms of distancing. 'To measure' here does not imply quantification, but rather an attunement or receptivity to the emotions of others. Adili, having only read these letters between her parents long after they were written, has turned them into the material for her own exploration of intimacy and language, of memory and loss, and of an approach to mourning that can enable affective modes of solidarity currently marginalized within the Iranian diaspora. She has studied the nuances of handwriting, the specificity of word combinations that lose their full meaning when translated into English, the inclusion of poetic stanzas and popular song lyrics scribbled into the margins, the questions that are left unanswered, and the feeling imbued in each letter that not only the fate of the family, but of history itself, had gone terribly awry.

3. Sharon Luk, *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018, p. 7.

At the centre of Smack Mellon's large industrial gallery, Adili placed *A Spatial Study of the 'Ye' Harvest from the Eleven-Page Letter*, a textual installation stretching more than 15 metres, composed of reproductions of the phoneme *ye* in Persian as it appeared in her father's handwriting across the eleven pages of a single letter. *Ye*, which functions as a consonant and a vowel in Persian, curves down and across from right to left when it occurs at the end of a word. Adili meticulously excerpted each *ye* and rendered it as a three-dimensional object held aloft by a dowel scaffolding. The approximately 137 *ye*s are displayed in a line in the order they appear in Mohammad's letter. The effect is a mesmerizing, undulating and repetitive motion that invokes waves of grief, while the scaffolding hints at Adili's prior architectural training and evokes the complex, often contradictory relationship between grief and structure. What are the structures that allow some losses to be grieved while others are disavowed? What structures support us as we grieve and what structures are the cause of our grief?



Golnar Adili, *Ye Harvest from the Eleven-Page Letter Installation*, 2026 (detail), transfer print on Japanese paper, archival blue board, beeswax, dowels. Installation shot, 'To Measure the Emotions of Others', Smack Mellon gallery, Brooklyn, 2026. Photo: Etienne Frossard

The meticulous, laborious fabrication by hand of more than one hundred *ye*s can itself be understood as an embodied grieving practice, a ritualistic enactment of the repetitive, physically consuming process of mourning which, like the rippling line of *ye*s, appears to carry on without a clear end-point. This melancholic approach to loss, which queer studies scholars have theorized as loaded with the subversive potential to disrupt heteronormative and nationalist frameworks governing who and what we are allowed to grieve, also makes possible a receptivity to the losses of others.[4]

In the context of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the aftermath of the January massacre in Iran, and the start of a new US–Israeli war against Iran, the notion of mourning as capacious and transgressive, rather than private and regulated, has acquired political urgency as a mode of ethical accountability and affective solidarity. This approach infused a series of gauzy sculptures Adili cast from her own arms, as well as those of her mother and her daughter, creating a disturbing entanglement of limbs. All at once the viewer was confronted with disparate and disturbing associations, from the shock and horror of searching for loved ones rendered lifeless by bombs or bulldozers, to the desperate embrace of unbearable sorrow, to the loving gesture of comfort that nurtures across generations. The delicate, gossamer texture of the sculptures, juxtaposed with the unadorned solidity of the cast plaster, conveyed the fragility of life and of solidarity, even as these are, ultimately, all we have to hold on to.

4. **See David Eng and David Kazanjian,** *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, **Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003; and Jonathan Flatley,** *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*, **Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.**



Golnar Adili, ***Ministry of Utmost Happiness*****, 2026, rubble, blanket. Installation shot, 'To Measure the Emotions of Others', Smack Mellon gallery, Brooklyn, 2026. Photo: Etienne Frossard**

Adili's exhibition brought the solidarities that animated her parents' activism and life trajectories into the present by assembling distinct elements of the family's archive – the records of their separation resonating with the losses and separations caused by the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Arranged around a column, just off-centre from *A Spatial Study of the 'Ye' Harvest*, was a pile of rocks, dirt, bricks and other detritus intended to bring the destruction of Gaza into the gallery space as an unavoidable aspect of contemporary consciousness no matter where we are located, no matter what ethnic, religious or national backgrounds we claim. Adili refused any separation between the losses of state repression and war with which Iranians were consumed and the genocide in Palestine, not because they are the same but because they are deeply intertwined geopolitically and affectively. 'To Measure the Emotions of Others' asked viewers to engage with the entanglements of settler colonialism, imperialism and authoritarianism, a conceptual realignment askew from simplistic US/Israel vs. Iran binaries. Such a move, even at the affective level of who and what we count as 'our' losses, might just be a prerequisite for a regional vision of self-determination and liberation that is beyond what most of us dare to imagine.

Such an act of imagination not only challenges US-Israeli hegemony but also bristles against the constrained logics of the 'axis of resistance', that unwieldy formation that includes the Palestinian people, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Islamic Republic of Iran. When Palestinians have been abandoned and betrayed by the world's most powerful nations and the institutions of international law, it is not hard to understand the popularity Iran enjoys among many who oppose Israel's expansionist and genocidal actions. Of course, the rise of Islamism as the major idiom of anti-imperialist resistance in the region was not inevitable and emerged as a result of the defeat of the Marxist left, which had successfully spread anti-colonial nationalism as a dominant opposition framework across the region in the 1960s and 1970s. The victory of Ayatollah Khomeini's factions in the course of the 1979 revolution, and the subsequent liquidation of the Iranian left, is a key part of this story. While Iran under the Shah had been a staunch supporter of Israel, the new revolutionary government officially joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979 and welcomed the Palestinian Liberation Organization chairman, Yasser Arafat, as the first foreign leader to visit post-Shah Iran.

Palestine became central to the revolutionary identity of the Islamic Republic.[5] Over the course of several decades during which internal struggles for reform in Iran were suppressed by state violence, large swathes of the population have come to reject an identification with the state and have also become alienated from Palestine. This dynamic should not be conflated with the diasporic support for monarchism and US-Israeli hegemony discussed earlier; it is tied to a particular material experience of authoritarianism and economic decline, in which working- and middle-class Iranians have paid a heavy price for Iran's isolation on the world stage. Alienation from Palestine did not generally result in support for the US and Israel or for the monarchy among Iranians living in Iran until the levels of state violence, and of outside propaganda, reached new heights in January 2026.

5. **Sayed Ali Alavi,** *Iran and Palestine: Past, Present, Future*, **London: Routledge, 2020.**

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The genocide in Gaza, which began one year after the Women, Life, Freedom uprising in Iran, galvanized the entire world, creating conditions of moral and ethical outrage that have generated new expressions of solidarity among Iranians critical of the Islamic Republic. Because the Women, Life, Freedom movement initiated a feminist revisioning of society against all forms of domination and violence, it also created a new context for Iranian expressions of solidarity with Palestine outside the 'axis of resistance' framework. A full exploration of feminist efforts to reclaim Palestine from the Iranian state and enact affects of solidarity linking Iranian and Palestinian desires for freedom is beyond the scope of this essay. However, this grassroots, anti-statist mode of affiliation, while still marginalized within Iran and within the Iranian diaspora, holds the potential to challenge divisive logics that cast the butchers of grassroots Iranian movements for equal rights, democracy and a livable future as the champions of Palestine.



Left: Golnar Adili, *Falak*, 2026, plaster, gauze, paper, metal mesh. Right: Golnar Adili, *Khoda Hafez*, 2026, plaster, gauze, paper, magnets. Installation shot, 'To Measure the Emotions of Others', Smack Mellon gallery, Brooklyn, 2026. Photo: Etienne Frossard

If there is any hope of Iranians inside Iran shifting away from the recent popularity of pro-monarchist, pro-Zionist orientations, affective alienation from the Islamic Republic needs to be channelled differently. Leftists will have to offer alternatives for approaching the compound crises gripping Iranian society that are more compelling than right-wing pro-war voices, without minimizing the pain and loss Iranians have experienced at the hands of their own government in the name of anti-imperialism. Perhaps a new iteration of anti-imperialism that includes a critical account of ethno-nationalism, heteropatriarchy and capitalist modes of development will be theorized and circulated out of sheer necessity, to respond to the material conditions Iranians are facing and in order to imagine a future in which Palestinians and Iranians can be free. I have tried to sketch the contours of such a stance with the concept of 'intersectional anti-imperialism', borrowing and adapting the insights of radical Black feminists, including the members of the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, to show how multiple structural forces of oppression – from the Iranian state, to US and Israeli bombs and sanctions – intersect on the bodies and in the lives of ordinary Iranian people.[6] Rather than picking one form of domination over another, an intersectional anti-imperialism offers a vocabulary for redefining self-determination as a liberatory project against empires and nation-states alike. This is, after all, how some Iranians, including artists like Adili, already feel and how they situate their work. In this current moment of authoritarianism and fascism, when the internationalist left remains weak, it may be at the level of affect rather than ideology, through an embodied response to the injustice, the suffering and the steadfastness that shapes Palestinian experience, that grassroots Iranian affiliations with Palestine become possible today.

6. **See Moradian, *This Flame Within*; and Manijeh Moradian, 'Feminist Uprising in Iran and the Politics of Solidarity', *Meridians*, vol. 25, no. 1, April 2026, pp. 156–80.**

For the exhibition's closing event, which occurred in late March 2026 as US and Israeli bombs were still falling on Iran, Lebanon and Gaza, Adili wanted to create a space of interaction and reckoning, where members of different communities could connect through a shared emotional register of grief. She asked me to facilitate the event, 'Finding Solidarity and Resistance in Collective Mourning', partly because of my work on the Iranian diaspora and the politics of solidarity, but also because the geopolitical upheavals that separated her from her father also took her from me. Our parents had been friends and comrades in Washington DC in the 1970s, and she and I had been toddler playmates, gleefully unaware of the changes that were coming. Our fathers travelled back to Iran together in 1979 to witness for themselves the revolutionary transformation under way. When Adili moved to Iran with her parents, no one explained to me where my friend had gone or why. From my perspective, she had disappeared, leaving a sadness that would take years for me to name. When Adili and I met again in New York in 2009, it was amid the pro-democracy 'green' movement in Iran, and the diaspora was galvanized around the hope for meaningful reform, not 'regime change' by foreign powers. Our friendship was rekindled in the midst of this rising tide of optimism, and we have since shared a diasporic experience of the many ups and downs of internal struggles over the future of Iranian society. We inherited the anti-imperialist Third Worldist perspectives of our parents' generation and reconfigured them through our own distinct experiences of the ravages of twenty-first-century US empire and the brutalities of the Islamic Republic. Our affective attachment to a free Palestine resides in our bodies because of how we were raised, and we have had to find the words to articulate this feeling alongside and with the embodied refusal to accept anything less than freedom for Iranians.

'Finding Solidarity and Resistance in Collective Mourning' was Adili's effort to create a space where Iranians, Palestinians and everyone horrified by genocide and war could sit together surrounded by the exhibition's aesthetic and material engagements with loss. Collective mourning became a vehicle for potential transformation and action, an antidote

to the censorship, fear and numbness that can lead to paralysis and despair. The audience was encouraged to notice the connections between war and genocide in West Asia and the assaults on immigrants, trans people, people of colour, activists and so many others in the United States. After engaging with particular aspects of the archive and the artwork, the musician and vocalist Mani Nilchiani performed a rendition of ‘To Ey Pari Kojayee’, by the twentieth-century Iranian classical composer Homayoun Khorram, made popular by the master of modern classical Persian singing, Hossein Ghavâmi. The plaintive beauty of Mani’s voice and the notes of the traditional *tar* string instrument reverberated through the gathering, their melancholic affects moving people to tears even if they could not understand the Persian lyrics. Adili found these lyrics, which describe an endless wandering, a desperate search for an elusive beloved who can neither be possessed nor forgotten, in her father’s handwriting in the margins of a letter, not once but twice, and she remembers he used to sing it to her after she returned from Iran, ending their long separation. Like melancholia itself, the song expresses the desire for a lost love object, which could be a lover, a friend, a daughter, a country, or even an idea of a future that might have been.

The refusal to relinquish that which has been lost can animate an ethical practice of searching for justice, an inability to make peace with the world as it is. The tears on the faces of friends and strangers gathered in the gallery space showed the strain of living in an unjust world while pursuing the elusive desire for things to be otherwise. If we could mourn for Palestine, Lebanon and Iran at the same time, if we could let the rage and grief and despair wash over us, perhaps these shared affects could also sustain the solidarities necessary for a different kind of politics.

‘Finding Solidarity and Resistance in Collective Mourning’ occurred in the midst of the Iranian new year holiday, Nowruz, which begins at the moment of the Spring Equinox and lasts for thirteen days. The holiday centers around rituals of renewal and hope, feelings that were difficult to sustain in the midst of war. Adili created a novel Nowruz ritual to end the event, inviting each person to write down a wish for the year ahead and add it to the rubble. The ‘if only’ of her mother’s words and the exhibition’s title became a jumping off point for each of us to imagine a more just future emerging from the destruction of the present.



Manijeh Moradian (left) and Golnar Adili speak at the closing event, Smack Mellon gallery, Brooklyn, 28 March, 2026. Photo: Melika Abikenari

How the Atomic Bomb Changed the World: A discussion on the geopolitical, philosophical and societal transformations of the nuclear era

Igor Bijuklič, Gal Krizmanič, Alja Zore

22 Oct 2026



Nuclear test at the Nevada Test Site, 14 July 1962, part of Operation Sunbeam.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Alja Zore: Since the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki 80 years ago, the world has changed. The air we breathe is different, containing radiation; the earth is different, having borne not only the radiation of those two bombs dropped in war, but also that of more than two thousand bombs detonated experimentally by the superpowers in subsequent decades. Other things that have changed include the ways wars and diplomacy are conducted, the way science is funded, and the world-position of humanity now that some of us possess the ability so suddenly to transform the Earth into an unrecognizable state: one in which our lives could not continue, at least not in their present form.

Despite the enormity of humans having created something so destructive, we engage with this issue relatively little today. In the first few decades after Hiroshima and Nagasaki fear was tangibly present, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, which pushed the world to the brink of nuclear war, led to treaties and arms limitations. Yet, today we seem reconciled with the fact that at least nine countries in the world possess atomic weapons, some of which are ready to be deployed at any given moment. Even the current abandonment of hard-won treaties and announcements of nuclear weapons-testing does not truly shake us.



First atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan by B-29 superfortresses on 6 August, 1945. Gelatin silver print. Source: National Committee on Atomic Information National Committee on Atomic Information records

It is true that nuclear weapon stockpiles have been significantly reduced since the Cold War, but the superpowers still possess thousands of nuclear warheads – more than enough to destroy or radically disrupt much of life on Earth. At the same time, there appears to be little present fear of these weapons and less understanding of their danger. How do you explain this? Why is it so difficult for us to contemplate the atomic age?

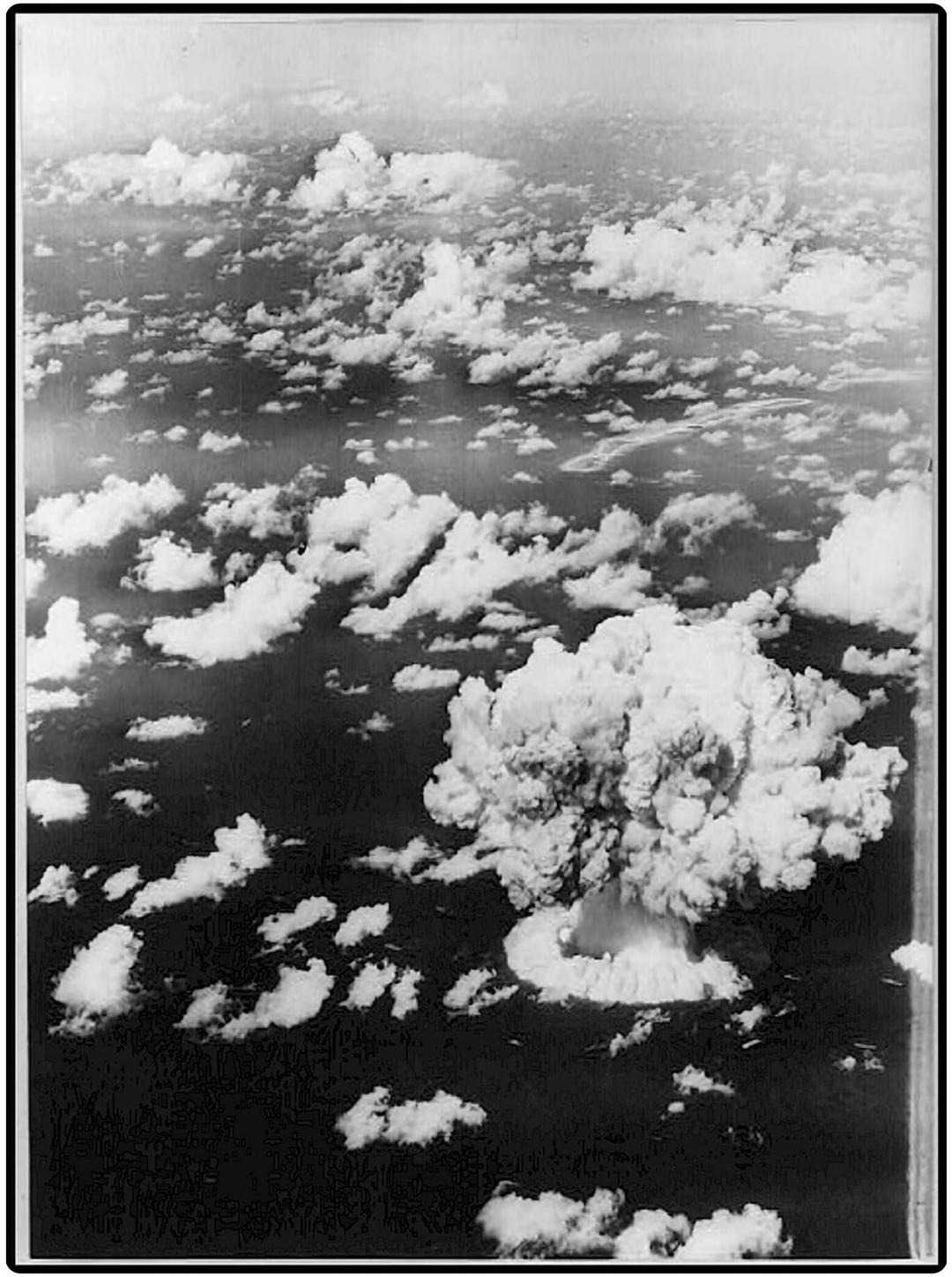
Igor Bijuklič: President Trump recently authorized the testing of nuclear weapons, and the Russian Federation followed suit. It is therefore possible to say that today's geopolitical situation has shattered the illusion that the nuclear threat is a relic of the Cold War. You mentioned a reduction in nuclear stockpiles. Does that actually mean anything? At the height of the Cold War in the 1980s, global nuclear weapon stockpiles were estimated at 60,000–70,000 warheads, enough to destroy the world several times over. Today, thanks to 'reductions' in global arsenals, we can now destroy the world a few times fewer. It is possible to argue that since 1945, the development, so-called 'testing' and use of the atomic bomb as a tool of extortion in international relations has never truly ceased, and nor has military training in their use. We could say that with the final treaties of the late 1980s a pause occurred, but we are once again in a potential renaissance of nuclear armament. Moreover, the current situation is worse, as most of the international treaties regulating development and testing have more or less expired, and their renewal is nowhere in sight.

We must also ask ourselves how we view the inaugural events of the atomic age in 1945 – that is, the first test at the Trinity site on 16 July, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August: Where and how are they recorded in our collective memory? Unlike Rwanda or the Holocaust, these anniversaries never became UN 'global days of remembrance', even though it was clear, from the accumulation of warheads, that any future nuclear cataclysm would not be a local phenomenon. Even on this year's 80th anniversary, the commemorative ceremony at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima did not receive special attention by the successors and representatives of the event's key historical protagonists. In fact, it seems that the epoch-defining events that marked the dawn of the atomic age and the onset of the Anthropocene are not commemorated on a scale commensurate with their historical significance.

Their remembrance has been also trivialized and commodified. Consider what the word bikini evokes today. The two-piece swimsuit takes its name from Bikini Atoll, which was being used as a site for nuclear weapons testing![1] We see, therefore, that it is possible to make a commercial bestseller out of the apocalypse itself.

Gal Krizmanič: The problem is also that people in positions of power appear to have very poor knowledge about nuclear weapons. When Donald Trump spoke about wanting to resume nuclear testing, claiming that other countries are doing so as well, he was referring to recent testing by the Russian Federation. In both cases, these tests were, and are, not nuclear explosions, but rather tests of nuclear delivery systems, which the United States itself already conducts as well. For example, the US last tested

1. **See for example Sunny Xiang, 'Bikinis and Other Atomic Incidents: The Synthetic Life of the Nuclear Pacific',** *Radical History Review*, **no. 142, 2022, read.dukeupress.edu.**



Mushroom cloud rising over Bikini atoll after atomic bomb explosion 1946. B&W film copy neg. Photo by USAF. Source: Library Of Congress Prints And Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

its submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles in September this year (2025). But at the same time, major military powers have begun modernizing their nuclear arsenals, most of which date back to the Cold War era, and are consequently increasing investments in these weapons. The US plans to invest more than a trillion dollars over the next 20 years, while the UK intends to invest around a hundred billion pounds to replace its ballistic missile submarine fleet. Yet increasingly, due to temporal distance, people in positions of responsibility seem to possess little or no knowledge about nuclear weapons or the past debates that took place around them.

AZ: You have highlighted the contrast between the present and the Cold War era, when both the people in positions of power as well as the public were much more deeply engaged with the issue of nuclear armament. But how aware were the Americans of what the atomic bomb could do when it was still in development, and to what extent did the effects of this weapon become clear to them immediately after its use? One would think not fully, because in the years following Hiroshima and Nagasaki they conducted an enormous number of tests, even though atmospheric radiation was then allegedly even higher than after the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded in 1986.

GK: The American debate on the use of nuclear weapons against Japan – both at the level of decision-makers and of the public – is fascinating, and keeps re-emerging. An interesting indicator was the 1995 exhibition prepared by the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum to mark the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Veterans' associations furiously protested any questioning of whether it had been justified. One of the demands they made in negotiations was that the exhibit must state that by doing so, the US avoided half a million casualties that would have been required to end the war by a land invasion of Japan. This is far removed from the rationale of the decision-making process that occurred at the time of the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945, during which the Trinity test also took place (demonstrating for the first time that the bomb worked) and at which the attention, including that of the US Delegation, was focused on deciding the fate of Europe. Partly for this reason, many key decisions were left to field commanders on the island of Tinian in the Pacific, including when the weapon would be dropped.

AZ: Did those field commanders also decide whether to use the atomic bomb at all, or only when to use it?

GK: These decisions remain the subject of historiographical debate and the distinction between them is not totally clear cut, also given that two bombs were used on two different major sites three days apart. What we do know is that they were arrived at via a process involving many people, not just issued as presidential orders. In preparation for using the nuclear bomb, two advisory committees were established: one that decided on targets, and another that decided on policy questions related to nuclear technology. What both committees treated as self-evident was that the

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nuclear bomb should be used, and they ultimately decided that it should be used on an urban civilian target so that the deterrent effect would be strong. They evaluated the possibility of dropping the bomb on a Japanese military base. They had a suitable target: a major Japanese naval base on the remote Truk Island (now Chuuk Lagoon). But they rejected this option because they judged the effect would not be sufficiently shocking. The same was true for the idea of dropping it over the sea in Tokyo Bay. The conclusion of these discussions was a list of Japanese cities against which the bomb should be used. Precisely when, which city, and at what tempo the bombing should be executed was left to military commanders. One must also keep in mind that, at the time all this was taking place, the US had been systematically firebombing the whole of Japan since the spring of 1945, destroying more than sixty Japanese cities. So the urban use of the nuclear bomb was a clear continuation of that strategy. When Secretary of War Henry Stimson objected to including the city of Kyoto among the targets due to its immense cultural significance, General Groves, commander of the Manhattan Project, interpreted this as political interference in military affairs.

IB: In May 2016, President Obama attended the commemorative ceremony of the 71st anniversary of Hiroshima. It is interesting to listen to his speech, in which the President of the United States was unable to articulate who the agent of this event was. The speech opens in simple, mythological, fairytale terms, describing how, on a bright August morning, 'death fell from the sky'. The question is, to what extent are Americans themselves capable of confronting their country's role in this historical event?

Regarding the first use of nuclear weapons, it is interesting to listen to historical revisions of that decision. Gar Alperovitz advances the thesis that the destruction of the two cities also served the perpetrators as a warning to the Soviet Union, then emerging as their Cold War adversary. Barton Bernstein offers another, perhaps more extreme thesis. There were six scenarios on the table for how to end the war in the Pacific in August 1945 including whether to continue conventional bombing, maintain a naval blockade, or revise the terms of surrender (to remove the demand that the Emperor must abdicate). Only one concerned the actual deployment of nuclear weapons against real targets, and yet it was never truly debated or decided upon. Chillingly, for Bernstein, this suggests that the bomb was used simply because it was available.

How are we best to understand this? In my view, through the lens of what the device itself represented. In his first address after the bombing, President Truman described the event as one of the greatest achievements of modern, organized science. Now imagine if the immense investment of resources into the development of the atomic bomb had yielded no epilogue, meaning no explosion: if this weapon was used merely as a deterrent, as a warning, or even against an isolated military target, we would never have learned its effects in light of the purpose for which it was manufactured – that is, mass destruction – which could only be known by using it to destroy cities and human beings. In this light, the first use of atomic weapons – which to this day we refer to as military – is extremely difficult to distinguish from a continuation of the nuclear experiment and weapon development programme itself. After the war ended, Truman established the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, sending numerous American doctors and scientists to study the long-term effects of nuclear radiation on survivors in Hiroshima itself, up until 1975, where treatment was not their primary objective. In short, we see that the drive to comprehend the ultimate effects of this instrument must be taken into account.

AZ: When we speak about the atomic bomb it really seems it does not function strictly as a physical weapon. Perhaps even more than the material destruction, the psychological effect the Americans created with this technology was what mattered most?

GK: The Americans already knew from intelligence reports that the Japanese government was divided and contemplating how to surrender. The dilemma, then, was not how to end the war, whether by invasion or the bomb, under the assumption that the Japanese were entirely fanatical and unwilling to surrender: this narrative emerged after the war and was never part of the discussions prior to its deployment. In 1945, a total war was drawing to a close, a war in which everything available was utilized, and the nuclear bomb was one such tool.



The remains of the city of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atomic bombing, taken from the aircraft Enola Gay some time after the moment of detonation at 08:15:43 (local time) 6 August 1945. Photo with the handwriting of the pilot, colonel Paul Tibbets. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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A few years later, during the Korean War the United States was again confronted with the question of whether to use nuclear weapons. It was determined that the weapon had no viable operational use that would yield victory or a significant breakthrough, and they realized the deterrent effect would be shattered if nuclear weapons were used without bringing about a decisive military turnabout. Nevertheless, nuclear powers continued to nurture somewhat schizophrenic military doctrines, planning the use of nuclear weapons for fully operational military purposes. At the height of the Cold War, in 1955 US President Eisenhower went so far as to say he saw no reason why these weapons should not be used like a conventional bullet. On the other hand, close US ally Franz-Josef Strauss, West German Defence Minister 1958–62, stated later: 'War should be looked upon to be as terrible as our fantasy can imagine it, and I think then we shall have a more peaceful period in the next 100 years than we have in the last century.'[2]

AZ: In order to prevent it from happening?

GK: Precisely – and to preserve its deterrent effect.

IB: I would also add that one of the ways we have domesticated this device is precisely by calling it a 'weapon'. I do not believe it is possible to think about the atomic bomb through these categories. One could argue that the atomic bomb is not a weapon.

AZ: Precisely because it cannot achieve concrete military objectives?

IB: Until now, it has always held true for so-called conventional weapons that a given weapon is developed vis-à-vis its capability to strike a specific military target. But the minimal effect of an atomic weapon is total destruction – it destroys virtually everything with total indifference. Throughout history, destruction was always a component of warfare, but never its primary objective. In the deployment of atomic weapons, it is no longer about destroying discrete conventional military targets but about destroying broader, non-combatant entities such as urban agglomerations, populations, the biosphere. Now the question arises: What, then, is the atomic bomb? If we cannot place it on the historical shelf alongside other weapons, where should it be placed?

If atomic weapons were developed neither as a deterrent nor as a tool of blackmail, but primarily as a means of total destruction, then in this sense it becomes possible to conceptualize Hiroshima alongside Auschwitz. On these grounds, one could argue that the increasing potency and accumulation of nuclear warheads during the Cold War was analogous to the continuation of – or, at least, to the intention to go on to commit – 'Auschwitz by other means', with or without genocidal intent as legally defined.[3] The Cold War is rarely interpreted in this way, and there is a historical irony in the fact that while judicial proceedings were taking place in Europe against the new figure of the criminal-bureaucrat, as in the famous Eichmann trial, the preparation, development, and testing of weapons of mass destruction were simultaneously underway, conducted, under different ideological banners than of those standing trial in Europe, by scientist-bureaucrats. During the Cold War, thousands of them were just as diligently preparing the conditions for a scale of catastrophe in comparison with which the recently perpetrated horrors of the Third Reich would have appeared as little more than an exercise in 'a provincial experimental theatre'.[4]

2. **Franz Josef-Strauss, interview clip included in 'The Education of Robert McNamara',** *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, **Boston, PBS, 1989, 25:30.**

3. **See for example 'Definitions of Genocide and Related Crimes', UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, un.org.**

4. **Günther Anders,** *Mi, Eichmannovi sinovi* **(We Sons of Eichmann: An Open Letter to Klaus Eichmann), Ljubljana: KUD Apokalipsa, 2020, p. 56.**



**Cathedral Urakami Tenshudo after bombing, Nagasaki, January 1946.
Source: Wikimedia Commons**

AZ: Perhaps this brings us to the creation of the atomic bomb. How did this process unfold? How did so many people agree to participate in something so destructive? And given that this was the first project of 'Big Science', how did it change the ways scientific research is conducted? **GK:** At the beginning of World War II, several nations were investigating the feasibility of nuclear weapons. The discovery of nuclear fission and the possibility of a chain reaction occurred just before the outbreak of the war, and these discoveries were published openly in scientific journals throughout the spring and summer of 1939. Subsequently, several countries initiated secret research programmes, but only the United States decided, in late 1942, to launch a full-scale industrial programme, devoting 90 percent of its budget to constructing a brand-new sector capable of mass-producing these weapons. Approximately 1 percent of the US wartime budget went into the Manhattan Project and roughly the same proportion of American workers were employed in these industrial facilities, such as the site in Hanford, Washington where plutonium production reactors were built, unaware of what they were producing. By the end of the war, four explosive devices had been manufactured: the Trinity test, the two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and one that remained ready for use.

The initial key discoveries took place on a single workbench: now in a museum in Berlin one can view the table where Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann performed the fission/chain reaction experiment, engendering

a monumental shift in the process of scientific discovery. For the development of the atomic bomb, the Los Alamos Laboratory was established 3–4 years later, employing 2,000 people and introducing an entirely novel structure for organizing research, complete with administrators and a vast technical support staff. Even during the war, scientists began reflecting on how to apply this model, which had proven so potent, to science in general. As early as 1944, several universities involved in the Manhattan Project each sought to establish a laboratory of their own explicitly modelled on Los Alamos, but stripped of the regime of secrecy that had so frustrated the scientists there. This was how the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York, came into being, opening in 1950. (The European laboratory CERN was created a few years later according to the Brookhaven model but ultimately housed no nuclear reactor, just a particle accelerator for 'peacetime' particle physics only).

IB: It is worth recalling President Eisenhower's famous address on the 'military-industrial complex'. We continue to repeat this phrase today, but a foundational element, really the bedrock of the entire structure is omitted: we must reconceptualize this entity as the military-industrial-scientific complex. Why does science find it so difficult to reflect upon the darker chapters of its history? One element is the popular perception that the results of technological developments are inherently 'neutral', implying that only the manner in which they are used retroactively imparts a moral character upon them, whether for good or evil ends.

AZ: Indeed, we often even view them as inherently positive.

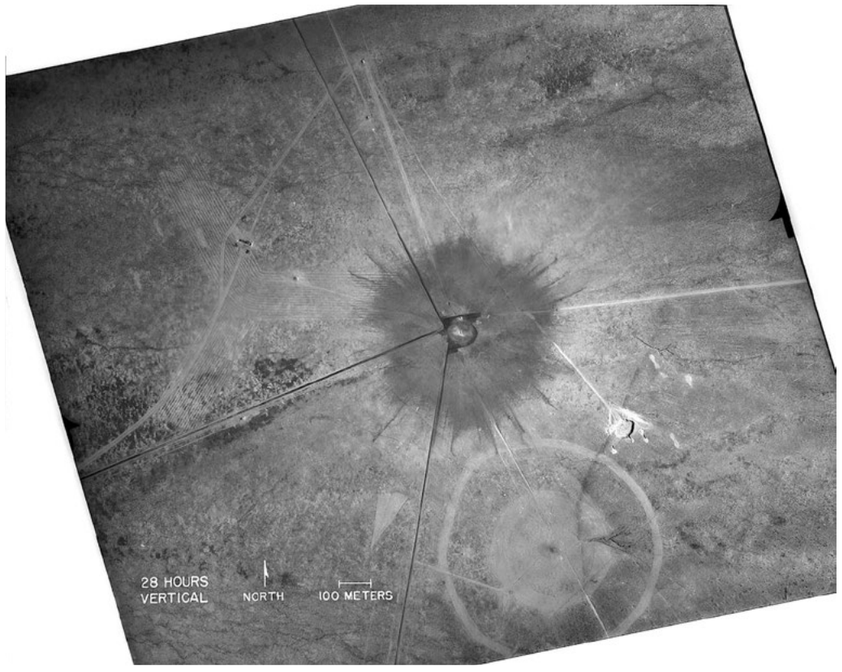
IB: Primarily as progress, and progress is difficult to critique. Viewing such developments as neutral implies that the scientific research required to realise them is also morally 'neutral'. In the case of the atomic bomb, this logic becomes impossible to sustain. What is most shocking is not that the bomb was invented, but that its 'effect' was subsequently refined and amplified, and furthermore, that nuclear warheads were manufactured in the same manner as any other product entering mass consumer circulation. Remember, the bomb was not only used twice: it has been used in more than 2,500 tests. When we consider the consequences of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands from 1946 to roughly 1963, the hundreds of victims suffering from leukaemia and other radiation-related illnesses among the indigenous population as well as illnesses among American personnel, how can we label this neutral? Today, as states seek to revive nuclear testing, we must remember these largely uncommemorated acts.

AZ: But why did countries accumulate so many bombs during the Cold War while simultaneously asserting that they must never actually be used? And how have the perspectives of politicians and decision-makers on the deployment of nuclear weapons evolved over time?

GK: What is interesting about nuclear arsenals during the Cold War is that in several countries, most notably the US, these weapons were not under the complete control of the military. Historian Alex Wellerstein has demonstrated in his latest book that President Truman felt misled regarding the decision to use atomic weapons, subsequently stripping the military of custody over them.[5] For his entire tenure until 1952, nuclear weapons were not managed by the US military: civil authority rested with the Atomic Energy Commission, and even Eisenhower transferred operational control back to the military only gradually, between 1953 and 1959.[6] Furthermore, at least initially, the military was often quite sceptical of nuclear weapons precisely because of the absolute destruction they wrought. Thus, a new intellectual elite formed – a clique within defence structures, partly in the Department of Defense and partly in the private sector, that began developing strategies for nuclear weapon deployment.

5. **See Alex Wellerstein, *The Most Awful Responsibility: Truman and the Secret Struggle for Control of the Atomic Age*, New York: HarperCollins, 2025.**

6. **See Peter J. Roman, 'Ike's Hair-Trigger: Nuclear Predelegation, 1953–60', *Security Studies* vol. 7, no. 4, Summer 1998, pp. 121–64.**



Aerial View of the Trinity Test Site, McDonald Ranch, 16 July 1945. This photo was taken 28 hours after the explosion, at ground zero. The circle at bottom right is where the 100-ton test was conducted on 7 May 1945. Source: atomicarchive.com

At the start of the Cold War, when NATO nations evaluated the conventional military force required to feel secure against the Soviet threat, they realized that maintaining such massive armies was politically unsustainable. Consequently, the US and NATO as a whole began relying on nuclear weapons against the strength of the Red Army. Thus, Moscow was threatened with a massive nuclear response to even limited conventional conflicts. This is the logic behind Strauss's remark that nuclear war must be imagined as being as horrific as possible – it is a logic of deterrence.[7] Over time, the logic of deterrence gave rise to the demand for the absolute reliability of the nuclear arsenal and its delivery system, which, it followed, must be capable of surviving an unexpected enemy first strike. Strategists

7. **See Strauss, 'The Education of Robert McNamara', 25:30.**

envisioned the most extreme scenarios in which a nuclear retaliatory strike must still be launched, incidentally providing rationales for acquiring an extraordinarily high number of nuclear warheads.

IB: Following the end of the Cold War, it has been suggested that it was precisely the possession of such colossal arsenals that prevented direct conflict between the superpowers. Yet, when asked whether nuclear arsenals prevented conflict, Robert McNamara, architect of the US deterrence doctrine, responded, in effect: not at all; we were lucky – we came close twenty or thirty times.[8] It is striking that the Cuban Missile Crisis, where we stood on the brink of apocalypse, has almost no place in our collective memory. Yet this event was the catalyst for the first serious treaties limiting the development and production of nuclear weapons.

AZ: As well as non-proliferation agreements and, eventually, limitations on testing. But another question opens here. To what extent did philosophy and literature reflect on the new atomic reality during the second half of the twentieth century? Of course, there have always been religions and myths portraying the end of the world – but for humans to be able to destroy the life of humanity as we know it seems to be a very new situation, worthy of serious rethinking.

IB: For me, this is where the radical nature of the atomic age lies: it translates the religious category of apocalypse into everyday geopolitical reality. However, unlike in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is an apocalypse that is not followed by a Kingdom. A new human condition follows from this. We do not require technological implants or cyborgization to speak of a new kind of human being. With the atomic age, we have become 'masters' of the apocalypse, so to speak, although we would prefer to be rid of this mastery. Even if we could dismantle all arsenals, it would be nearly impossible to eradicate the knowledge we possess regarding nuclear energy and weapon design. This knowledge remains with us: hence, an exit from the atomic age is no longer possible.

Through an enormous expansion of human technical capability, a radically new disparity arises between what we can produce technically and our ability to mentally comprehend the consequences of our technical power. Are we able to imagine the possibility of nuclear warfare as the most horrific thing possible? Can our mental faculties even encompass it? The effect of atomic bombs is so vast – that is, supraliminal – that our senses, imagination, and moral capacity can no longer register it. Journalists and researchers who went to Hiroshima to gather survivor testimonies noted an inability to speak about the event – that is, a failure of language in the attempt to describe what transpired there.

The implication that something is so vast that our imaginative faculties are no longer equal to it has profound ethical consequences. We can conceptualize and mourn the murder of one person, or two, but at the scale of the destruction of an entire city it becomes impossible. What is most terrifying about this new human condition is that precisely when we are cap unleash effects of the highest magnitude, our faculties fail, leaving us cold and indifferent. Here is what underlies the hellish reign of the atomic age, redefining us beyond the classical anthropological definition, 'all humans are mortal': the production of nuclear weapons entails that, as Anders would say, 'humanity can be killed as a whole'.[9]

8. **See Jean-Pierre Dupuy, 'An Andersian Approach to Nuclear Deterrence', in Günter Bischof, Jason Dawsey and Bernhard Fetz (ed.),** *The life and work of Günther Anders: Émigré, iconoclast, philosopher, man of letters*, **Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2014, p. 39.**

9. **See Günther Anders,** *The Obsolescence of the Human* **(trans. Christopher John Müller, ed. Christopher John Müller and Christian Dries), University of Minnesota Press, 2025 (ePub).**



Hyde Park Protesters in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Throughout our conversation, we have repeatedly noted that the events of the atomic age remain beneath the threshold of our fears and concerns. In an era where the climate crisis is already unfolding, we ought to recall this other crisis as well. We would then face at least two simultaneously. And although it sounds strange, especially in an era where fear has become a ubiquitous and popular tool of governance and manipulation, it is worth asking whether we ought to expand our capacity for feeling fear to meet the challenge. Are we capable of feeling fear where it is necessary, and to a degree proportionate to the actual danger? That is the essential question, the one with which I believe we ought to begin.

“Near East, Far West” and the proposition of Middle East Europe

A conversation between Nick Aikens, Charles Esche, Nav Haq, Serge Klymko, Magda Lipska

20 Oct 2026

Nick Aikens: It’s almost a year since the opening of *Near East, Far West* at MSN Warsaw (Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie). We started discussing the project two years prior to that. There was an invitation, or a proposition, from the Kyiv Biennial that we do this exhibition as L’Internationale. Magda, you were involved in those early discussions.

Magda Lipska: The immediate catalyst was Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This coincided with internal discussions within the L’Internationale confederation regarding its expansion: we proposed inviting the Kyiv-based VCRC (Visual Culture Research Center), the organization behind the Kyiv Biennial (launched in 2015) with which we had been collaborating since 2018. During these talks, we agreed to collaborate on two editions of the biennial, to be held in 2023 and 2025 during ‘Museum of the Commons’, a new project by L’Internationale launched in February 2023.

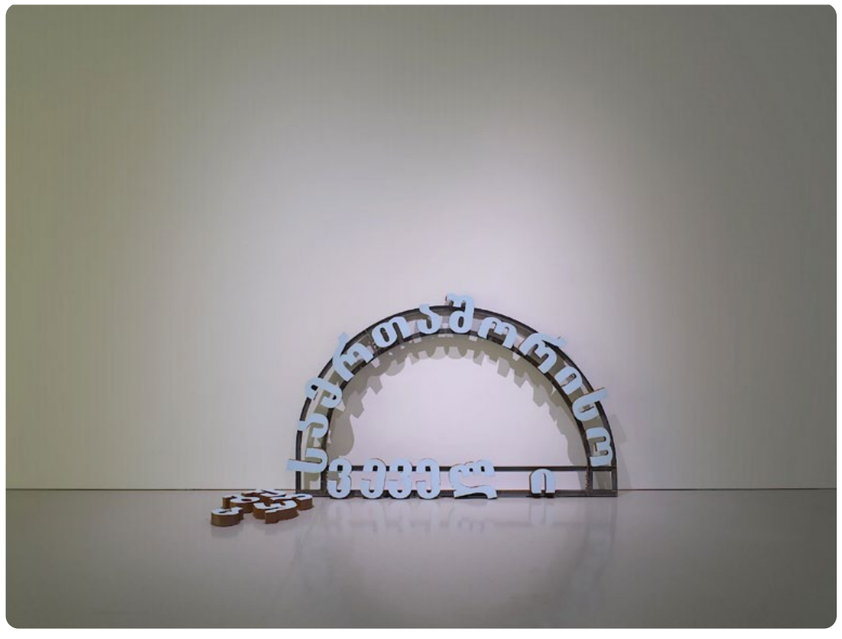
At the time, none of us knew how the war would unfold or whether it would still be ongoing in 2025. However, we agreed that if the war continued, we would organize it in our space in Warsaw; if it would end, the Kyiv Biennial would take place in Kyiv. This was unfortunately not the case.

And that is only part of the story. On 7 October 2023, Hamas attacked Israel, followed by the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. These events deeply divided opinion and inflamed emotions within L’Internationale. We wanted to respond in a meaningful way; some felt we should issue a statement condemning the genocide, while others believed we should take concrete action. At that time, the confederation included HKW (Haus der Kulturen der Welt) in Berlin, for who issuing a statement in support of Palestine as a German institution was unthinkable, even though it simultaneously declared its readiness to engage in pro-Palestinian support initiatives. These discussions – often difficult and extremely heated – prompted Vasyl Cherepanyn to propose addressing these issues through artistic means within the framework of a biennial, for the co-creation of which he invited all members of L’Internationale. We wanted to understand why it was so difficult to reach a consensus on Palestine in Europe, whereas support for Ukraine was apparently self-evident. While the answer might seem obvious in the West, the situation in the East is not necessarily the same: Poland, for instance, recognized Palestinian statehood as early as 1988; yet it was here that the Holocaust took place, alongside postwar pogroms against the Jewish population, not to mention the anti-Zionist campaign of the late 1960s. These events have a lasting impact on the perspective through which Palestinian-Israeli relations are viewed, much as in the case of Germany.

Charles Esche: We shouldn’t forget that the Kyiv Biennial should happen in Kyiv. What happened was the displacement of an activity that violence forced to occur elsewhere. Simply put, that raises the question of whether what we did was the right thing: I’m not saying there was an alternative, but I think it’s worth asking what it means to displace the activity and, in a sense, normalize the situation. This is very much the Palestinian question as well, at least historically, before the current phase of the genocide started. How do you normalize a situation of exception, of abnormality? And to what extent does that achieve, or fail to achieve, the bigger cause, which here would be the liberation of Ukraine and the end of the war, with Russia’s defeat or at least a negotiated ceasefire?

That was also the background to the conversation. Magda is right that it was Vasyl who asked why we didn’t think about combining these two questions. They are linked, in the sense that what happened historically in Palestine foreshadows many of the techniques that are being used elsewhere in the world. Palestine has been the laboratory of violence for the world since 1948, more or less, and certainly since the 1990s and the end of the Cold War. That made the violence that was happening, and is happening, in Ukraine and the violence in Palestine not separate issues but very similar ones, with histories of occupation, imperialism and colonialism connected to them.

That is what we did with the exhibition. We tried to weave relations between these locations, which, from a Western subject’s point of view – from my people’s point of view – are utterly different. I think it is completely unsustainable on any ethical level, but this is where most of the Western political territory is, and this is what we’re dealing with: that, to put it very simply, in one case the genocide is good, and in the other the slaughter of Ukrainians is not good.



Tolia Astakhishvili, *International*, 2024, installation view Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc

NA: As Magda says, there was a pre-history, in terms of the biennial coming into the L'Internationale 'Museum of the Commons' project and then this particular moment in Berlin. And already at the beginning there was this need to think genocide and full-scale invasion together.

Within L'Internationale and its history there have been numerous shared projects and research trajectories, and some attempts at co-curatorial work, *Spirits of Internationalism* being an early one. But the exhibition is quite a unique example of a curatorial group from across the confederation coming together. Those early meetings were as much about trying to figure out how we wanted to work together as about what we wanted to show or say.

At the same time, this was happening in parallel with a rewriting of L'Internationale's mission statement, trying to rethink what the confederation stood behind and stood for. In those early meetings of 'Near East Far West', we named *anti-fascism*, *solidarity* and *internationalism* – these are words that also appear in our mission statement, and they were key to finding a shared political position that the exhibition was speaking to, or speaking with.

Nav Haq: Within the confederation, I would still say this exhibition was quite an exceptional collaboration. There was a genuine sense of wanting to see what we could bring to such a project with our various capacities. I think first of MSN hosting the biennial – an amazing new museum and infrastructure in Warsaw – with its proximity to Ukraine, and the activities you had done there, like hosting the Sunflower Solidarity Centre. Thinking in that way about what we could bring from our own conditions and infrastructures was actually very generative



Saule Suleimenova, *Sky above Almaty. Qandy Qańtar _Bloody January*, installation view Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc

For M HKA, as a collecting institution, it was a case of thinking about what we could contribute that would be meaningful. For example, Saule Suleimanova's *Sky Above Almaty: Qandy Qańtar/Bloody January* (2022) work was a new acquisition for the museum, jointly with Tselinny Center in Almaty. We haven't even exhibited it at M HKA yet, but we offered for it to be presented first as part of this exhibition in Warsaw. So, in terms of organizing something based on what each of us could offer from our own institutional set-up, I thought it was very effective. I see it as a model for what L 'Internationale could be.

NA: Let's turn to the title 'Near East, Far West', which took a long time for us to land on.

NH: I was never convinced about the title. It's an unnecessary attempt to reformulate 'Middle East Europe' in my eyes. As such, I didn't see the necessity, especially as I find 'Middle East Europe' stronger and more evocative. When I was reading the description of the Berlin iteration of the biennial at KW, they don't use the term 'Middle East'. They use 'West Asia', which is in itself an attempt to find more progressive terminology, although I think even the new term is questionable. This kind of reversal or reorientation of the colonial gaze in titles, particularly of 'East and West' or 'centre and periphery', was abundant in post-colonial theory some decades ago, and it became a cliche. Middle East Europe on the other hand is, I think, a different and more interesting geopolitical proposition.

Serge Klymko: It stems from the Soviet or post-Soviet formulation of the region. In the Soviet and post-Soviet classification, what in the West is called the Middle East is called the Near East, a term also deployed in Western Europe. So that was also the play.

ML: I really like this title, precisely because of its ambiguity. However, the ideological weight of the term lies elsewhere. These geographical references to proximity and distance fit into a conceptual repertoire and are part of an imperial mindset. They stem from the colonial language of conquest that categorized the East into Near, Middle, and Far. These terms are not only Eurocentric but are also geopolitical constructs. And it is precisely these terms that shape the way we view the world. I find this deeply problematic. The same applies to the term 'Eastern Europe'. Poland and Ukraine lie at the geographical centre of Europe. We are Eastern only from the perspective of Western Europe, which has always defined 'the East' in terms of backwardness and regression. We wanted to play with this idea, given that no one really questions the central position of the West. Introducing a concept like the 'Far West' thus constitutes a kind of countermove – challenging the perspective from which policy is shaped. It points to a different centre and expresses a critique of the imperial foundations of Western thought. **SK:** The title also works with the feeling of solidarity. In certain respects, even though the territorial distance between them may be huge, the countries of the East feel much closer to one another than they do to countries in West, which may be closer geographically but which work by their own logic, apparently without real understanding, empathy or solidarity with what is going on in the east of Europe or in the Middle East.

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Lana Čmajčanin, *551.35 - Geometry of Time*, 2014, installation view, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc

CE: I think there’s an interesting point here from the perspective of a Western subject like me, which is that these terms shift the geocultural location. They each do it in ways that are slightly different, but more or less the same. I was brought up in a narrative in which the only art histories were told by Western states; largely from New York, though later it became a bit more pluralized. The idea that the narrative shifts is also a kind of geopolitical action. In the 1930s, a British prime minister could say that Czechoslovakia was a country of which we knew little, so it didn’t matter if the Germans occupied it. That is the inheritance of the Western mindset in relation to these territories.

Moving to Middle East Europe, what I like about it is that it also distinguishes between Central Europe, which is where the exhibition happened, in Warsaw or at least in Berlin, and Eastern Europe, and in a way puts Kyiv in the centre. Kyiv is the centre of Middle East Europe. So there is a bracketed ambiguity: “‘Middle East Europe”, or “Middle *East Europe*’”, and I like that play of terms. On the one hand, it might define Kyiv as the centre, the main city, of Middle East Europe. On the other hand, you could understand it as the relation between two areas that are, in a sense, divided by the great powers and not allowed to have a dialogue on their own terms. Historically, it was the French and the British; now it’s the Israeli–American axis that determines that relationship.

I think it was really important in that regard that the exhibition wasn’t confined to the Palestinian and Ukrainian situations. There was also Turkey, the Caucasus, and Central Asian questions; and other works from the collections, such as those by Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Navine Dossos, brought in a wider Middle East: not only the Palestinian lands, but also Lebanon and Saudi Arabia to some extent. Even so, that is an important argument about a geocultural shift that maybe we needed to take further. That’s where a publication was missing, to some extent, and where a whole set of other questions could have been developed.

It’s also interesting for a cultural institution to say that the force we’re looking at is no longer located in the Far West but somewhere else, and that this is where our cultural future – or cultural present, as well as our military present – is being forged. It could also have been interesting if this had been articulated from a key institution in Western Europe! I think that’s what the exhibition tried to say, and the title does it well. I understand that from Nav’s point of view it’s maybe a little too neat, but I quite like it, because it creates an expectation in visitors that they’re seeing a different geography, a closeness and a farness that shifts. I’m not sure whether that works in Poland to the same extent, but in the Netherlands it would certainly work to shift a geography that is very firmly rooted in people’s identity, whatever their ethnic background. There still tends to be a centrality of the West, and of New York, in culture today.

NA: I think you’re right. And there’s also a reorientation, or a dynamism, that ‘Near East, Far West’ evokes, rather than Middle East Europe as a place, or an imagined place – what Edward Said calls an imaginative geography. ‘Near East, Far West’, depending on your orientation, takes you either further away or closer. Within the exhibition, there were a number of different scales and cartographies that allowed you to zoom in, to be near or far. I think of viewing Aykan Safoğlu’s *Rosette (Rose window)* (2025) that was placed in the atrium of the MSN building. Seen from above, the piece reveals itself as a fractured mosaic of the window of the Sirkeci railway terminus in Istanbul, the eastern terminus of the Orient Express but also the point of departure for migrant workers from Turkey journeying to Germany following the recruitment agreement between the two countries in the 1960s. Or visitors finding themselves amid pipes in the Nord Stream pipeline as part of Hito Steyerl’s *Leak* (2024), which explores how the so-called ‘cultural pipeline’ between the Soviet Union – now the Russian Federation – and (West) Germany has been a crucial part of the promotion of fossil fuel infrastructure. Or looking up at the sky over Beirut in Lawrence Abu Hamdan’s *The Diary of a Sky* (2024), which documents the ongoing presence of Israeli fighter jets and drones over Beirut. This idea of moving near and far, of being reoriented and rescaled, was very much part of the exhibition.



Aykan Safoğlu, *Rosette*, 2024, installation view Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc



Hito Steyerl, *The Leak*, 2024, installation view, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Diary of a Sky*, 2024, installation view, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc



'East of East: Trains and the Making of the East'. Research by Bojana Piškur, installation view, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Alicja Szulc

SK: In that sense, the titles of the subsequent exhibitions that comprised the Biennial form a kind of perfect trilogy: 'Homelands and Hinterlands'[1] and 'A Bird That Cannot Land'[2] also play with these distances: the bird's-eye view, and the feeling of home underneath it. Distance is present in all three propositions and in many of the works that comprised these shows.

Nav, the term 'Middle East Europe' was something you put on the table. Is it something you thought about in relation to the process of the exhibition, or something you had been thinking about separately?

NH: I suppose it does engage with my focus towards Eurasia. In this case, though, it came out of attempting to write a description of what we were trying to do. It seemed a useful device to give clarity about the focus of the biennial. So it was a construct, a neologism of some kind, articulating a new and complex cultural and geopolitical paradigm. Thinking about different kinds of historical internationalist perspectives, this kind of multi-regionality is really important: to be able to construct new constellations, formulations and perhaps antagonisms. 'East' appears in both 'Middle East' and 'Eastern Europe', so in this instance 'Middle East Europe' works as a simple and useful device to describe something timely, layered and yet incongruous.

As we moved further with the exhibition, some of the projects that started to stand out were really about the historical relations and connectivity between the two regions, and the kind of proximity that did exist but might no longer do so – Bojana Piškur's research project and archival display on

1. A group exhibition held at M HKA in Antwerp as part of the Kyiv Biennial, 20 September 2025 – 11 January 2026, muhka.be.

2. The KW Berlin chapter of the Kyiv Biennial, 11 June 2025 –13 September 2026, kw-berlin.de.

historical railway infrastructures, in that sense, was very helpful.

NA: This was also an interesting example of an exhibition being a process of trying to figure out an idea. The term ‘Middle East Europe’ was put on the table as a proposition rather than a firmly worked-out construct. But the exhibition itself and some of the works brought to it – Bojana’s research into train networks, and I think of Lana Čmajčanin’s lightbox with overlaid archival maps of the Balkans – help us to think about what that construct might mean, in terms of how these different geographies, imaginaries, and political contexts can be brought together. You were saying that was picked up and developed further in Berlin?

SK: I think it was rather a reconfiguring along the same line. The Berlin iteration drew on a selection of works from the existing chapters, and the whole sphere of Middle East Europe grew out of that. That was the basis for the exhibition in Berlin, though it probably had a more poetic touch at KW. They had a proper public programme to unpack the ideas behind what we tried to put forward in Warsaw.

In Warsaw we didn’t only put Palestine and Ukraine in focus, we also tried to think larger, and that direction was also taken in Berlin. They worked with more points on the map in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and they also took up music, or the sonic, as a form of expression. So they evolved the concept we started in Warsaw.

NA: In the exhibition there were seven commissions that were, for the most part, by Ukrainian artists. That was also a clear decision. Some works were drawn from the collections and archives of institutional partners of L’Internationale, others were loaned. We also invited different people to make proposals in specific contexts – Merve Elveren was key in that regard. But there was a very clear decision that the new work we commissioned for the exhibition would come from Ukrainian artists.

CE: I think that was inevitable once we decided to base the exhibition on the collections of confederation members, because the works of Ukrainian artists are absent from many of those collections. That is itself a comment on what we were saying about shifting the geopolitical and geocultural maps in the head, if you like, of the artistic or curatorial field. It was also definitely a decision to support artists in Ukraine, or artists who had left Ukraine but were still working with the context of Ukraine.

What would have been nice – and we did do this a little with Palestinian works when I was still in L’Internationale, when there was an attempt to buy some work collectively – is a discussion about buying Ukrainian work collectively. But I don’t know whether that happened after I left.

ML: I disagree. First of all, the commissions were not limited to Ukrainian artists. We commissioned three non-Ukrainian contributions, two of which were completed. Secondly, at MSN we have been regularly acquiring works by artists from Ukraine since at least 2012. The same applies to M HKA.

So, this decision did not stem from a lack of prior engagement, but rather from a desire to present a narrative about Ukraine that was timely and critical of the unfolding situation.

Ukrainians had already lived through three years of war; perceptions of the conflict and its consequences were constantly evolving, and that process continues. We wanted to address the realities of the moment and stay as close to them as possible. That is precisely why we commissioned a work from Dana Kavelina, who tackled the subject of the forced mobilization of men in Ukraine – an issue that was not being discussed at the time and probably still is not openly debated there. It was not a narrative found in mainstream media. In Poland, at least, one mostly heard about the heroic stance of the country’s defenders, who are operating with limited resources. The same goes for the work by Nikita Kadan, which examined Ukrainian art history through the lens of Russian colonial policy.



**Exhibition view, ‘Near East Far West’ Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw.
Photo: Alicja Szulc**

CE: I take the point. Maybe, just to rescue myself a little, it’s also partly what Magda said: given that there had been three years of war at that point, a lot of the work in the collections perhaps felt less relevant, even if it was by Ukrainian artists. Or it could be by Ukrainian artists who had different relations with the war – the Kharkiv photographers, for instance. It’s a more complicated narrative than when those works were acquired. I think the truth is that new work needed to be produced, because the situation in Ukraine has changed so dramatically over the past four years. But I also think the absence from some collections wasn’t a coincidence: their focus is elsewhere. That’s maybe fair enough, but it’s interesting that relatively few collections represent this, and perhaps they don’t represent the Ukraine of today so much as the Ukraine of 20 or 30 years ago.

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NA: Reflecting on this project from the context of L’Internationale, many colleagues have acknowledged that working through this exhibition, realizing it together, staging it at MSN and in Ukraine is a concrete model for what it means to work in solidarity with an internationalist perspective. It feels more relevant than ever to take this with us into the future.

I also feel, despite Nav ’s reservations, that both ‘Near East, Far West’ and ‘Middle East Europe’ are incredibly resonant as propositions: the former for its kind of reorientation without quite landing, and the latter for underscoring the necessity first to become aware of, then to redefine how we think and name this place or that, and to find new vocabularies to do so.

CE: I’d be interested to hear what the reaction was in Warsaw…

ML: The reach was quite significant. I don’t remember the numbers, but most of the main newspapers covered the exhibition. Equally important was the international reception of the exhibition. *Frieze* magazine included the show in its most important exhibitions of 2025, for example, which, despite what one thinks of these lists, means that the show gained international attention. Anecdotally, I often hear comments that this was the most compelling exhibition we have done at the museum so far. And this is said by people who don’t make easy judgments. I believe its strength lay in the attempt to show the complexity of the situation from multiple perspectives. Assaf Gruber’s work has played a major role in embedding the Palestinian issue in the history of Eastern European antisemitism, presenting it as a conflict ‘delegated’ to the Middle East, the price of which is now being paid by the Palestinians. The works of artists Oraib Toukan and Dana Kavelina allowed us to look at the issue of war from a humane, emotional perspective. We also managed to avoid the trap of exceptionalism, which, in my view, is crucial when seeking narratives that can unite rather than divide. The exhibition showed that both the issues of Palestine–Israel and those of the post-Soviet regions are part of a colonial matrix.

SK: What also happened in the year since the exhibition, and what complicates the question of Middle East Europe even more, is Iran. There is a famous line from the Soviet film *White Sand of the Desert* (1970): ‘The East is a delicate matter’. And now the question of Iran has also shifted the perception of the region, I would say. Iran is a rather divisive figure in this configuration, because it didn’t start the current war there: it was attacked by ‘imperial’ forces. But at the same time it is Russia’s close ally, and Ukraine has signed drone and air-defence agreements with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to counter the axis of Iran, North Korea and Russia. That’s another layer that was not present a year ago.

And oil prices are actually playing against Ukraine. Even when Iran, Russia’s partner, is attacked and pressured, it is Ukraine that takes the heat: they miss weapons from the USA; vital Patriot missile interceptors aren’t being delivered, fuel prices are rising and Russia profits from its oil exports. And energy logistics has become a new weapon that affects





Asaf Gruber, *Miraculous Accident*, 2025 (film stills), 30 min, DCP. Courtesy the artist

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the West but reciprocally affects the East, particularly Ukraine at a time of war. The exhibition at KW didn't have time to catch up with these developments either. We might have a chance to reflect on that through the next edition.

CE: It is not my call anymore, but this shifting geography, which relates to the titles and to a lot of what we've spoken about, could be something interesting for the future of L'Internationale as well. It makes a proposition that isn't the old colonial routes towards the West, but different imperial traces that go in different directions. It would be nice to think that this could be built upon and taken forward. It seems that 'Middle East Europe', perhaps more than 'Near East, Far West', is something that could have a life beyond this edition of the biennial. I was always struck that Kenneth Clark's BBC series *Civilisation*[3] starts in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates and then never goes back. According to him, all civilization begins in this one place, but he never has any curiosity about what might have happened there afterwards. Given what we know now that he didn't, I think it's very telling that he never goes back, because that's partly where the problems start.

3. *Civilisation: A Personal View by Kenneth Clark*, **London: BBC Television, 23 February – 18 May 1969.**

Nick Aikens

Nick Aikens is a curator, researcher, editor and educator. Researcher at HDK-Valand, University of Gothenburg and Managing Editor and Research Responsible for L'Internationale Online, he assumed this role in August 2023 as part of the four-year EU funded project 'Museum of the Commons'. Nick has a PhD from HDK-Valand, academic partner of L'Internationale. He was previously a curator at the Van Abbemuseum (2012–23), where he worked on numerous exhibitions and publications, as well as leading the research programme 'Deviant Practice' (2016–19). He was a tutor and course leader at the Dutch Art Institute in Arnhem (2012–19) and a guest professor in the Department of Exhibitions and Scenography at Karlsruhe University (2023–24).

Sheena Barrett

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Prior to joining IMMA, she served as the founding Curator of Dublin City Council's The LAB Gallery (2006–2023), curating over 130 exhibitions by Irish and international artists. Her research contributions include pioneering investigations into Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) in European contexts and directing interdisciplinary programs uniting artists and scientists. She is the programme lead for Shared Perspectives, a UK Ireland governments funded research programme with Tate, IMMA and the Imperial War Museum 2026-29.

Barrett holds degrees from University College Dublin and a Postgraduate Diploma in Executive Coaching. She served on IADT's MA Art Research Collaboration team for ten years, lectures across UCD, TUD, and NCAD, sits on the Editorial Board for L'Internationale Online, and is TU Dublin's Entrepreneurial Ambassador for Art and Visual Culture.

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engineering and scientific management – reshape the human condition, agency and the future of education.

Sezgin Boynik

Sezgin Boynik is a theorist and publisher. He holds a PhD from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland on the cultural politics of ‘Black Wave’ Film in Yugoslavia. He is the co-editor of *Yugoslavya Komünist Partisi Yayın Organı “Sosyalist Fecri” Gazetesi* (The Publication Organ of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia: “Sosyalist Fecri” Newspaper) (TÜSTAV, 2023). He founded Rab-Rab Press in Helsinki in 2014, an independent publishing platform combining experimental art with left-wing politics. He is also the co-founder of Pykë-Presje, an independent cultural space and publishing platform in Prizren. With Tevfik Rada, Boynik led the research and programming of ‘Translated into Socialism’, realized at Salt (2024) and at MG+MSUM (2025).

Marijana Cvetković

Marijana Cvetković is a producer, curator, and lecturer with a background in art history, cultural policy, and cultural management. She has been involved in various programmes and projects related to cultural policy, international cultural cooperation, contemporary dance, visual arts, and museums. She is a co-founder of Station Service for Contemporary Dance and Nomad Dance Academy, a platform dedicated to the development of contemporary dance and performing arts in the Balkans. Additionally, she serves as a cultural activist within the independent cultural scenes of Belgrade and Serbia, where she has co-founded platforms such as druga scena (other scene), Cultural Centre Magacin, Association of Independent Culture of Serbia, and Platform for the Commons Zajedničko.

As a lecturer at the University of Arts in Belgrade and the University Lyon 2, but also at many informal education platforms, she shares knowledge on curatorial studies, cultural policy, and arts production. Her main interests are self-organization, self-management, Yugoslav cultural policy, cooperation platforms, the political aspects of cultural work, institutional transformation, and the working conditions in arts and culture.

Marijana has edited several books and contributed to many edited volumes, journals, and online magazines.

In 2018 she received the Jelena Šantić Award ‘for consistency in her work and promotion of contemporary dance, continuous advocacy for better working conditions in the field of culture’.

Sofia Dati

Sofia Dati is a Brussels-based curator. As part of the curatorial team in WIELS (Brussels), she has worked on exhibitions, discursive programs and publications with artists Everlyn Nicodemus and Marie Zolamian, and the large array of voices who shaped ‘Magical Realism: Imagining Natural (Dis)order’. Previously, she worked as visual and audiovisual arts programmer at Beursschouwburg (Brussels) where she curated exhibitions and film programs with Ève Gabriel Chabanon, Sina Hensel, Hoda Siahtiri, Black(s) to the Future, Eden Tinto Collins, Filipa César, Maxime Jean-Baptiste and Onyeka Igwe, among others. Her practice is rooted in writing and translation. She worked with the Christopher Okigbo Foundation on Christiane Fioupou’s French translation of the collection of poems Labyrinths (Gallimard, 2021), and she has published articles in magazines such as Po&sie, Arshake and Conceptual Fine Arts.

Merve Elveren

Merve Elveren is a curator and researcher. With an emphasis on the social and cultural landscape of the 1980s and 1990s in Türkiye, her research-based curatorial practice examines critical discussions and new institutional formations around shifting political urgencies. Some of her projects include ‘PresentAbsent’ (co-curated with Meriç Öner, YUNT, 2025-2026), ‘Translated into Socialism’ (Salt, 2024 and MG+MSUM, 2025), ‘Eternal Flame-the Radiating Archive’ (Barınhan, 2023), ‘In Time / On Ground’ in 17th Istanbul Biennial (co-curated with Çağla Özbek in collaboration with Women’s Library and Information Centre Foundation, 2022), ‘Little did they know’, 39th EVA International-Ireland’s Biennial (2020-2021), ‘Continuity Error’ (Salt, 2018), and ‘How did we get here’ (Salt, 2015). She is the co-editor of *Cengiz Çekil: 21.08.1945-10.11.2015* (Salt, 2020), co-editor of *Day to Day* (YAZ Publication Series, Sharjah Biennial 16, 2025), and co-editor of *National Identity and Feminist Praxis: Perspectives from Kosovo and Turkey* (National Gallery of Kosovo, 2025).

Charles Esche

Charles Esche was the director of Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2004–24). He is an advisor at Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, and Professor of Contemporary Art and Curating at Central Saint Martins, London. He was part of the Finding Committee for the artistic direction of documenta 15. He received the Princess Margriet Award in 2012 and the CCS Bard Award for Curatorial Excellence in 2014.

He has (co-)curated numerous exhibitions, including: ‘To those who have no time to play’ (2022–23), Framer Framed, Amsterdam; ‘The Meeting that Never Was’ (2022), MO Museum, Vilnius; ‘Hurting and Healing’ (2022), Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm; ‘Power and Other Things’ (2017), Europalia, BOZAR, Brussels; ‘Art Turns, World Turns’ (2017), Museum MACAN, Jakarta; 16th Jakarta Biennale (2015); 31st São Paulo Bienal (2014); U3 Triennial of Contemporary Art, Ljubljana (2011); RIWAQ Biennale (2007 and 2009), Palestine; Istanbul Biennial (2005); Gwangju Biennale (2002); and many Van Abbemuseum exhibitions. Since 2023, he has been a member of the editorial board of L’Internationale Online

Maddalena Fragnito

Maddalena Fragnito, cultural theorist, is obsessed by the proximity between care and violence, and is a feminist, anti-racist activist. She is a member of Institute of Radical Imagination.

Yousri al-Ghoul

Yousri al-Ghoul is a Palestinian novelist living in Gaza.

İrem Günaydın

İrem Günaydın is an artist based in Istanbul. Working as a 'suffix' to art-historical and institutional canons, her practice unfolds through sculpture, text, and para-fictional strategies that investigate the politics of framing, ornament, and refusal. Her recent works and writings engage with questions of institutional critique, the afterlives of cultural remnants, and the blurred boundaries between art, architecture, and language.

Nav Haq

Nav Haq is Associate Director at M HKA – Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp – where he is responsible for the development of the artistic programme.

Rana Issa

Rana Issa is a writer, translator and curator committed to thinking and communicating about the atrocities taking place in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and the world. She believes that historical context is necessary for unpacking our present predicament and hopes that one day she can write about the ocean blue. Until then, Rana dreams of a less wretched world, from the river to the sea.

Serge Klymko

Serge Klymko is a curator and cultural manager, co-founder and managing director of the Kyiv Biennial and founder of the Emergency Support Initiative for Ukrainian artists.

Vida Knežević

Vida Knežević is an art historian, curator and art critic. She is a co-founder of Kontekst collective, whose work represents the process of connecting critical theory and practice, artistic production with broader social context. In 2014 she co-founded the educational project and the online magazine Masina.rs, where she works as co-editor and author exploring the relationship between contemporary art, critical theory of culture, economy, politics and activism. In 2019. she completed her PhD thesis entitled 'Theory and Practice of the Critical Left in Yugoslav Culture (Yugoslav Art Between the Two World Wars and the Revolutionary Social Movement)'. She was teaching at the College of Fine Arts and Design, Belgrade, on the courses of Art History and Theory of Contemporary Art and Culture, and was a lecturer in Curatorial Studies at the University of Arts, Belgrade, in the frame of the MAIPR Program - MA in International Performance Research.

She has curated numerous projects and exhibitions in the field of curatorial, artistic and activist practices such as: 'Critical Machine - Education, Organization and Social Critique' (2014 – ongoing); 'We Have Built Cities for You - An Exhibition on the Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism' (2017-2018); 'Unexpected Encounters' (2013); 'About Solidarity' (2013); 'Permanent Art Class. Re-performance of the Unknown' (2012); 'From Creative Work to a Creative City' (2011); 'Urban Machines and Spaces of Struggle' (2010); 'Without Borders? Some Critical Reflections on the European and Global State of Borders' (2009); 'Young Visual Artists Awards' (2008); 'EXCEPTION: Contemporary Art Scene from Prishtina' (2007/2008); 'Sex, Work and Society' (2006/2007); etc. She was assistant curator at the 49th October Salon 'Citizen Artist, Citizen Artist, Contextual Art Practices"', 2008.

She is currently is a member of the Board of Directors of the Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia (NKSS), a member of the Association of Art Critics AICA - Serbian section, as well as a member of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia (NUNS). She is the winner of the 'Lazar Trifunović' Award for 2024, for critical thought and critical views on contemporary fine and visual art, expressed in written forms and electronic media, for the author's text published in the accompanying catalog of the exhibition 'Kun: Artist-Worker-Fighter', in the SANU Gallery.

Gal Krizmanič

Gal Krizmanič is a historian and philosopher who works as a journalist – mainly in the field of economics. He worked for several years at Radio Študent, where he was also the editor-in-chief, and now writes for the Slovenian newspaper Dnevnik.

Learning Palestine Group

The Learning Palestine Group is a group of artists, academics, intellectuals and community members working closely with Radio Alhara, who aim to disseminate knowledge on the history of the ongoing struggle for justice, liberation, and freedom of Palestine and the Palestinian People.

The Learning Palestine Group wishes to practice new and old ways of disseminating this knowledge, that function with and around the constraints of social media and corporate controlled networks.

Magda Lipska

Magda Lipska is a curator. She is Head of Research at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN Warsaw) and the Project Leader for the Museum of the Commons project.

Manijeh Moradian

Manijeh Moradian is associate professor of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University. Her book, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* (Duke University Press, 2022) won the 2024 Hamid Naficy Book Award for the best book in Iranian Diaspora Studies from the Association of Iranian Studies and the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies. The book also received an Honorable Mention for the 2023 Middle East Studies Association Nikki Keddie Book Award. She has published widely including in *American Quarterly, Journal of Asian American Studies, Radical History Review, Scholar & Feminist online*, jadaliyya.com and *Meridians*. She is a founding member of the Raha Iranian Feminist Collective and a member of Feminists for Jina, a global network which formed in fall 2022 to support the women, life, freedom uprising in Iran.

Shayma Nader

Shayma Nader is an artist, curator and researcher from Palestine. Her research-led practice is concerned with anti-colonial, anti-disciplinary and land-centred imaginaries and practices. She is currently a PhD candidate in artistic research at ARIA at Sint Lucas Antwerpen (KdG University College) and the University of Antwerp.

Bojana Piškur

Bojana Piškur works as a curator at the Moderna galerija in Ljubljana.

Her curatorial and research work focuses on the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav context and the Non-Aligned Movement, especially in relation to art and culture. Much of this work formed part of the 'Southern Constellations' series.

She is also very interested in how historical emancipatory ideas can be translated and practiced in contemporary situations.

Martin Pogačar

Martin Pogačar is a cultural studies scholar with a PhD in memory and digital media and an MA in Central and South-Eastern European Studies. His research interests include media memory studies, philosophy of technology, as well as Yugoslav popular culture and industrial heritage, as well as the history of technology in socialist Yugoslavia. His recent work includes: 'E/Affect Agropop: how pop and joke made people resonate in the 1980s', in Ana Hofman and Tanja Petrović (eds.), *Affect's Social Lives: Post-Yugoslav Reflections*, Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SA ZU, 2023, and the co-edited volume *Social Impact in Arts and Culture: The Diverse Lives of a Concept* (with Iva Kosmos), Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SA ZU, 2022 in which he wrote the essay 'A microphone in a chandelier: how a secret recording sparks mnemonic imagination and affect'.

Tevfik Rada

Tevfik Rada is a PhD candidate in Comparative History at the Central European University in Vienna. His research focuses on the history of Albanian leftist movements and political thought in Yugoslavia and Albania proper. He is the co-editor of *Yugoslavya Komünist Partisi Yayın Organı* "Sosyalist Fecri" Gazetesi [The Publication Organ of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia: "Sosyalist Fecri" Newspaper] (TÜSTAV, 2023). He is the co-founder of Pykë-Presje, an independent cultural space and publishing platform in Prizren. With Sezgin Boynik, Rada led the research and programming of 'Translated into Socialism', realized at Salt (2024) and at MG+MSUM (2025).

Philip Rizk

Philip Rizk is a filmmaker & writer from Cairo currently living in Berlin. In his films he experiments with methods of 'making the habitual strange', in *Out on the Street* (2015) co-directed with Jasmina Metwaly, through performance, and in his found footage films *Mapping Lessons* (2020) and *Terror Tales* (2024), Rizk experiments with the technique of montage. Along with the filmmaker Baya Medhaffer, he is programming the upcoming Majliss Fanon, a film program around Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and is editor of the upcoming book entitled *Neocolonialism and its Dismantling*, which puts Fanon's final book in conversation with the tharwat of the Arabic-speaking region in the past 15 years. You can follow his work @ filfilfilm.com

Sanaa Salameh

Sanaa Salameh is a translator and wife of the martyred prisoner Walid Daqqa.

Alissar Seyla

Alissar Seyla is a Lebanese woman who also identifies as South West Asian and North African (SWANA). A visual artist, writer and researcher, she makes work to reimagine her lived experiences of war, violence, and transgenerational trauma in relationship with tender and disturbing aspects of social ecologies and cultural fantasy. Merging community work and a PhD in Public Health with an interdisciplinary practice, she educates about cultural safety and anti-racism, and creates poetry and cultural criticism across academic and community spaces. Alissar founded and curates Rage Café, a group that meets infrequently to explore and uplift SWANA art and intellectual movements as a way of caring for communities in grief and combating harmful portrayals of Arabs and their homelands in mainstream media. She is interested in equitable, non-exploitative research structures and processes, particularly with refugee and immigrant communities in countries of the global minority.

Slinko

Slinko is a multidisciplinary artist based in the United States who grew up in Donbas, Ukraine. Blending an interest in history with personal inquiry, she examines how power shapes lived experience and how personal agency may be reclaimed from systems of abstraction. While her work is informed by scholarship on labor, extraction, and ideology, Slinko draws inspiration from everyday people, places, and material culture.

Françoise Vergès

Françoise Vergès is Chair of Global South(s) at the Collège d'études mondiales in Paris. Vergès grew up on Réunion Island and has lived in Algeria, Mexico, and the US, where she was a feminist anti-racist journalist and editor in the 1980s. She is an active teacher, scholar, and curator. Her PhD thesis *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage* was published by Duke University Press in 1999. Subsequent publications include: *A Decolonial Feminism* (Pluto, 2021); *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2020); *Exposer l'esclavage: méthodologies et pratiques* (ed.; Africultures no. 91, 2013); and *L'Homme prédateur: Ce que nous enseigne l'esclavage sur notre temps* (Albin Michel, 2011). She has written documentary films on Maryse Condé (2013) and Aimé Césaire (2011), and was a project advisor for documenta11 (2002) and the Triennale de Paris (2011).

Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman

Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman (b. Philadelphia, US, 1986) helps make interventions, essays, performances, poems, films, and installations with/in overwritten and denied places and materials, tracing local experience to and from entangled catastrophes. His contributions establish difficult situations for durational contemplation and vernacular rites, manifesting a quiet language of intense proximity over time by tending accidents, anxieties, and memory. Works include *Lost in Jüdischer Friedhof Weißensee* (2016–19); *Night Herons* (2020–21), recipient of the 2024 ING Polish Art Foundation Prize, created with Joanna Rajkowska; *Wierzba Estery / Esther’s Willow* (2018–), created with Katarzyna Sala and Marta Sala; *flight manifesto* یان الصعود الی السماء (2019–24), created with Dirar Kalash; and *Imagined Land Axa Xeyal Kirin* خاکی خەیاڵکراو (2023–), created with Nastaran Saremy.

Ezgi Yurteri

Ezgi Yurteri is an editor and writer operating across the cultural field. With a background in economics and visual arts, she is interested in exploring forms of cooperation, the organization of artistic labour and the politics of knowledge production. Ezgi has worked with various cultural institutions and publishing houses in Turkey, and currently serves as the editor at Salt. She was part of the artist-initiated space sub in Çanakkale from 2019 to 2021, and has collaborated with AVTO, an independent organization for research and practice in Istanbul. Since 2022, she has been a member of the editorial board of L’Internationale Online.

Alja Zore

Alja Zore is a journalist for the Educational and Documentary Feuilleton departments at Radio Slovenija’s First Programme (Prvi). Since joining the national broadcaster in 2020, she has produced in-depth talk shows and audio documentaries, including Intelekta, Sledi časa and Glasovi svetov. Her work focuses primarily on historical, social and political-economic topics. She appreciates the privilege of stepping away from the fast-paced daily news cycle to instead focus, with the help of her guests, on understanding the deeper processes that shape our past, present and future.

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Collective Study in Times of Emergency Volume 2: 2025–2026 brings together 18 contributions published by L'Internationale Online from January 2025 to October 2026 under the research strand 'Internationalisms'. Comprising essays, conversations, poetry, listening sessions and more it is an attempted response to the urgency of the present conjuncture and the need to rethink what it means to practice, articulate and claim internationalisms within the cultural sphere today. Palestine and the ongoing genocide frame the publication and sit at its core. Here, Palestine is articulated with other struggles, both contemporary and historical; an attempt to bring contexts into relation, even if such a move is always inadequate.

The publication is organised into three sections that traverses modes of bearing witness, reading and writing, as well as the complex, contradictory nature of internationalism itself. Following the first, eponymous publication the contributions gathered here, their diverse forms of realisation and dissemination, point to collective study as a practice of solidarity, what Bojana Piškur, one of the editors describes as 'the joy of shared commitment and struggle'.

With contributions by:

Nick Aikens, Sheena Barrett, Igor Bijuklič, Sezgin Boynik, Marijana Cvetković, Sofia Dati, Merve Elveren, Charles Esche, Maddalena Fragnito, Yousri al-Ghoul, İrem Günaydın, Nav Haq, Rana Issa, Serge Klymko, Vida Knežević, Gal Krizmanič, Learning Palestine Group, Magda Lipska, Manijeh Moradian, Shayma Nader, Bojana Piškur, Martin Pogačar, Tevfik Rada, Philip Rizk, Sanaa Salameh, Alissar Seyla, Slinko, Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman, Françoise Vergés, Ezgi Yurteri, Alja Zore

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