Tania El Khoury’s Live Art
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Introduction

Laurel V. McLaughlin and Carrie Robbins

*Tania El Khoury’s Live Art: Collaborative Knowledge Production* is a readerly experiment in how to convert an artist’s residency on a college campus into a lasting reference work that also serves as an entry point for learning more about that artist’s social art practice.

The Lebanese-British artist Tania El Khoury pursues an immersive social art practice that “focuses on audience interactivity and is concerned with the ethical and political potential of such encounters.” She is currently the director of the Open Society University Network Center for Human Rights and the Arts as well as a Distinguished Artist in Residence in the theater and performance program at Bard College and “creates installations and performances in which the audience is an active collaborator.” El Khoury classifies this work as “live art,” or artwork situated at the intersection of performance, new media, and interactive (social/relational) practices. While El Khoury has worked as an individual artist in the past, since the 2011 Syrian uprisings she has collaborated with others, whether the art was conceived by her and executed with partners, or composed within the research and performance collective Dictaphone Group, including urbanist and architect Abir Saksouk, and artist and producer Petra Serhal. Many of the individuals with whom she works are displaced as migrants or refugees, and others collectively worked as activists and revolutionaries in the South West Asian/North African (SWANA) region. Their lived experiences at and across international borders become the subjects of her artwork, which she uses to affect audiences and facilitate critical dialogue about the politics of SWANA and the multilayered impacts of globalization.

Having earned a Ph.D. in drama, theatre, and dance from Royal Holloway in London, an M.A. in performance making from Goldsmiths, a Certificate in physical theater from the School of Physical Theatre, London, and a BA in drama from the Institute of Fine Arts, Lebanese University, El Khoury takes seriously the role of research in her practice. As she explained in conversations at Bryn Mawr College, she visits local archives, reviews urban plans, conducts interviews with and films the subjects with whom she interacts. The research notably tests the limits of disciplinary boundaries, seeping into the often nebulous territory of “artistic research.” For El Khoury, this research attempts to examine conditions
and experiences, and foster interactivity among audiences in its aftermaths, rather than categorize stagnantly.

El Khoury and Dictaphone Group have exhibited internationally in performance festivals, white-cube galleries, community-run spaces, and such unconventional art viewing sites as a storage container. She has exhibited her individual and collective works in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, totaling thirty-two countries on six continents.

El Khoury’s work centers around geopolitical factors that attempt to circumscribe citizens and refugees in sites where she has herself lived or traveled. In Lebanon she laid bare dehumanizing social expectations of women in the region from a progressive feminist perspective in early works such as *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better*, a one-on-one performance in 2011 in which a male audience member dictates the movements of a female performer from an elevated space through wireless headphones. Moreover, interactive performances with audiences, researched in Dictaphone Group alongside collaborators Saksouk and Serhal, interrogated the political cooptation of urban space in Jounieh in the work *Bit Téléférique* (2010) and land in Beirut in performances such as *The Sea is Mine* (2012). Works presented in the survey *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury* (September 6–23, 2018), such as *Camp Pause* and *Stories of Refuge* by Dictaphone Group, and interactive works credited to Tania El Khoury but realized in collaboration, such as *Gardens Speak* (2013), *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2014), and *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018), intersect with the artist’s home country of Lebanon and sites of travel such as Germany through the experiences of migrants, refugees, and activists. The forced migrations and autocratic regimes that affect many of El Khoury’s subjects result from the entangled political stakes within the region, including but not limited to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the dictatorial Bashar al-Assad regime leading to the civil war in Syria, and even the Mediterranean Sea’s encroaching presence upon a refugee camp in southern Lebanon.

This reader neither makes grand claims concerning how migration functions in and for residents of refugee camps or migrants from SWANA, nor does it attempt to trace microgeographies within Lebanon and the places of El Khoury’s travels or living. Additionally, this compilation cannot offer a comprehensive account of how social movements, activist aims, and revolutions contributed to the movements of subjects and collaborators. Furthermore, this reader does not aim to settle disputes among our authors, whether in and across their content, recommendations, or even vocabularies; nor does it aim to define and prescribe a singular perspective of the political terrain. Following El Khoury’s lead to relate some of the various experiences of her subjects, it attempts to leave our authors’ unique perspectives intact. It is hoped that the authors’ various intellectual investments and perspectives on a shared body of work will aid in the development of a more comprehensive art historical methodology for evaluating complex border-crossing artworks such as those that El Khoury makes.

El Khoury’s emergent form of “live art” practice might be claimed as evidence of any number of theoretical “turns” in contemporary art. Insofar as it requires an audience’s
"interaction," it can be interpreted within the wider "social turn" of contemporary art observed by art historian Claire Bishop. Its attention to the lived experiences of displaced subjects, such as migrants or refugees, and deceased revolutionaries who lay claims to regions’ collectivities beyond the nation-state, emblemizes what curator Emma Chubb has identified as the "migratory turn" in contemporary art. El Khoury’s research-based artistic processes and their investments in or resemblances of oral histories might align it with an "ethnographic turn," and the resulting accumulation of documents, data, testimony, and other forms of evidence might be representative of an "archival turn" in contemporary art. More broadly, El Khoury’s live art might be discussed under the heading of "knowledge production," which describes a "diversity of artistic, curatorial and educational projects [that] fram[e] and articulat[e] social problems and concerns in terms of economic, historical, and geopolitical issues, exhibiting an attentiveness to both material and research." Since the 1990s, such terms have been couched within those that art historians, theorists, and most notably artists themselves have termed "artistic research." Merging pedagogy, research methodologies, and artistic strategies, the multidisciplined—or perhaps, undisciplined—area has been examined recently by theorist Natalie Loveless as regionally specific "research-creation," and curator Lucy Cotter as a global shift, among others. These tentacular histories reference artists ranging from Joseph Beuys to Tania Bruguera, who initiated practice-led knowledge in dialogue with their environments and collaborators.

This volume begins by considering the ways in which the artist produces knowledge by inhabiting the roles of the researcher, archivist, or collaborator in her practice. It opens with the artist’s own voice, paired with that of urban architect Abir Saksouk, her collaborator in the artist collective Dictaphone Group. In this republished essay, “Camp Pause: Stories from Rashidieh Camp and the Sea,” they relate their collaborative research processes within refugee communities, as well as the political stakes of urban and coastal spatialities. In the subsequent essay, art historian Sascha Crasnow identifies the role of research in El Khoury’s practice and contextualizes it within a longer lineage of research-based art in post-war Lebanon, known as the Beirut School.

By documenting the precarious lived experiences of displaced subjects in ways that sometimes resemble an oral history interview or an archive, as in Tell Me What I Can Do, El Khoury aligns herself with the role of the archivist. Political scientist Samer Abboud appreciates the need for El Khoury’s creative memory work that can tell the stories of individuals in situations of diaspora. He identifies the narrative strategy of the personal or intimate account in Gardens Speak as that which relocates history writing from the grand narratives of the battlefield to the particularity of individual lived experiences. For Abboud, this is especially important for remembering that which motivated individual protest and envisioned a better Syria before being decimated by the regime and its dominant counter-narrative. His essay also chronicles a useful history of power and conflict in Syria for the less initiated. Archive director Sue Breakell then considers and critiques the ways in which El Khoury’s artworks operate at the intersection of art and archives studies in situations of diaspora and displacement to represent Syrian political violence and its traumas—otherwise lost or disappeared by those in power. Breakell considers El Khoury’s work alongside other artists in an effort to surface some critical differences between artworks and archives.
Critical artistic practices that are invested in knowledge production, such as El Khoury’s, seek to avoid and challenge normative conceptions for the role of the artist. One strategy is to decenter its heroic singularity by engaging in collaboration, which also challenges normative ways of producing knowledge. El Khoury invites collaboration in the making of her work, not only by working as part of artistic collectives, but also by working with individuals so that they can tell their stories. Anthropologist Beth Derderian describes the ways in which El Khoury centers the lives of her subjects, even handing over the camera to them in *Stories of Refuge*. This transgression of artistic power helps us see trauma in the otherwise overlooked banality of daily life now reinvested with care and even enchantment. Writer, researcher, and activist Kinana Issa, who collaborated with El Khoury on *Gardens Speak*, also reflects on the losses she experienced and experiences every day in her displacement as a refugee who remembers and remains in solidarity with the activist struggle of the Syrian uprisings.

Beyond collaborating in the making of her work, El Khoury requires elaborate forms of collaboration to exhibit her performances and installations. This volume includes a primary source roundtable discussion with festival producers and curators of her work. Organized and moderated by curator Anna Gallager-Ross of The Bentway (Toronto, CA), it features Ron Berry ofFusebox Festival (Austin, TX), Gideon Lester of Bard College (NY), Kate Craddock of GIFT Festival (Gateshead, England), and Lisa Kraus of Bryn Mawr College (PA). They describe and relate their experiences presenting El Khoury’s live art, and the ethical, financial, and structural forms of support for the work and its reception that are required.

Audiences are a particularly important collaborator in El Khoury’s project. She describes them as “audience-participants.” Performance studies scholar Olivia Lamont Bishop and art historian Laurel V. McLaughlin analyze this constitutive component of the work. Lamont Bishop argues that El Khoury’s interactive works are sensorial and affective apparatuses that allow viewers to understand places of conflict in nuanced ways. McLaughlin draws on Mieke Bal’s concept of migratory aesthetics to describe the formal properties of El Khoury’s artwork and the subjective experience of encountering it. She attends specifically to Bal’s migratory aesthetic quality of “contact” for the ways in which it articulates a social/political space in which subjects meet or find relationality with one another.

Although an important and even constitutive aspect of the work, audience-participant experiences are not always recorded and are thus somewhat elusive. This volume of essays takes up the artist’s project by documenting some of the knowledge production that has accrued for at least some audience-participants of El Khoury’s art—namely, our authors. Each of them brings a particular disciplinary perspective to the work that helps to expound upon the social problems and geopolitical issues that the work frames and presents. Social work scholars David S. Byers and Anan Fareed cannot help but view the precarity of the Palestinian refugees represented in *Camp Pause* through their experiences of training and interviewing social workers concerning their labor in the region. They focus on the development of the social service infrastructure, especially in the West Bank, with critical attention to the social goals of “normalization” for refugee communities, asking pointedly: “Should Life in Refugee Camps Feel ‘Normal?’: The Stakes of Social Work among Displaced Palestinians.” Archaeologist Jennie Bradbury experiences deep historical resonances that connect her archaeological work with the contemporary commemorative and burial practices represented in *Gardens Speak*. Her essay explores how processes of memorializing,
valorizing, and forgetting the dead have been used as coping mechanisms, as well as socio-political tools for persecution in the Ancient Middle East. The archaeological record helps her recognize established precedents from which deviations have occurred.

Taking its lead from El Khoury’s multifaceted and category-testing practice, the volume employs interdisciplinary perspectives to bring together ideas that are not entirely alike to see if there are ways to generate meaning that do not insist on strictly historical connections. To delimit its scope, the book uses a single survey exhibition of her works as its framing device. It centers on the works included in the artist’s 2018 residency at Bryn Mawr College, in which we participated as organizers. Those works include: *Stories of Refuge* (2013); *Gardens Speak* (2014); *Camp Pause* (2016); *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2016); and *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018). The volume then closes by focusing on a single case study: *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, the artist’s 2018 residency and exhibition at Bryn Mawr College. It asks, and attempts to offer an example of, how to document ephemeral works of art that are simultaneously on-campus events, exhibitions, and immersive experiences that produce knowledge.

By documenting El Khoury’s residency and exhibition at Bryn Mawr, we can contribute additional primary sources to the artist’s and institution’s archives. These include two transcribed interviews between the artist(s) and students, staff, and faculty of the college that were held as otherwise ephemeral public events. In the first, El Khoury joins the co-editors of this volume for an introduction to her artistic methods, including her conceptions of the terms “live art” and “interactivity.” In the second, El Khoury is joined by Dictaphone collaborator Saksouk, as well as Laurel V. McLaughlin, Bryn Mawr Ph.D. candidate in history of art, and Azade Seyhan, professor of German and comparative literature. The artists elaborate upon their collaborative strategies and the ethical impact of these strategies on participating refugee communities. This case study also includes a description of the project and its initiation, its chronology, and a checklist, as well as a response from one of the undergraduate collaborators who assisted in the realization of this project. Talia Shiroma’s sensitive reflection helps illuminate the practical and conceptual complexities of El Khoury’s artistic endeavor in its enactment and display.

El Khoury’s works are often only available to be experienced outside of traditional art spaces like the museum or by transforming galleries with installation set pieces, such as a shipping container or a raised garden bed. At Bryn Mawr College, we have no museum or conventional gallery spaces; El Khoury’s works were installed in the theater building’s blackbox, a rehearsal space, the library’s Rare Book Room, as well as outdoors in an adjoining garden. In her contribution, arts administrator and artistic director of the Tania El Khoury survey at Bryn Mawr College, Lisa Kraus, reflects on the humanizing experience of connection with otherwise estranged victims of uprising and war that *Gardens Speak* gave her. She felt a conviction that this piece needed to be experienced at Bryn Mawr and by our students.

We, as editors, are grateful to join this interdisciplinary and collaborative knowledge production alongside those who joined us for the programming, the authors gathered in these pages, and many others who contributed to the conceptual, production, and interpretative labor of the exhibition. Its afterlife continues in the assembly of this reader and the many editorial and publishing hands who guided its compilation. Bringing El Khoury’s work to Bryn Mawr not only allowed our community to engage with the then topical, so-called...
“refugee/migration crisis” and rippling political forbears and aftermaths, but it also united arts programming on campus that is otherwise institutionally segregated. More typically, visual art exhibitions on campus are developed by the college’s Special Collections department, and live theater, dance, and music performances are organized by its arts program. The genre-crossing nature of El Khoury’s work helped us recognize an opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration, which is so valued by and more nimbly accomplished at small liberal arts colleges. The curatorial imperatives at such schools aim to connect exhibitions with an incredibly broad curriculum, including myriad faculty and student interests. Curators not only care for the collections with which they are charged, but also for their audiences. El Khoury’s work has an immediacy that makes human suffering at borders and other costs of war undeniably and intimately present. We recognized that it would provoke questions and emotional reactions for our community. How could we best respond (as El Khoury taught us to ask)? We sought the expertise of our community members, who could share their perspectives on related topics of forced migration and refugee communities throughout SWANA. These included seed workshops concerning diasporic memory, performances of personal migratory experiences, poetry readings engaging the crossing of borders, and lectures delving into the object-based and political histories of the region that characterized the forced and voluntary movements of populations in eleven weeks of interdisciplinary programming with faculty partners across the college.

Much like the exhibition programming we developed to support the artist’s residency at Bryn Mawr, this interdisciplinary, multimedia volume aims to usher readers into a space of curiosity—now through essays and supporting media and images. The reader takes up El Khoury’s insistence that the audiences’ experiences are a fundamentally constitutive aspect of the work. From the social worker to the archivist, the archaeologist to the festival curator, all of our authors engage with the provocations of El Khoury’s project and share their individual perspectives on their complex encounters with the work. The sum of all such perspectives is not contained here. We are not aiming to circumscribe and contain the possibilities for its interpretation. Connecting subjects across chasms of difference, whether academic or geopolitical, is in keeping with the radical epistemological and political revolutions that El Khoury and her collaborators invite us to join. We hope that you find an entry point and continue the conversation.

Notes

3. “Live art” is the term used by the artist; see El Khoury and Pearson, “Two Live Artists in the Theater.”
4. We elect here to use the term “SWANA” to refer to the regions of South West Asia and North Africa in place of Middle East, Near East, Arab World, or Islamic World in an attempt to address the diversity of communities in this part of the world and to avoid further reification of the colonial and Orientalist origins of these other references. We acknowledge that all of these are
contested terms that may sometimes require use. All participating authors’ elected terms have been preserved by editors. The examples discussed in this reader involve territories in South West Asia; however, El Khoury has collaborated with artists across North Africa. See “About,” SWANA Alliance website, accessed August 24, 2022, https://swanaalliance.com/about.
5. Countries are listed based on El Khoury’s CV as of July 2022 and her current biography on the Bard College website, accessed July 25, 2022, https://www.bard.edu/faculty/details/?id=4496.
6. “Interaction” is the term used by the artist; see El Khoury, “Participation—or rather, Interactivity,” In Terms of Performance website.
8. For more on the ethnographic turn, see Rutten, van. Dienderen, and Soetaert, “Revisiting the Ethnographic Turn.” For more on the archival turn, see Simon, “Following the Archival Turn.”
10. See Loveless, How to Make Art at the End of the World and Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation; and Cotter, Reclaiming Artistic Research.
11. “Audience-participants” and “audiences” are terms used by the artist. We discussed the term “audience-participants” with El Khoury during her residency at Bryn Mawr College in 2018–19. For “audiences,” see El Khoury and Pearson, 122–6.
12. This reader consults the artists involved but remains independent of their perspectives outside of their contributions.
13. ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury was collectively organized by Bryn Mawr College’s Performing Arts Series, Special Collections, and the Fringe Festival in the fall of 2018. For documentation and more information on the retrospective, see “ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury,” Bryn Mawr College, September 6–23, 2018, accessed July 12, 2020, https://taniaelkhoury.brynmawr.edu/.
14. We use quotation marks around “refugee/migration crisis” not as a means to doubt the very real humanitarian crisis, but as a way to problematize the way in which the term is used, understood, and circulated. As El Khoury demonstrates, it is far from monolithic, and its context and speaker deeply matter to its interpretation.
The Artist as Researcher
1  **Camp Pause: Stories from Rashidieh Camp and the Sea**

Dictaphone Group (Tania El Khoury and Abir Saksouk)

We know very little about why Palestinian camps are located where they are in Lebanon. We also know little about the trajectories of their communities. We often assume that, upon their arrival, refugees were directly transported to tents that later became “camps.” Reflecting on ideas of refuge and ways of writing alternative histories of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, Dictaphone Group created a project entitled *Camp Pause*, commissioned by Dar El-Nimer in Beirut for Qalandia International Festival 2016. Our work process combines live art methods and multidisciplinary research. Live art and research are intertwined from the initial conceptualization of the project through its development and public viewing. In that sense, and like many art projects that are based in communities rather than art studios, the process is as crucial and telling as the outcome.

As the members of Dictaphone Group, our personal and artistic interests center on examining marginalized places, peripheral to the capital, and to discuss our relationship (and right) to access the sea and enjoy it as a place open for all. In the summer of 2012, we created an interactive performance entitled *This Sea Is Mine*, which invites the public on a fishing boat journey from the fishermen’s port of Ain al-Mraisseh to the contested Dalieh of Raouché. We stopped at each resort location on Beirut’s coast to explore its land ownership, the laws that govern its use, and the practices of its users. In 2015, we created a project in collaboration with a group of youth from the city of Sidon. In the project, entitled *I Will Guide You Through Saida*, we explored the relationship of the residents of Sidon with their communal spaces and discussed the real estate projects that are radically changing their neighborhoods and the city’s seashore.

*Camp Pause* continues our interest in looking at the relationship of the individual and the community with the sea as well as their urban and natural environment. The project centers on a video installation we developed with four residents of the Rashidieh refugee camp, located on the coast of Lebanon, just south of the city of Tyre. We filmed their everyday routes from their homes to the sea, each participant leading us to the final scene in which they stand against the backdrop of the sea. Along the way, they weave narratives
about the history of the land, their arrival, the struggle to build, and everyday life in a camp situated away from the city, bordered by agricultural fields and the sea. The installation is presented in a small room where audience members find themselves at the center of four stories, each projected on of the walls in the room. The videos begin in the home of each of the participants, then move with them along the alleys and streets of the camp to finally reach the sea.

The encounters we had with various people we met by appointment or by chance revealed the spaces of the camp through their everyday lives and habits there. As a lived space, the specificities of the days we visited the camp and experiences of the people we met dictated the outcome of the project. As visitors to the camp, we were struck by the contradiction between, on the one hand, its openness to the sea and the vast surrounding agricultural fields, and, on the other hand, the militarized entrance to the camp. The Lebanese army has set up a checkpoint at the entrance along with surveillance points on the seashore. Such discrepancies in the scenery reveal a masked oppression and a false freedom given to the camp’s residents.

The History of the Land and Early Arrivals

“If it was not for the orchards here during the camp’s siege, people would have starved to death,” says one Rashidieh resident. Farmlands and citrus orchards irrigated from the Ras al-Ein area by old water canals surround the camp. The area of Ras al-Ein accommodates
ponds of drinking water, two of which are on Rashidieh Hill and considered to be some of the oldest water springs along the Lebanese coast.\textsuperscript{1} Ras al-Ein and Rashidieh Hill are also important areas of “Old Tyre,” which expands down to the coast. Historically, the area was inhabited by Tyre’s residents because of its abundance of water and fertile soil, while the city itself was left for governance and religious matters. It is said that Alexander the Great razed the part of Tyre on Rashidieh Hill after the priest refused him entry into the temple. What remains today of Old Tyre is the Rashidieh village.\textsuperscript{2}

During the French mandate, the French authorities gave many plots of land to the Catholic Church’s religious endowment.\textsuperscript{3} Sections of Rashidieh Hill, where there were already two churches, were part of this giveaway. It was on that land where, in 1936, the French authorities established a camp for hundreds of Armenian refugees fleeing the area of Cilicia. Around a decade later, the Palestinian refugees arrived. An elderly woman from Rashidieh told us that she and her family first arrived to the town of Maroun al-Ras from northern Palestine. She goes on:

From Maroun al-Ras to Bint Jbeil and from there we took a bus to Tyre. The district administrator found us. There was a train that passed through here. We took it towards Syria and arrived in Hama. We managed to get cars to take us to the mosque where there were many Palestinians. We stayed there for seven days. Later, they brought cars and asked each person what their occupation was so they could send them to an area where they could work. My father had said he wanted to go to Damascus but they did not allow us to. They sent us to Houran. We eventually returned to Damascus but then made it back to Lebanon and decided to stay in Tibnine because we had relatives there.

In 1950, a couple of years after arriving in south Lebanon, the Lebanese authorities decided to relocate all Palestinians residing in southern towns (for example, Tibnine, al-Mansouri, al-Qlayla, and Bint Jbeil) to designated refugee camps. The authorities established one of these camps adjacent to the Armenian camp with nothing but tents. The residents there began to build walls from mud and clay in order to reinforce the tents. For every eight housing units, they built a shared bathroom fifty meters away. A decade later, as Armenian residents began to leave, the Palestinian refugees began moving into those lots. Of the 311 Armenian houses, 200 of them remain today and are commonly referred to as the “Old Camp” (Figure 1).

In 1963, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) built a new camp to house Palestinian refugees who were then residing in French mandate military buildings called the “Gouraud barracks” in the Beqaa city of Baalbeck. After the Lebanese government had decided to evacuate the barracks, building the new camp began in Rashidieh, adjacent to the Old Camp (Figure 1). The single housing units were 99 m\textsuperscript{2} and composed of three rooms, a bathroom and a courtyard lined a grid network of roads. The residents of Gouraud barracks moved in, along with some others who moved out of the Old Camp. However, the rooms were very small and the ceilings too low. Over the years, Rashidieh camp residents demolished these houses and built their own.
Throughout the years, large numbers of Rashidieh residents worked in the surrounding orchards either as seasonal or daily laborers, benefiting from the generous amounts of water in the area. Abu Hassan, one of the people we worked with on this project explains:

We would not be able to live if it was not for the water we have in the camp. We have a lot of it and always had. Ras al-Ein contains water springs, two rivers and ponds. We pump water from the ponds to our water tanks and from there to the houses and farmland.

After the 1969 agreement in which the Lebanese government recognized the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, and its control of the camps, the Rashidieh residents worked the Jaftalak fields surrounding the camp without paying any fees. Each farmer could choose a plot of land to plant and they would come to be (informally) known as the owner of that plot. The Jaftalak land was public land divided between the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education, and other-defined state land. Yet the cultivation of Jaftalak fields was limited to greens: pinto beans, lettuce, parsley, cilantro, radishes, and so on. The farmers were prohibited from growing fruit-bearing trees since the land did not legally belong to them. According to Lebanese property law, whoever plants a tree, automatically owns the land it is on.

Currently, rapid changes are affecting the farmlands that characterize Rashidieh. This is partially caused by an ongoing battle to build between the residents and the Lebanese authorities.

The Battle to Build

Because of its proximity to Palestine and its location on the coast, there is a history of resistance fighters (fida’yeen) departing by boat to carry military operations against Israeli targets. As a result, the camp has seen many Israeli attacks, most notably in the years 1973, 1978, and 1982. During the latter, Israel destroyed 600 shelters and displaced 4,000 people.4

After 1985, the Lebanese state took complete control of the Palestinian refugee camp’s entrances and forced all residents to enter the camp through a single checkpoint guarded by the Lebanese army. This siege is still in place today, in different forms. Restricted by demarcated boundaries and the sea, the Rashidieh camp cannot expand. Instead, new construction projects are built within these boundaries, compromising shared spaces in the camp such as football fields, the seashore, and the farmland. Mona, who lives close to what was once the camp’s first football field, explains:

The first football field was here, inside the camp. It was nice because we would sit on our balconies watching and rooting for the players. With time the camp felt overcrowded and people began building on the land of the football field. Now it is completely gone. There are
three others, but they were all opened by Palestinian factions. This one was not owned by anyone. The residents of the camp had made it themselves.

She also told us about when construction on the farmland started:

Demand for houses was growing, especially after the influx of refugees from Syria. It is more profitable to build and rent the land than to farm. Look at the al-Kawakina neighborhood as an example. It was once planted and is now completely built on. The landowner fenced the land in ten years ago and planted it. Five years ago, he started housing construction there. He built rooms and rented them to displaced Syrians. Initially, he had built two rooms for a small café, but that was not successful so he began renting them out. He also started selling plots of land for others to build on.

Mona and many others talked about the Rashidieh seashore.

The coast of the city of Tyre, including Rashidieh’s beach, was subject to sand grabbing and suction during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) in a dubious and corrupt process which involved stealing the sand. This has resulted in the threat of collapse and other damage by waves to the houses directly facing the sea. The residents of the camp are dealing with this problem by building a wall between the houses and the waterfront. For this, they use rubble from roads and other infrastructural projects. Despite their ugliness, the piles of rubble are an appropriate solution because they do not cost the residents anything except the effort of transporting them to the site. Residents of the seafront are most often the poorest in the camp. They chose living on the beach for the low price of the land. An owner of a café on the beach recounted, “My parents were looking for low prices, not for the sea.” He also explained that a large part of Rashidieh beach is made up of landfills stacked along the sea, as well as garbage that is being thrown into the water channels that flow into the sea, with the waves throwing it back on the beach. The UNRWA does not clean up the beach. Its work is limited to waste collection containers distributed in the neighborhoods, which are later emptied into a landfill at the outskirts of the camp, to then be transferred to a landfill in the town of Qana, after the Ras al-Ain seaside landfill closed down in 2015.

The battle to build is also further complicated by the Lebanese government’s decision to prevent the entry of construction materials into the camp without obtaining a permit, which takes a long time and, in most cases, is not granted. Residents of the camp describe this ban as collusion between Palestinian factions and Lebanese authorities who grant permits only to influential people in the camp. These people in turn sell the materials to residents at double the price. The battle to build affects all Palestinian camps in south Lebanon. Most recently was the news of two people being wounded, including a policeman in municipal Tyre and a Palestinian resident of Buss camp, due to an attempt to bring construction materials into the camp without permission.

The participants in the Camp Pause project told us these stories, as well as many others. Together, we aimed to work on research that would contribute to the formulation of an alternative discourse about Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.
Community Projects

Community-based projects are not as simple as they may sound. They are where the ethics and politics of art and research work are most at stake. How do we make art that is with the community and not only about the community? How do we represent those we work with as they would have liked to represent themselves while maintaining the artistic integrity of the project? These questions become even more poignant when we are working with a community that our government has discriminated against, positioning us in a much more privileged citizenship status.

Working with a community means that we allow encounters to happen, the work to be transformed, the schedule to be shifted, and stories to unfold as we discover the space. For example, the initial artistic concept of Camp Pause was to call on each participant in the project to design the last scene in the video and to choose their background with the sea. In reality, no one responded well to this proposal and some expressed the need to move away from the romantic view of the sea and the geographical proximity to Palestine.

Working with participants means that we look for their personal reasons behind sharing their stories with us. It also requires that we respect those reasons while maintaining a critical distance from them. According to one of the participants in Camp Pause, the main purpose behind sharing her story with the public—especially their arrival at the camp and the violence that her family endured during the “camps war” with Lebanese militias—is that the Palestinians should make sure that their stories do not die with them.

Like many of Dictaphone’s Group projects, we found that recounting the narrative history of spaces is key to understanding the present state of things. The early recollection of Palestinians arriving in Lebanon in 1948 reveals a similar lack of understanding and lack of organization by the Lebanese state that we are now witnessing with Syrian refugees arriving in vast numbers since 2011. Um Khalil, a Palestinian resident of Rashidieh, recounts reaching Syria after having stopped in Lebanon on the way from Palestine. She was consequently forced by the Syrian authorities to go back to Lebanon as this was her first port of arrival after Palestine. This practice is now known in Europe as the “Dublin Regulation,” which calls for the deportation of people to where they were first registered as refugees irrespective of their preferences or life plans.

We are reminded through this project that the disregard of people’s pain and personal choices, the casual racism toward and vilification of refugees in Lebanese villages and towns, and the calls for grouping refugees in camps that are easily controlled and ultimately attacked is nothing new. While the whole world is busy discussing what they call the “refugee crisis,” we hope to remember the importance of listening to those who are really in that crisis. We also hope to remember that leaving people in limbo with few resources and rights is not a solution but an absence of one.

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Sources

Green Southerners, unpublished report about Ras al-Ein water springs.
Interviews with Rashidieh camp residents and with researchers Nasr Charafeddine, Ismael Sheikh Hassan, and Lina Abu Risan.
Republic of Lebanon, Land Registry and Cadastre, various documents.
United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), reports on the Rashidieh camp.
Historical aerial photography and cadastral maps of Tyre.

Notes

2. All information about Old Tyre is extracted from an interview we conducted with architect and urban planner Nasr Charafeddine in July 2016.
3. From interview with Nasr Charafeddine.
4. Sybille Stamm, “Palestinians in Lebanon review.”
5. The authors included these references to acknowledge inspiration and collaboration, as much of the research for this essay was based on unpublished conversations.
There has been an increased investment in what artists and scholars have referred to as “research-based practices” among global contemporary artists. As these practices have become more prominent, and as institutions of higher learning have developed degree programs for artistic research, scholars and artists alike have reckoned with what research means within artists’ practices and the ways—if any—it differs or challenges scholarly conceptions. As someone who describes her own practice as bridging the academic, artistic, and curatorial, Lucy Cotter notes that “academic-led protocols [regarding research] often drown out art’s sensibilities” despite “art’s potential to research or create knowledge in other ways.” Cotter continues, “art’s epistemologies open up precisely at the site of representation. They open up through attention to form, through play and through the ability and desire to question the terms of the discourse, rather than provide supplementary knowledge.” While artistic research may utilize the methodologies of scholarly research—including explorations of libraries and archives, or conducting interviews to gather oral histories—its departure comes in the form that the engagement with these materials takes. While academic scholarship has a limited number of typical standardized forms, ranging from the academic book to the peer-reviewed article and the academic lecture, artistic research allows for expanded possibilities of form, even in cases where the form itself mimics a scholarly one (as in Walid Raad’s “academic lectures,” discussed later).

The prevalence of research-based practices has been particularly notable among the generation of post-war Lebanese artists who came of age during the Civil War (1975–90). Referred to as the Beirut School, this generation of artists includes Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Rabih Mroué, among others. Art historian Chad Elias notes that artists of this generation utilize the structural formations of the archive and methodologies of academic scholarly research from a variety of fields to
create an alternative paradigm of representation in which a range of pressing issues—the traumatic aftereffects of civil war violence, the curtailment of civil liberties, continuing sectarian divisions, border hostilities, the social cost of reconstruction, [could] be publicly articulated and worked through.\(^5\)

In so doing, these artists’ works articulate political stakes in telling often-overlooked or elided histories, despite the fact that the histories their works produce are often characterized by

the fragmenting of narrative, the conflation of fact with fiction, the emphasis on the anecdotal, the creation of minor characters to intersect with major events, imagining whole archives of material where credible explanations (as well as traps, false starts, and digressions) might be found.\(^6\)

These artists integrate fact and fiction into more complete narratives, sometimes infusing elements of personal archives or memories, other times incorporating found materials as the seeds from which to grow a broader fictionalized narrative.

A member of a younger generation than the Beirut School artists, Tania El Khoury also engages in research-based practices. However, it is the expression of this research through the form of “live art” that differentiates her work. The strategies she utilizes in her live artworks, she contends, position audience-participants not in the role of passive recipients, but rather as active agents, requiring that they make a political investment in partnership with the artist. As El Khoury has stated herself, “[t]hese experiences ask audiences to make political choices, to take a side and to become part of the narrative they are encountering.”\(^7\) Through El Khoury’s interactive live art, audience-participants are implicated in the lives of others—individuals whose stories they are exposed to, and through which they are pushed to stake their political and ethical positions. While El Khoury’s work situates her within a lineage of research-based contemporary artists in Lebanon, what distinguishes her practice is the way she utilizes that research as the foundation for intimate, personal, and unique experiences that position audience-participants as active agents in the creation of the work and potential transmitters of knowledge.\(^8\)

This genre of art, which is fully dependent on audience participation, has been described as “live art,” a term most often used in the United Kingdom. Artists who adopt this term, like El Khoury, aim to distinguish their practice from “performance art” and “theater,” even as they acknowledge that it follows in this lineage.\(^9\) For El Khoury, one of the distinguishing factors is that her work resists centralization around a performer or the artist herself.\(^10\) And unlike mainstream “theater” proper, she does not present a performance to passive audiences. Instead, El Khoury creates environments that rely on the interactive engagement of participants.

In particular, El Khoury creates interactive experiences that engage audience-participants in the lives and stories of her subjects, collected during interviews with her collaborators. Her oral history approach gives her access to personal accounts of overlooked real-life implications or unseen effects of some of the larger ethico-political issues of our contemporary
moment: the Syrian uprisings, increased globalized migration, and the multitudinous experiences of refugees. By decentering herself—her control of the narrative, her presence in the work—El Khoury demonstrates a care for her subjects that models a dynamic conducive to empathy and shared vulnerability as the way to participate in these politics.

Given this context, it is worth comparing El Khoury’s research-based practice with, and within the legacy of, the Beirut School. Artist Walid Raad is perhaps the most widely known from this generation. Raad created his project The Atlas Group as a foundation whose mission aims to archive the history of the Lebanese Civil War (or Wars, as Raad refers to them). The Atlas Group was influenced by Raad’s work with multidisciplinary artist Jayce Salloum on the documentary *Up to the South* (1993). Creating the film included conducting extensive interviews with individuals who had been involved in the resistance movement during Israel’s invasion of South Lebanon in 1982. The Atlas Group, which utilizes the formats of the archive, academia, and the museological display through a website and exhibitions of documentation materials and performative lectures given by Raad, blends fact and fiction. Questions of authorship and the parsing of fact from fiction have been examined within the discourse on Raad’s work by other scholars; but I would like to highlight two aspects of Raad’s work here as they relate to the legacy of research-based performance practices coming out of post-war Lebanon into which El Khoury figures: the rootedness of the project in research practices and the performance of lectures.

![Figure 1. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire, Plates 63 and 64, 1991/2003. Archival inkjet print mounted on aluminum anodized, 44 × 78¼ in. (111.8 × 198.8 cm). © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.](image)

**Rooted in Research**

While Raad makes clear that the “documents” that comprise the *Atlas Group Archive* are those he has fabricated himself, they are rooted nevertheless in the realities of the Lebanese
Civil Wars. As Raad puts it, they are “specifically produced for the purposes of the project, on the bases of factual events and those ‘which could have happened.’” For example, Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire (1991) purports to document the car bombs that exploded in Lebanon from 1975–91 and includes 145 cut-out photographs of cars and notes from Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, the leading historian of the wars (Figure 1). While the historian is a fabricated character, and the photographs were taken by Raad on the streets of contemporary Lebanon, the cars that appear in the images were based on those that were weaponized during that time period. Raad also “formed a research team of sorts,” gathering “press reports, television news footage, radio programs, and interview transcripts,” and interviewed people about the bombings. While the resulting “documents” that constitute Raad’s project are fabrications, there is a notable instrumentalization of the processes of research—in his use of interviews and archives—and the utilization of this material and information gathered from it as the basis for The Atlas Group Archive.

El Khoury’s works are grounded in similar engagements with research processes. While Raad’s interviews of bombing witnesses and victims provide the basis for fictionalized representations of the realities they describe, El Khoury’s interviews function more similarly to oral histories in the resulting works, though the immersive aesthetics and artistic choices that shape their final presentation distinguish her projects from documentary to be passively witnessed. Her approaches for works such as Stories of Refuge (2013) and Gardens Speak (2014), as well as Camp Pause (2014), involve her identification of individuals whose stories are relevant to each work’s subjects, conducting interviews with them, and in some cases, as with Gardens Speak, gathering related materials, such as audio or visual recordings. The means by which El Khoury comes to her subject matter is also rooted in this process.

For example, in order to determine her subjects for Gardens Speak (Figure 2), El Khoury worked with Syrian activist and writer Kinana Issa, who helped El Khoury identify individuals who had themselves buried loved ones in gardens. Issa and El Khoury asked for accounts of the loved ones who had been lost in the Syrian uprisings and had the experience of this funerary rite. With poetic revision, Issa then reconstructed the stories of the individual deaths into proxy testimonials, as if narrated by the deceased. The resulting versions arguably merge fact and fiction in order to articulate otherwise lost or untold stories. This strategy differs from Raad’s in that while the narratives as cohesive first-person stories are fabricated, the deceased individuals whom they stand in for are real. Still, El Khoury shares with Raad an interest in exposing the false binary between the seemingly oppositional poles of fact and fiction. There can exist more than one truth, especially when it comes to telling the stories of those in precarious positions. El Khoury remarked, when talking about the Syrian refugees in Munich she interviewed for Stories of Refuge, “the narratives you share with your friends are definitely different from the ones you tell to the authorities of the country you would like to be hosted by; there are various and conflicting narratives at play in these situations.” This does not necessarily make any of these narratives untrue; rather, they may all be true. This variability even in “truth” was drawn out further during the Q&A for a 2016 presentation by El Khoury, in which an audience member questioned how participants could know the veracity of the stories in Gardens Speak about the individuals who had died, since they were constructed from
Figure 2. Installation view from Under the Radar Festival, New York, Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2017. Installation view. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of the artist.
the accounts of those other than the deceased. When prompted that the oral histories that were told in *Gardens Speak* were fictional, El Khoury replied, “Well, aren’t they always fictional?” pointing to the fact that memory is always subjective and malleable, stories are told and retold differently depending on the context and audience. El Khoury’s strategy aims to replicate the ways in which life is experienced, lived, and recounted over time. As such, even though El Khoury, like many of the generation that followed Raad, grounds her work more strictly in “factual” research, the nature of storytelling inherent in oral histories, as well as art-making, particularly in the medium of performance, insinuates that fictionalization is endemic to subjectivity and life lived.

This blending of fictionalization and factual materials and narratives is often the central focus in discussions of The Atlas Group and other works of the Beirut School. For example, Rabih Mroué utilizes the unedited martyr tape of Jamal al-Sati, a member of Lebanon’s National Resistance Front, as the basis for his seventeen-minute single-channel video *On Three Posters* (2004). He juxtaposes multiple takes of the video of al Sati, which were never meant to be viewed publicly, with a version of his own “martyr video.” His “martyr video” is ultimately revealed to be fabricated, a feed from a live performance to the audience. Similarly, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige utilize still-prevalent tourist postcards of Beirut, but invent their photographer and his process of matching the actual destruction of the buildings by burning the images in the series “Wonder Beirut” (1998–2007).

**Performative Lectures and the Question of Audience**

The specific form of performance and its relation to an audience for these works is also important, especially in Raad’s *The Atlas Group*. The performative aspect of this project consists of public talks in the form of an academic lecture. Raad, at least in the original iterations before the project was more widely well known, presented himself as a member of the foundation devoted to researching Lebanon’s history. Adopting the authoritative voice of historian, academic, and preservationist, Raad manipulates the expectations of the audience and their willingness to accept what they are presented with as fact. The very structure of the academic lecture bestows upon Raad and the words he delivers an authoritative voice.

Raad has a more determinative purpose for and cynical understanding of the role of his audience than El Khoury does. He not only plants some of his audience members, priming them to ask specific questions, but he also speaks to his audience according to assumptions about who they are, what they know, and what they believe. As documentary philosopher Stefanie Baumann has noted,

> [t]he spectator (as imagined by the artist) is treated as another variable in the project: always considered a part of a specific public, with specific prejudices, background knowledge and cultural biases, her reaction is anticipated by the artist and integrated as yet another potential
declination of the project. Rather than being thought of as a distant, uninvolved observer, or as an active, conscious participant, she takes on a decisive part in the very conception of *The Atlas Group.*

For Raad, the performance is altered to adapt to audiences with the goal of constructing a particular interaction. While El Khoury’s work rests on audience-participants as variables in the work, there is an openness and flexibility to how the audience will engage, rather than one that is pre-determined and anticipatory, as with Raad’s lectures. In contrast, El Khoury’s live artworks engage with an audience as active participants. While El Khoury’s works change depending on those involved, these audience-participants remain the driving forces behind the variability—their experiences are dependent on how they each respond to it. While El Khoury does make certain sensorial choices, such as lighting levels and using scented spray on the soil in *Gardens Speak,* ultimately, the audiences’ responses neither rest upon, nor even involve, perceptions the artist has about what they are bringing to the experience. While El Khoury associates the interactivity her works require with care, she notes that “care doesn’t mean that we do not challenge each other’s politics.” As such, the variability creates space for discussions of often contentious subjects. As El Khoury remarks, “it’s necessary that this art contributes to the already existing discussion on the subject, and produces knowledges that can be used by other people, and that it ends up having a life of its own.” Interestingly enough, this centralization of audience-participants does not eliminate the transfer of information or experience about a place or time that may be outside their own. Rather, because of this individualization, and the interactive nature of the live art medium, those engaged with El Khoury’s work are perhaps even better poised to understand the implications of the histories to which they are exposed.

**Interactivity and Empathy**

In El Khoury’s live artworks, the interactive experience places audience-participants in relational positions with her subjects. Be it feelings of empathy, guilt, anger, frustration, or apathy, El Khoury’s works elicit responses from audience-participants through this direct confrontation, and often intimate engagement, with the lives of her subjects. The audience-participants become implicated in or carriers of the stories to which they are immersed. As such, after their engagement with one of El Khoury’s works, they are left with a choice: they can either brush it off by ignoring or forgetting it, or they can do something about it by sharing the story with someone else or by taking more definitive action. Regardless of what choice audience-participants make, as variable as the individuals themselves, it is a political one. This political stake is more than what El Khoury’s works demand of their audience-participants; it is that in which they inextricably wrap themselves, and it belies the political nature of conducting and sharing research.
In *Stories of Refuge* the viewer is confronted with intimate portraits of the lives of Syrian refugees in Munich, of varying ages and genders (Figure 3). While a simple viewing of these glimpses into the refugee camps might place the viewer in a passive position in relation to these stories, El Khoury’s installation of the videos across from bunk beds, requires audiences to sit or recline while wearing headphones to view the work, propelling audiences to draw parallels between the bunk beds they witness on the videos in the camps and the ones in which they are resting in the gallery space. In the parallels and contrasts between the two situations, audiences are made to both connect with and understand their distance from—and relative privilege with relation to—the individuals to whose lives they are briefly given access. Rather than engaging with the oral histories of these individuals’ experiences as a passive audience in a traditional historical museum context might, or even as a reader of scholarship on the subject might, El Khoury’s audiences are asked to engage more directly, even materially. The form that El Khoury’s work takes closes the distance between audiences and the subject, utilizing material intimacy as the means to transfer knowledge.

When the work was originally shown in 2013, it was installed in a shipping container—referencing the concealed means by which many refugees arrive in the country—on a busy road in Munich. In this way the form of the work reinforced a particular aspect of the oral histories recounted in the videos that audiences would see once inside (Figure 3). By locating the installation outside of a museum context, it drew audience members from the general population of the city in which the work was located (rather than a dedicated art audience).
Doing so drew out the reality that these refugees, often hidden from or misrepresented to the public, are present and a fixture of the Munich community—invoking the social responsibility of community members towards one another. The acknowledgement of this by those who viewed the work was made clear in responses that they left in notebooks placed under pillows on the beds. The notes included welcoming gestures and advice about Munich for the refugees. In subsequent iterations, in the context of a gallery and further afield from Germany, this connection and implication of the viewer may not be as clearly drawn out. However, the pairing of this work with another of El Khoury’s, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2016), as has been done on a number of occasions including at Bryn Mawr College and at the University of Michigan (where I saw the works), makes clear the placement of the burden of refugee stories on us, regardless of where we are located, through a physical marking on the audience-participants’ bodies.

**Interactivity and “Shared Vulnerability”**

While *Stories of Refuge* asked participants to respond and “interact” by leaving notes for the refugees in the videos, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* consists of a one-on-one experience between the audience-participant and a refugee artist, through a wall (Figure 4). It is more exemplary of the interactive live art experience that El Khoury seeks to cultivate. Walking to one side of the wall, the audience-participant puts on a white lab coat with one sleeve missing, sits on a chair, puts headphones on and places their sleeveless arm through a hole in the wall. On the other side of the wall is Basel Zaraa (or Baz), a musician and artist, as well as a refugee two times over. A Palestinian born into the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, the uprising made him a refugee a second time, when he fled to the United Kingdom. The audio on the headphones briefly explains who Baz is and gives the audience-participant instructions on what to do. It then plays a rap song that he recorded, inspired by his sisters’ journey from Damascus to Sweden and translated on the wall. Simultaneously, the artist draws on the audience-participant’s arm—images of refugees carrying luggage or children trailing down their forearm, and figures in a boat resting in their palm.

In placing their arm through the wall, the participant is consenting to be physically marked with the refugee’s story. There is an intimacy in this exchange, enacted both through physical touch and through the trust the participant is showing the refugee in relinquishing their arm to him, answered by the trust Baz puts in the participant by sharing his sisters’ story. In so doing, the participant enters into a space of “shared vulnerability” with the artist-refugee. This physical connection accentuates the participant’s ties to refugees like the ones whose stories they may have just seen in *Stories of Refuge*. At the end of the roughly fifteen-minute interactive performance, the participant pulls their arm back through the wall to reveal that they bear the trace of the refugee experience—not just in the figures that adorn their arm and hand, but in the ink that blots each fingertip, recalling the fingerprinting of refugees upon arrival in a country.

For a brief moment, the audience-participant is then fully confronted with the presence of the refugee subject, when Baz comes around the wall to say a quick thank you and gesture
Figure 4. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass, and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production), and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
to the bowl of water available to wash if one so chooses. It is here that the audience-participant stakes their political position. They can choose to wash any trace of this experience off of them, relegating this experience to a moment. Alternatively, they can choose to bear the physical trace of the story and experience with them, a marking visible to others. They can choose to be the carrier of this story and share it with others. The audience-participant’s arm becomes a document—a primary source whereon a refugee’s story has been written. What they choose to do with this knowledge, passed on in this direct exchange, is up to them—whether to replicate erasures of immigrant stories, using their position of privilege to forget, or to carry that story with them and transmit it to others. Whatever the choice, El Khoury’s work demands that you make one—that you take a stance about your investment in the lives of those individuals who have just opened themselves up to you and become an actor in the process of knowledge transmission.

Regardless of the choice made, it is likely that the refugee’s experience will have gotten under, as much as on, the participant’s skin. Pedagogical studies have shown that students engaged in learning retain information better when they learn through multiple different forms, such as visual, auditory, and tactile. Unlike the readily disposable information about “the refugee crisis” that peppers mass media, oversaturation of which has caused compassion fatigue among viewers, *Stories of Refuge* and *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* confront the audience-participant with a few realities of refugees’ experiences through multiple and unique modes of transmission—through the videos of refugees in Munich, the rap song telling of Baz’s sisters, and the physical drawing on their arm—creating a potentially deeper and longer-lasting impact. Instead of simply reading a scholarly text, listening to a lecture, or watching a documentary—all traditional forms of dissemination of research—the multimodal nature of El Khoury’s works utilizes intimate and experiential means to transmit refugee stories in a way that engages audience-participants and prepares them to be more receptive, making them more aware of their own positions and implications within these realities.

**Intimate Materiality**

*Gardens Speak* and its associated work *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018) also place the audience-participant in a position of intimate relation with the stories of others living through contemporary sociopolitical conflicts. In *Gardens Speak*, each of ten audience-participants lies in the dirt atop one of ten graves, corresponding to the name of an individual marked on the headstone and a card they have been given (Figure 5). Digging into the dirt a bit, each audience-participant uncovers a voice which tells the story of that individual’s death. The narratives of their deaths were compiled from interviews with their families and friends, as well as audio and video footage when available, and otherwise recorded by actors. The individuals whose stories are told are all victims of the Syrian regime, as part of the uprising; they have been buried in gardens because more public funerals in cemeteries increased the risk to survivors.
Once again, El Khoury utilizes intimacy and interactivity to connect the audience-participants to the subjects of her research, and to implicate them in these stories in a way that requires them to take a political stance. In handing each audience-participant a card with a name, they are given a one-to-one relationship with one of the deceased individuals. There is a personal connection formed in being handed an individual who is “yours.” This recalls the interactive experience at some memorial museums wherein visitors are given the identity card of someone who went through the experience memorialized in the institution as a conduit for experiencing the narrative of this history.

This intimacy is accentuated in the choice of actors to read the voices. While the cards with the names are always written in Arabic, so that non-Arabic reading participants must match their cards to headstones according to the visual form of the script, the actors who voice the individuals’ stories do so in the audience’s local language, which changes depending on where the work is exhibited. Beyond the practicalities of comprehension—El Khoury could have overlaid a translated voice on top of the Arabic—the inclusion of actors speaking in the local language connects the listener to the narrator in a way that accentuates their kinship. More than simply translating the research into the local language for legibility, this creates a local intimacy. The locality is also accentuated by the choice of soil—El Khoury always sources it locally; the texture and makeup of it change with the location of the work. The use of local soil
translates the narratives told in the interviews to an intimate context, placing the audience-participant in a position in which they are immersed in a performative engagement with the experiences articulated in the oral histories they hear.

Much like the experience of watching the videos that comprise *Stories of Refuge* from bunk beds, the experiences of listening to the stories that comprise *Gardens Speak* while lying atop “graves” employs material staging to connect the audience-participants with other individuals. At the same time, the artifice of the staging reveals to audience-participants their distinctly privileged positions. At the end of the experience, audience-participants are given the option to write letters to the deceased and bury them for other participants to read; they were also informed that the letters might be shared with the friends and families of those who had passed. The choice to participate is similar to the one in *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*. Participants in *Gardens Speak* can choose to walk away from the experience without writing a letter, or they could write it and refuse to bury it. If they choose to write a letter, especially knowing it could be shared not just with other participants in the project but with the families and friends of those to whom it was written, their political position with regard to the ongoing crisis in Syria, and most importantly its human cost, is not only staked but available for scrutiny by others. They carry the weight of the knowledge compiled by El Khoury and transmitted to them through the work, and then choose what to do with it.

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Tell Me What I Can Do is an installation resulting from the numerous letters that participants have written in response to Gardens Speak—the title drawn from one the letters. The work, which was commissioned for El Khoury’s survey exhibition at Bryn Mawr College, consists of scroll-like compositions of the letters papering the walls, cascading from the ceiling, and flowing onto the ground of the exhibition space (Figure 6). Viewers are encouraged to touch and handle the letters, connecting them not only to the individual author of this response, but also to the original testimony of the deceased. As one viewer of the work noted, “being able to touch a handwritten letter is just so much more profound than reading an article online.” As with Stories of Refuge and As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, the material intimacy involved in the sharing of these stories and the effects they have had on those who have heard them, forges links with viewers in ways that impersonal news stories by international media outlets cannot. They also make visible a community of international solidarity in response to a crisis whose seemingly relentless persistence—going on almost a decade—has removed it from prominence at the forefront of many people’s minds. While inspired by their responses to El Khoury’s artistic research, they produce their own documents of knowledge that others may now learn from through new intimate experiences.

Through examinations that foreground the personal stories of her subjects and the interactivity that the medium of live art affords, Tania El Khoury’s works create intimate, emotional, often empathic or vulnerable experiences for audience-participants that implicate them in the politics operating on people’s lives. The live component of the art gives these stories a lifespan that extends beyond the confines of the exhibition and performance spaces in which they are often staged. These stories live on in the audience members who carry them with them—sometimes physically on their bodies, or as new knowledge, and even as political positionality newly declared. As part of the tradition of research-based practices prevalent in Lebanon and throughout the global contemporary art world, El Khoury sets herself apart by bringing current events, history-in-the-making, to audiences through interactive experiences that connect them to individuals otherwise reduced to news headlines. Her work pushes us to ask ourselves what it is that we can do.

Notes

1. This essay will focus on this trend among Lebanese artists specifically. For some examples of other global contemporary artists engaged in research-based practices, see Morehshin Allahyari, Michael Rakowitz, Bouchra Khalili, Otobong Nkanga, Forensic Architecture, and Dario Robleto.
3. Cotter, 10–11.
4. It is worth noting (as Cotter does) that as many artistic doctoral programs are relatively new, determining the most appropriate form for written components of the dissertation (or equivalent), something that is typically quite standardized, has been a challenge. Ibid, 15.
8. The artists of the Beirut School generation had an impact that continued to be felt among later generations of artists in addition to El Khoury. Wilson-Goldie notes that artists of this younger generation, like Marwa Arsanios, Ahmad Ghossein, and Rayyane Tabet, “have come around to question the kinds of histories their predecessors privileged […] to tell another kind of story, one rooted in private consciousness and autobiographical contexts.” (Wilson-Goldie, “By All Accounts,” 325). She states in reference to these artists, “[h]ere, the documentary turn becomes testimonial” (Wilson-Goldie, 328). Artists of this generation have continued to embed their practices in research, though foregrounding the personal through explorations of their own autobiographical histories. While some of El Khoury’s most recent work has explored this more autobiographical approach to history (as in Cultural Exchange Rate from 2019), most of her work does not centralize her personal narrative the way others of her generation do.


11. El Khoury and Pearson, 125.


15. Lee Smith, “Missing in Action”.


20. Hadjithomas and Joreige have also rooted projects firmly in research, such as The Lebanese Rocket Society (2012) and Khiam (2000–2007).


22. Given Raad’s position at the Cooper Union, an academic institution, this authoritative voice likely persists even when the audience is “in the know” about the fabricated elements of the project.

23. Baumann, 3.

24. There are, of course, limitations to the variability possible. For example, possible responses are limited by the tangible realities of to whom the work is accessible.

25. Uszerowicz, “Challenge and Care.”


28. Cianetti, 22.

29. El Khoury, “As Far As My Fingertips Take Me: In Conversation with Tania El Khoury.”

30. Willis, “Brain-Based Teaching Strategies,” 311.

31. Moisescu.

32. For example, this is the case for student group visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC: “Activities Using the Identification Cards.”

The Artist as Archivist
3 Narrating Syria’s Conflict through Intimate Memories in *Gardens Speak*

Samer Abboud

*To access all audio/visual examples referenced in this essay, please visit the open access version on Fulcrum at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424.*

![Figure 1. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.](image)

“The problem of war and memory,” novelist Viet Nguyen writes, is “first and foremost about how to remember the dead, who cannot speak for themselves.” How can we narrate the intimate memories of those killed in the brutal violence that has engulfed Syria since 2011?
Battlefield analysis offers no account of the hopes and sacrifices of the revolutionaries. But the artist Tania El Khoury makes visible these accounts in her interactive sound installation *Gardens Speak*, comprised of the oral histories of ten Syrians who were killed during the Syrian uprising and buried in a friend’s or relative’s private garden. El Khoury develops these narratives in collaboration with the deceased’s families and friends. She then incorporates them into *Gardens Speak* as an integral sound installation, around which an interactive experience is designed to situate the living in the presence of the dead. *Gardens Speak* asks us to remember the dead through the intimate memories of their hopes and sacrifices for a different Syria. Today, most of our understanding of the Syrian conflict has been reduced to the battlefield, as analysts long ago eulogized the revolution. The intimate memories narrated in *Gardens Speak* move us away from the battlefield, reinscribing individuals and their experiences of Syria’s conflict through personalized narration (Figure 1). Rather than focusing on the battlefield or questions of governance, counterinsurgency, war economies, or other frameworks deployed in the analysis of Syria’s conflict, I use this chapter to ask how the intimate memories disclosed in *Gardens Speak* narrate a story of the Syrian conflict that both situates the deceased at its center and isolates their experiences to a specific period of time (2011–14).2

*Gardens Speak* reminds us of the hope that motivated so many to protest and the sacrifices they made in the name of a different Syria. There are quite literally hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have perished violently since 2011 and millions more who continue to live through the horrors of displacement and insecurity. I contend that *Gardens Speak* provides a unique entry point into narrating Syria’s conflict, first, by atomizing the uprising in individual stories, and, second, by deploying memory through posthumous narration to preserve the revolutionary spirit of the first years of the conflict. Audience-participants can hear and engage intimately with the story of one of ten deceased individuals represented in the work. They can then read the other nine stories in a supplementary publication that accompanies the installation. Placed in conversation with one another, the collective narration offers a more complex representation of Syrian experiences during the conflict.

To begin this chapter, I share some historical background for the conflict focused on some of the broader structural changes that occurred in Syria in the years preceding the uprising. I do not try and answer why the uprising started, but instead try to provide context for why some Syrians chose to revolt and demand the overthrow of the regime. I then briefly situate *Gardens Speak* within the academic field of memory studies by considering it alongside other artistic forms of cultural production about the Syrian conflict, and demonstrate how the forms and strategies of posthumous narration help us understand the Syrian conflict. The conclusion of the chapter considers both the afterlives of *Gardens Speak*, or how the trajectory of the conflict deviated so radically from its original revolutionary path, and how it can be incorporated into undergraduate classrooms.

**Authoritarianism and the Prelude to Revolution and Conflict**

While mass demonstrations demanding regime change began in March 2011, Syria’s uprising had many beginnings; its roots lay in intertwined historical and contemporary processes. It would be convenient to reduce Syria’s uprising to a simple starting point, but as
with climate change or the contagion effect of the Arab uprisings, such reductionism does not sufficiently capture the multiple dynamics behind mobilization. There is no single cause for the Syrian uprising, nor is there a single reason why one individual or another decided to risk their lives to protest against the Syrian regime. The trajectory of the conflict changed the individual and collective calculations of Syrians in relation to the nonviolent and violent opposition as well as to the regime. As we see in *Gardens Speak*, each of the deceased made different choices in relation to events on the ground, sometimes quite literally in their own homes. The question of why the uprising began, therefore, should be redirected towards questions concerning the overlapping contexts of the time.

Since 1963 Syria has been ruled by the Ba’ath party, which came to power after a period of intense postindependence political instability during which a series of crises culminated in the ill-fated union with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (1958–61). The collapse of the Republic intensified Syria’s political crises and climaxed in the 1963 Ba’athist coup. In 1966, an internal coup within the Ba’ath party brought Salah Jadid to power as president. Jadid subsequently appointed one of his accomplices in both coups, Hafiz al-Assad, as defense minister. The disastrous 1967 war with Israel threatened the legitimacy of the party and initiated more internal turmoil. By 1970, al-Assad led a coup against Jadid—what he called a “corrective revolution”—before assuming the presidency in 1971. Hafiz al-Assad was able to achieve stability and prevent his own overthrow through violence, including the initiation of a massacre of citizens in Hama in 1982 after low-intensity conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Hama massacre is an important moment in Syrian history, recalled and expressed by the deceased in *Gardens Speak* as the source of that generation’s fear. Hafiz al-Assad remained president until his death in 2000, after which his 34-year-old son Bashar al-Assad was appointed president and a transition in regime leadership transferred to him.

The coercive apparatus of the Syrian state expanded dramatically in al-Assad’s three decades of rule. As president, he successfully suppressed internal conflict within the Ba’ath party and pacified social groups that threatened his presidency, while also reorienting Syria’s foreign policy towards rapprochement with the Arab Gulf monarchies, principally Saudi Arabia. Al-Assad cultivated wide popular support for his policies and regime by placating formerly hostile or conservative social forces, such as the bourgeoisie, and by incorporating new groups that had previously been excluded from access to state institutions, such as peasants. For example, the post-1970 parliament saw the incorporation of smaller leftist, nationalist, and communist parties into the National Progressive Front (NPF), a Ba’ath-dominated coalition of parties that enjoyed a constitutionally guaranteed majority in the Syrian parliament. Thus, Hafiz al-Assad created a state and party to rule through by way of masking the personalized nature of power.

The regime under Hafiz al-Assad had four pillars of power. The first was the Ba’ath party, which ensured the diffusion of state policy into the villages and governorates. The party also successfully incorporated social forces into party and state institutions, such as trade unions. Such corporatism was the second pillar, or the process through which previously demobilized groups were incorporated into state-controlled associations and provided with material and political benefits. The regime controlled all associational life in Syria; and thus, everything from unions to chambers of commerce were not autonomous from the state. The material benefits accrued from incorporation into associational life created a natural constituency
for the state. The third pillar was the state bureaucracy that employed around a quarter of all Syrian labor, providing the professional classes with access to the state and guaranteed employment. The final pillar of power was the security apparatus, represented by the army and various branches of intelligence. More Syrians were invested in the stability and longevity of al-Assad’s regime than any other of the country’s postcolonial governments.

By the late 1990s changing economic and geopolitical realities restructured state power. The state’s material dependence on a combination of oil revenues and recirculated petrodollars from the Arab Gulf countries was no longer sustainable after a late 1980s oil price decrease severely restricted its budget. The Cold War was over, and the Syrian economy had to be reoriented away from internal production toward external trade with the Soviet bloc to meet the needs of what was popularly known as “globalization.” At the same time, various segments of Syria’s social landscape began to make demands on the government for greater freedoms. As scholar Raymond Hinnebusch observes, the Syrian regime’s model of an authoritarian political economy had become “exhausted.”

In 2000, Bashar al-Assad assumed his father’s position of power, presenting himself to the Syrian public and the world as a Western-educated reformer who would successfully lead Syria into the 21st century. This new century brought about significant and rapid social, political, and economic change in Syria in all facets of everyday life. The Ba’athist economy of old was dismantled through a comprehensive and far-reaching economic reform program that introduced free markets into the economy and reduced the state’s fiscal burden. Motivated by neoliberal reforms, the vaguely defined strategy of the “social market economy” was officially promulgated by the bureaucratic and political elites at the tenth Ba’ath Party Regional Congress in 2005 as the way to balance social needs with a market economy. This new “social market economy” emerged from private interests, charities, and businesses through a belief that the private sector would be the new engine of employment and growth for a newly reformed “civil society.”

Despite repeated reassurances to the contrary, living standards deteriorated for many Syrians. Unemployment was rampant, salaries did not increase commensurate with prices, and previously public functions, such as education, slowly shifted to the private sector. The encouragement of private interests was a way to alleviate the fiscal pressure on the state to provide services to the population. Nonprofit civil society organizations developed, but these were mostly confined to charities that took on explicitly apolitical charitable causes. All legal civil society organizations were subject to strict state regulation through the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor and were presided over by the president’s wife, Asma al-Assad, who assumed patronage for all NGOs. A more appropriate term used to describe these organizations was government nongovernmental organizations (GoNGOs) because of the state’s control over activities.

Disenfranchisement of State Opposition and Non-State Activity

In this climate of perceived openness to charitable organizations, some civil society groups attempted to form and advocate for explicitly political issues. Some advocacy or rights-based groups did emerge in the early 2000s but the legal obstacles to institutionalization prevented
their widespread growth. Political discussion was severely restricted and associated activity was confined to charitable organizations that did not make political demands on state authorities. The Statement of 1,000, a public statement signed by activists and intellectuals demanding greater political freedom, grew out of some of the cultural forums that emerged in the 2000s, and gave some hope for the possibility of more open political discussion. This, however, was quickly reversed when the regime closed down the forums and repressed many of the Statement’s signatories. Thus, on the eve of the uprising, there were few, if any, institutional spaces in which Syrians could advocate for rights, make political demands, or generally engage meaningfully with the state on issues of social and political concern.

In the absence of political parties, NGOs, and professional associations to mobilize the population against the regime, the outbreak of protests in March 2011 was spontaneous and unorganized. Many of the first protests in Daraa were in response to the arrest and torture of school children who had spray-painted what was already a shared slogan of the Arab uprisings (“The people want the downfall of the regime”) on a wall. Within weeks, however, protests had spread throughout the country but the lack of institutions to organize protests made their mobilization difficult. Nevertheless, protests continued. The regime responded with a dual strategy of continued repression and cosmetic reforms meant to placate protestors. These included repealing emergency laws, extending citizenship to stateless Syrian Kurds, releasing some political prisoners, and guaranteeing wage increases for public sector workers. The cycle of protest and repression was initiated very early on. As more people died, more people came out to protest. By late summer 2011, many Syrians had begun to engage in violence against regime soldiers. But a robust revolutionary movement was coming into being that was committed to nonviolence and the revolutionary organization of society. The tension between these revolutionaries, the armed actors, and the regime, would shape the trajectory of the first few years of the uprising.

Memory Making and the Revolutionary Subject

Despite its unique reliance on posthumous narration, Gardens Speak shares an emphasis on individual testimony with other forms of cultural production and artistic expression. Syrian cultural life has flourished during the conflict, as artists produce plays, songs, films, and other expressions that bear witness to the collective Syrian experience. Ramzi Shoukair and Wael Kaddour’s X-Adra, for example, is a play that dramatizes the testimonies of Syrian detainees who suffered torture in different prisons. Here, the actual Adra prison serves as a stand-in for all Syrian prisons. Similarly, Aurélie Ruby’s Winter Guests is a three-act play in which Syrian refugees share their stories and experiences in exile. Anis Hamdoun’s play The Trip centers around the real lives of Mazhar Tayyara and Oussam al-Habali during the regime massacre of civilians in the al-Khaladiyyah neighborhood of Homs in February 2012. During the intense shelling of the neighborhood, Tayyara is killed; and, while al-Habali survives, he is eventually detained in a regime prison where he is eventually murdered. As in these productions, Gardens Speak centers the individual experience as a way for audiences to gain access to the Syrian conflict. Similarly, Gardens Speak deploys narratives of hope and sacrifice to tell this story. In doing so, audience-participants bear witness to the
suffering of Syrians and the dreams for a different future that drove them to engage in the political activity that led to their deaths. The revolutionary subjects in Gardens Speak share commonalities with the individuals of countless other Syrian productions since 2011.

Gardens Speak takes audiences back to a revolutionary moment when the choice between reform, revolution, or the regime was being debated among Syrians. How an individual chose whether to support reform, revolution, or the regime occurred within the broader contexts of the Arab uprisings which began in Tunisia in late 2010. “Memory makers,” including El Khoury, focus their narratives on the individual revolutionary subject, negotiating this choice at a particular moment in time. The landscape of cultural production and memory making in the Arab world shifts toward those who favor individual experience, rather than through the grand narratives associated with the anticolonial struggle that stressed the homogeneity and destiny of a national collective. This new approach constructed a story through the disjointed and fragmented narratives of the individuals participating in the uprisings, instead of sewing them together coherently into a linear narrative. The linear narrative lends itself more conveniently to a national story, one that can end in independence and statehood; the story of the uprisings is yet to be fully written. Social historian of the Arab Middle East Sune Haugbolle argues that the uprisings shifted memory making from the national framework and its anticolonial struggle toward an interest in the histories and memories of the individual revolts. Postcolonial memory making emphasized the struggles of the nation as a collective entity, whereas memory making today focuses on the struggles of individuals against overlapping forms of oppression, including their own governments, armed groups, external military actors, and poverty. This shift from the national to the revolutionary subject simultaneously involved the fragmentation of narrative and memory expressed through thousands of new forms of cultural production. By emphasizing individuals and their experiences in the uprising, memory makers seek to restore hope and to capture the moments within the uprisings that portended a different future.

One of these examples from Gardens Speak revolves around the tension between the strategic choices of violence and nonviolence as represented in the narrative of Jalal al-Lattuf. He tells us that he “kept believing that protests not arms were the basis of the revolution.” He then reveals the ubiquity of death and his efforts to help the injured and to bury the deceased. As in other accounts, al-Lattuf elevates the importance of revolutionary sound as a means to overcome shelling and violence: “I thought that maybe our singing could be louder than the sounds of death...” However, and without sufficient explanation, we are quickly transported with al-Lattuf to the frontlines. This is no accident, as the narrative situates him as an armed fighter who was trying to prevent the army from entering Talbiseh. Violence is presented here as defensive and not predatory, as protecting his community rather than exploiting it. We see here in the individual tension over the strategic choice of violence a broader conflict among Syrian revolutionaries over the use of arms.

The individual revolutionary subject has become a central motif of Syrian cultural production during the conflict. Novels, memoirs, and other testimonies of the displaced have
produced a polyphonic landscape of individual narratives of the conflict. The principal difference between this vast archive and Gardens Speak is that the latter relies on posthumous narration to tell the stories of the individual. It is the strange, insistently embodied present tense of now-deceased voices that enshrines its hopefulness. The nostalgic politics of contemporary narratives is absent; and instead, emphasis is placed on hope and sacrifice driven by a vision of the future, not the actual reality of Syria’s devastation, which deviates from how Syrian cultural production today celebrates the uprising while mourning its trajectory. Contemporary memory making around the Syrian conflict is structured around a possible past or a what could have been, while in Gardens Speak the deceased narrate a possible future of what could still be. These anticipated futures contrast with earlier forms of cultural production that glorified the past.

Unlike other individual accounts of the Syrian conflict that focus on the stories of the living, Gardens Speak turns our attention to the stories of the deceased. In each case, the shift involved is from the conflict as a set of geopolitical contestations or battlefield calculations, to one of the granularity of daily life and the insecurities produced by war. These testimonials provide a stark contrast to the ways in which we tend to talk about the Syrian conflict in the West as a series of battles between Russian and Iranian proxies against Western, Turkish, and Gulf Arab proxies. The narratives of the living reveal the day-to-day of the uprising and the affective disorder of trying to retain hope while experiencing violence and displacement. Dialogue between the living is shaped by the benefits of retrospection in which specific trajectories and outcomes can be normalized. The narratives of the living tend to focus on hope lost. Yet, when we switch narration to the dead, we see how hope is articulated through their sacrifice. They died for a future Syria that they imagine manifesting long after they are gone. The hope with which they died is preserved for us, the living, to contemplate.

The form of posthumous narration deployed in Gardens Speak shifts the focus and puts the living into conversation with the dead. In doing so, the style of Gardens Speak produces new forms and methods of memory making. The collaboration between the living and the dead has three principal layers in Gardens Speak. The first refers to the actual circumstances surrounding the death and burial of the narrators. El Khoury describes the installation in the following terms:

By concealing the bodies of martyrs under the soil, these gardens play out a continuing collaboration between the living and the dead. The dead protected the living by not exposing them to further danger at the hands of the regime, which began to target funerals very early on in the uprising. The living protected the dead by concealing their identities and their stories; not allowing their deaths to become instrumentalized by the regime in its attempts to alter reality and shape the discourse about why and how they died.

The second layer of collaboration occurs between the artist and the families and friends of the deceased: “each narrative has been carefully constructed with the friends and family members of the deceased to retell their stories, as they themselves may have recounted it.” And, finally, the third layer is between the recountings of the deceased and the
audience-participants. El Khoury invites all audience members to reflect on the performance with the following prompt:

I invite you to go and sit facing the tombstone where you laid, just like a relative or a friend would do when visiting the grave of a loved one. Use this page to write a letter addressed to the martyr whose story you just heard. Your letter may be shared with their surviving family and friends.20

Figure 2. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

Gardens Speak brings together the living and the dead to collectively bear witness to the Syrian revolution and to the absence created by the death of so many. In bearing witness, the audience members “contribute to the collective mourning and remembering of activists and ordinary Syrians who revolted and, as a result, were killed by the regime.”21 On the aesthetic and performative levels, the installation represents the burial of the deceased in their (or their friends’, families’, or relatives’) gardens as a common practice in Syria for the living to protect the dead from continued regime violence. The aesthetic of the installation thus demands our intimate engagement with the deceased, rather than our separation from them. When audience members enter the installation, they find a plot of ten graves marked by wooden tombstones containing the names of the deceased. The tombstones
lack permanency and identify the graves for what they are in Syria: hastily constructed burial sites. The audience is required to wear protective layering and then lie or kneel on the ground and slowly remove the dirt from near the makeshift tombstones before they can hear the deceased’s story (Figure 2). Audience members lie with their heads near the tombstone and listen to the stories of the deceased. Only ten people are permitted entry at a time (one audience member for each of the deceased). As such, audiences’ interactions are restricted to engage in a single story. The physicality of the installation and the limitations placed on audiences hearing only one narrative render the performance a profoundly intimate one. By bearing witness to only one story, each audience member is unable to place the experience within a broader context or in relation to the other martyrs. The memories they hear are individual ones; they are fragmented and disconnected from the others, even as audience-participants nevertheless retain awareness of the presence of other narratives. The intimacy of the installation forces audiences to think and engage deeply with only one narrative despite being surrounded by so many others.

In structuring the installation in this way, El Khoury allows us to bear witness by elevating the experiences and emotions of Syria’s revolutionaries to history. The experiences of individuals moves us away from the geopolitical narratives about regional rivalries and proxy wars that mostly dominate popular narratives about the historical conflict. Rather, the intimacy of the installation and the singularity of the experience for audience members enables participants to envision an alternative Syrian future, one built on the hope of the revolutionaries and the expectations that their sacrifices would not have been in vain. Bearing witness to this hope and sacrifice reorients us away from the battlefield and towards the affective states of revolutionaries.

**Narrating Syria’s Conflict through Posthumous Narration**

El Khoury describes the aims of *Gardens Speak* as such:

> Telling stories of the dead can become an act of resistance against the regime’s attempt to dehumanize the dead. *Gardens Speak* is an archive of stories from the first two years of the Syrian uprising, when many hopes, dreams, and lives were crushed by the brutality of the regime’s crackdown on protestors.  

Posthumous narration and periodization of *Gardens Speak* are pedagogically relevant frameworks through which to explore the Syrian conflict, precisely at the moment noted above when many revolutionaries’ hopes for future political change are strongest. The first two years of the uprising marked a period of intense hope and possibility, where the likelihood of regime contraction or collapse was at its highest. Foreign fighters had not yet deeply penetrated the armed opposition. A nonviolent movement aimed at the reorganization of Syrian society along revolutionary lines existed and had taken on governance responsibilities in various Syrian locales. *Gardens Speak* captures the hope and possibility of this moment, not the despair and massive displacement that followed. While some narratives of
the deceased allude to the trajectory of the conflict, most are predicated upon a moment of hope, one in which their sacrifices for a free, liberated Syria remain possible. Indeed, Tania El Khoury’s central project is how to narrate the conflict from the perspective of “the aspirations of the early days of the Syrian uprising.”

How to narrate the conflict is a central question for memory makers. In structuring a narrative about the conflict from the perspective of the first two years, Gardens Speak intervenes into narrative wars operating in parallel to the actual conflict. The narrative wars involve intense and complicated debates about the origins and trajectory of the conflict as well as the roles that different actors have played in fomenting violence. According to Bassam Haddad, a prominent and widely read observer of contemporary Syrian politics, the narrative wars have reached maximalist positions and have hardened, so much so that they are incapable of incorporating alternative perspectives in their respective analyses of the Syrian conflict. The framing of the Syrian uprising as either a “pure and consistent revolution,” or as an “external conspiracy,” leaves little room for understanding the diversity and complexity of individual experiences during the conflict. Moreover, these narrative dead ends prevent us from seeing shifts in the trajectory of the conflict. Gardens Speak introduces us to the diversity of experience and politics of the first two years of the uprising. It draws equally on the narratives of people who participated in nonviolence as well as those who took up arms against the regime. This approach helps us think beyond the narrative wars toward the experiences of individuals who made specific choices that shaped the conflict’s trajectory. We are not asked to judge these choices or to fully understand them, but, rather, to hear them and potentially empathize with the individuals and their desire for a better world. Much like other forms of Syrian cultural production, Gardens Speak is an attempt to reinscribe individual narratives of revolutionary actors into a communal narrative of the Syrian conflict so that they are not lost to the violence of the conflict.

In Gardens Speak the represented deceased are mostly young people who narrate a future inspired by hope and freedom. El Khoury constructed these narratives through sustained contact and communication with the friends and relatives of the deceased. The represented are not archetypes but real people whose emotions and experiences of the revolution are reconstructed through dialogue between the artist and those closest to them. This dialogue thus produces representations that reflect how the living want the deceased to be remembered, as people who gave their lives for others in the hope for a free Syria. Even Abu Khaled (a pseudonym), a 40-year-old father of four, narrates through his hopes for his children (Figure 3). Abu Khaled’s narration, like most of the accounts in Gardens Speak, speaks in intergenerational terms. Here, time is extended into a hopeful future but also backwards into a violent past. The specifically intergenerational temporality of the narratives underscores the continuities of violence relived, especially through the specter of Hama, as if reliving the Syrian regime’s massacre of residents in the early 1980s. Salwa Ismail, a scholar of contemporary Syria, argues that the Hama massacre was a form of governmental violence central to the regime’s rule. The infliction of horrific violence on the population was intended to affect the subjectivity of Syrian citizens in relation to the regime, to render citizens subservient to, and fearful of, regime violence. This new subjectivity was realized through the affective states of Syrian citizens, whose fear and worry about “another Hama”
structured their relations with the regime. Ismail advances the idea of anticipated subjectivity to refer to how people’s interactions were mediated by a subject that was not present. For Ismail, the threat of a massacre like what happened in Hama mediates interactions between Syrians during the current conflict.

Figure 3. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak [Abu Khaled audio excerpt], 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Audio: 2:32–4:03 min. Courtesy of the artist. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.5138jh749

The anticipated massacre of another Hama is reflected throughout the narratives in Gardens Speak. Ayat al-Qassab, for example, recalls what her dad used to tell her: “None of you knows the regime’s oppression like I do. If you knew what happened in the 1980s you would forgive my fear.” In a reflection on why Aleppines did not immediately take to the streets, Mustafa Karmani speculates that “maybe it was because of the suffering it [Aleppo] experienced under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad when the Muslim Brotherhood rose up in the 1980s and the security forces killed hundreds.” For Abu Khalid, the fear of another Hama was not something to be anticipated but something that was actually lived: “I would have preferred if my dad, my uncle, and many of my neighbours had not died as martyrs in the 1982 Hama massacre.” At the end of his story, Abu Khalid worries about his children’s future, collapsing time and the experiences of his father, uncle, neighbors, and children into one shared experience: “I wonder if they [his children] will always remember that their father died a martyr. Or maybe they won’t know anything at all while they live under the rule of Hafiz, the son of Bashar al-Asad.” Abu Khalid’s fear is that the Assad family will
continue to rule Syria and that the succession from father to son to grandson will never be broken.

All of the deceased in Gardens Speak overwhelmingly express the hope and desire not to have died in vain like those in Hama, but they also express regret about not being able to have had a proper funeral. On the one hand, the regret is personal and reflects the loss of a loved one, who speaks on behalf of the deceased and inserts their wish for the lost family member or friend. On the other hand, this regret is also deeply political because the deceased’s family desires a revolutionary funeral in which residents sing and chant revolutionary slogans. The revolutionary funeral appears to us here as the fuel of the revolution and as what gives people a shared sense of sacrifice and hope to continue fighting. Shayna Silverstein, an ethnomusicologist whose research explores Syrian dance, has detailed how in the early stages of the revolution, protestors performed what she calls “radical dabke” at protests and funerals. Rather than mourning loss, protestors turned funerals into moments of collective protest as “the euphoria of collective movement emerges in the wake of trauma.”

The blurring of the lines between a protest, wedding, or funeral, renders collective dance not only celebratory but intensely political as a physical embodiment of the revolutionary demands for freedom and dignity.

The desire for revolutionary song and movement saturates the narratives of the deceased. Indeed, almost all of the narratives expressed some form of sadness that their burial was not turned into a revolutionary act. In these moments around the burials themselves, audiences are reminded that the narratives reflect how the living remember the funeral as both a personal and political loss. Ayat al-Qassab, a resident of the impoverished Karm al-Zaytoun neighborhood of Homs where she is now buried, speaks of a young life committed to the Syrian revolution. Having lost her two brothers Ahmad and Abdallah to regime violence, she marries a revolutionary:

I thought that maybe by being with him I can continue to be part of the revolution. And I thought that maybe tomorrow, if I have a little girl with him, she can live freely in the country that I hope the revolution would build.

Her life was cut short at the age of 15—the age of her marriage, pregnancy, and martyrdom—when a shell landed in her house and took her and her father’s lives. She was buried in the family garden along with her brothers by three men who buried her in silence. The friends and family who helped construct her narrative use the funeral to express their own sadness that the burial could not have been turned into a revolutionary act: “I wished they said something; anything. Or sang a revolutionary song, turning my burial into a protest just like what happened the day my brothers were buried. Just like they sang for the other martyrs.”

Similarly, Abdul Wahid al-Dandashi expresses regret, not anger, that his funeral was silent: “I wasn’t upset that they didn’t sing for me... There was no noise other than the sound of shelling and that of the soil falling on me.”

Throughout the burials, the sound of shelling dominates the soundscape and keeps burials short and silent. Mustafa Karmani’s burial is recounted in this way: “They couldn’t give me a funeral procession or a demonstration like we did for all the other martyrs. I was buried very quickly with ten other martyrs who were killed by the same shell.” Jalal al-Lattuf states bluntly that “they didn’t sing for me the
day of my burial. The funeral never turned into a protest." Ultimately, the regret embodied in the collective narratives is not that they were committed to the revolution, but rather, that their deaths could not have been used as a revolutionary act.

The story of Bayan (a pseudonym that also means “statement”) also expresses regret about having died and been buried under the sound of shelling and not revolutionary song. She states: “I would have definitely preferred to hear the sounds of chants on my way to my burial just like the other martyrs.” Having been forced to change her name three times during the revolution so that the regime would not discover her, she was eventually buried on top of the coffin of a friend’s relative without a tombstone. Her family was forced to flee the area; and, to this day, they have never discussed her revolutionary activity for fear of regime retribution. Bayan, a committed revolutionary who left her teaching career to provide relief work to protestors, remains anonymous in her revolutionary life and her death.

One of the principal contrasts between the narratives is that not all of them demonstrate a commitment to nonviolent revolution. One of the common narratives about the trajectory of the Syrian conflict is that it began as a revolution that morphed into a violent civil war. The assumption of this narrative is that the revolution was totally supplanted by armed groups who destroyed the nonviolent movement. Gardens Speak reinscribes the violence onto nonviolent subjectivities and experiences of revolutionary individuals, reminding us that the relationship between the violent and nonviolent movements existed in tension with each other and that the choice for Syrians was not an easy one. In other words, we should not understand the Syrian conflict as simply beginning nonviolently and then transforming into a violent conflict. Rather, Gardens Speak reminds us that violent and nonviolent politics existed alongside each other all along.

The story of Hassan helps us understand how the uprising became militarized by situating the revolution and revolutionaries within an increasingly militarized and hostile environment. As a Syrian Palestinian, Hassan was raised in the Yarmouk refugee camp. Despite intense regime bombardment of the camp in late 2012, Hassan and many of his friends stayed and tried to overcome the two sieges he experienced: “one from the regime on the outside, and one from the inside.” The Free Syrian Army (FSA) maintained the “inside” siege by actively arresting revolutionaries and curtailing their activities, while the Syrian regime was “outside” the siege area also arresting revolutionaries. Hassan’s story dispels the notion that armed groups were supportive of the nonviolent movement. Hassan states that these dual sieges limited their choices as activists and, eventually, he was forced to leave with his wife Wa’d. Hassan was arrested by regime soldiers at a checkpoint and eventually tortured to death in prison.

In contrast, Ahmad Bawwabi’s narrative celebrates the emergence of the armed groups: “I was really happy about this [armed activities] at first because the Free Syrian Army was able to take on the regime and liberate Bustan al-Qasr.” Bawwabi’s narrative describes the armed and nonviolent activities as operating in harmony toward liberation. His narrative is complex and dynamic, moving between a celebration of both the armed and nonviolent activities despite never taking up arms himself. Instead, Bawwabi saw his role in the revolution as building a foundation for a new educational system in Syria. As he began organizing in his community, ISIS emerged in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Here, we are introduced to ISIS as an antirevolutionary force which began “harassing the community and attacking civilian activists, just like the regime did.” Bawwabi’s condemnation of
ISIS’s violence is not extended to that of the FSA, which he understood as an organic part of the revolution.

If Bawwabi believed that oppositional violence to the regime was something to celebrate, Bilal al-Naimi, a brigade leader actively engaged in violence, presents the descent into violence as an unfortunate but inevitable reaction to the regime’s violence. Al-Naimi first picks up a rifle during a demonstration after a regime massacre of residents in the al-Khalidiyya neighborhood of Homs. He then tells us that:

You probably don’t understand our relationship with guns. But you can understand that we see ourselves as fighters protecting our families and country. We were just protecting the demonstrations. Bit by bit, everything changed. There was more death than anything we could imagine. We could no longer see the checkpoint, which detained and killed our loved ones, and not do anything.  

Here, al-Naimi describes violence as an inevitable outcome of regime repression. How else could Syrians respond when they were constantly under attack and their mobility was limited by checkpoints? The dilemmas posed by al-Naimi’s experiences are those that Syrians struggled with throughout the first years of the conflict.

The sole narrative to forecast violence into Syria’s future that portends the humanitarian catastrophe is that by Basil Shehadeh, an amateur filmmaker from Damascus whose productions had reached audiences inside and outside of Syria. Unlike the other deceased, Basil was afforded a funeral in Damascus (even though he was martyred and buried in Homs). At his funeral, friends recited Christian prayers and read verses from the Qu’ran. They sang not a revolutionary song but the Syrian national anthem. Basil is the only one of the deceased to narrate his funeral in this way. After his funeral, Basil tells us:

I died when the revolution was in its height. I died before the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) appeared. They are hijacking the revolution and detaining its activists… I wish I could be standing with my friends today, chanting against both the regime and the Islamic State.  

*Gardens Speak*’s engagement with the issue of militarization serves an important function in helping us problematize the role of the armed groups in relation to the revolution. Individually, the testimonies encourage us not to equate the armed groups with the revolution but to realize how militarization hurt the revolutionaries. With the exception of references to ISIS, none of the narratives imagine the future of prolific violence that engulfed Syria after 2013. As such, the collective effect of the narrations, when read alongside each other, is to distinguish the politics of the revolutionaries and the armed groups from each other.

*Gardens Speak*’s *Afterlives*

*Gardens Speak* contributes to the narrative of Syria’s conflict by introducing audiences to the intimate memories of ten Syrians who died in the first years of the revolution. These intimate memories reveal an intense hope for a free Syria liberated from authoritarian rule.
The hopes and sacrifices of the deceased are revealed to us through an interactive art installation that brings the living into conversation with the deceased. Through its method of posthumous narration, *Gardens Speak* freezes the Syrian conflict in a moment of time. While gesturing towards a future in which ISIS and other armed groups propel further violence and misery in Syria, the accounts shared in *Gardens Speak* are confined to a specific moment in the Syrian conflict of intense revolutionary activity in which Syrians who were engaged in violent or nonviolent activity believed that in either case they were bringing about a new world and a new Syria.

As we, the living, now know, the free Syria of which the deceased dreamed has not been realized. Instead, the conflict has assumed an even more brutal and violent trajectory that has not led to freedom or even a negotiated peace, but rather an “authoritarian peace” that has ensured the persistence of enmity and state violence against the citizenry for years to come. *Gardens Speak* reminds us that this was not a predetermined trajectory and that the Syrian conflict was initially driven by the revolutionary fervor of everyday Syrians who hoped and sacrificed so that a new generation of Syrians could live freer lives. As we move further and further away from the initial revolutionary moment in Syria, and analysts do their utmost to eulogize the revolution, *Gardens Speak* serves as a reminder of the revolutionary potential that many Syrians remember.

![Figure 4](image_url). *Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College.* Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
In this way, *Gardens Speak* is an ideal entry point for thinking about the origins and trajectory of the Syrian conflict. The narratives do not present that trajectory in linear terms. Rather, collectively, the narratives introduce us to the everyday decisions that people made during the conflict and the deep desire they had to propel the revolution to victory (Figure 3). For students of the Syrian conflict, *Gardens Speak* shows the complexity of individual decision-making during the conflict while situating the individual within a fearful past (such as the Hama massacre), a violent present, and a hoped-for future. As the conflict remains mired in violence and the regime and its allies declare “victory,” we would all benefit from the reminder of what Syria’s revolutionaries wanted and deserved—something much more for their sacrifices. *Gardens Speak* preserves the integrity of the revolutionaries’ experiences and protects them from the violent trajectory of the conflict. We, the living, preserve these intimately shared memories. In providing this encounter between the living and the dead, El Khoury reminds us that Syria had, and may still have, many other possible futures. After hearing the narratives of the deceased, audience-participants are given the opportunity to write a letter to the deceased which may be shared with their families. We, the living, are brought into conversation with the deceased and their families so that we too can mourn for them. And as we mourn for them, we also are forced to reflect on the hope that drove the sacrifices made by these revolutionaries and to carry with us their dreams (Figure 4).

Such dialogues between the living and the dead provide important entry points into learning about Syria, specifically, and the field of memory studies more broadly. In a co-taught course on conflict and the arts of memory, the use of texts and productions such as those in *Gardens Speak* provided students with deeper understandings of how we memorialize conflicts at specific moments in time. Moreover, students had the opportunity to interrogate key questions in memory studies, especially those concerning who gets to narrate the stories of the deceased, by drawing on the forms of artistic choice deployed in *Gardens Speak* and the involvement of friends and family in the final production. *Gardens Speak* embodies an important counterpoint to forms of memory making produced by survivors of conflicts or their descendants by isolating a conflict to a specific moment. This choice of periodization is extremely relevant in *Gardens Speak* as it captures the hope and revolutionary subjectivity of the deceased. This subjectivity is ever more important today as retellings of the Syrian conflict increasingly erase the experiences of the revolutionaries, instead framing the conflict as one that began and will end as a regional proxy war.

*Gardens Speak* operates as an important antidote to national forms of memory making that dominate memory studies by centering the experiences of individuals. These stories present important teaching opportunities for demonstrating the ways in which memory is fragmented, contested, and malleable in the process of historicization. The contrast with national forms of memory making is important here. Whereas the nation appears to have one destiny and one common trajectory by way of the collective memorial narrative emblematic in national monuments, history-telling, and other forms of memory making, this is an illusion that covers over the experiences and memories of the multitudes that populate the nation, which are many and often divergent. Speaking through the individual, as *Gardens Speak* does, creates forms of memory outside of the collective and
allows students to query the importance of individual experiences in the process of memory making, especially when these are memories of conflict. Students in our class approached memory in collectivist terms, understanding memory at the beginning as something naturalized and reinforced through forms of cultural production. Memory may be contested, but the space for contestation is limited. After engaging in literature and other forms of cultural production that center the individual, however, they began to develop the tools to deconstruct collective notions of memory that present specific communities as consistent in their understanding and experience of conflicts. As a pedagogical tool, then, Gardens Speak moves us towards denationalized, individualized forms of memory making. The production thus serves as an excellent entry point into a critique of national memory making that can direct students to new ways of understanding the importance of individual experience.

Notes

3. See Seale, Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East.
5. See Hinnebusch, Peasant and Bureaucracy in Ba’athist Syria; Hinnebusch, Authoritarian Power and State Formation in Ba’athist Syria.
10. See Landis and Pace, “The Syrian Opposition.”
12. An excellent digital archive of Syrian cultural production during the conflict can be found at the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution website.
13. See Haugbolle, “Memory Studies in the Middle East.”
15. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 57.
16. El Khoury, 57.
17. See Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution website.
18. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 1.
20. El Khoury, 64.
22. El Khoury, 1.
23. See Munif.
25. See Haddad, “The Debate over Syria Has Reached a Dead End.”
29. El Khoury, 50.
30. El Khoury, 53.
33. El Khoury, 11.
34. El Khoury, 23.
35. El Khoury, 29.
36. El Khoury, 58.
37. El Khoury, 35.
38. El Khoury, 61.
40. El Khoury, 40.
41. El Khoury, 46.
42. El Khoury, 18.
43. See Abboud, *Syria*. 
If “the archival spirit of our time reflects a fertile and iterative urge to frame archives anew in a way that is not monolithic,” at the heart of such a new modality is the archival encounter, both in popular culture and in contemporary art practice. Archives are mobilized in projects which bring the self to the archive as an active agent, facilitated by intermediaries, including creative practitioners. These mediated encounters serve to rehabilitate aspects of individual and collective memory, and indeed to connect individual memory with collective memory. What we do with our archives—and what we ask them to be—is a mirror held up to us collectively, as the past is brought into the present, as a reflection of ourselves, shaped as we are by forces of colonialism and imperialism. In this chapter I will consider some aspects of the archival encounter, and of creative archival practices, as a context for the analyses of the work of Tania El Khoury elsewhere in this reader. Framing these mobilized selfhoods as viewer-participants, rather than as users or consumers of archive material, I will reference some of the ways that dynamic subjectivity shapes work with archives, and the shifts in the ways that these perspectives both respond to and remake the archive, in increasingly digital forms and realms. This framing of the archive is based on two contentions: Sue McKemmish’s observation that “recordkeeping as cultural memory evidences the past in ways which link significantly to the here and now of individual lives, carrying a personal archive beyond the boundaries of an individual life”; and J.J. Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell’s that “at its strongest, archival power is the power to decide what is and what is not a serious object of research, and, therefore, of mention or thought.” My understanding and presentation of the archive is framed by my perspectives and positionality, as a practicing archivist from the U.K. archival tradition, as an active researcher in critical archive studies, and art and design history, and as a white British woman.

Here, I draw particularly on research into the presentation of archives in archive-themed special issues of journals from disciplines outside archive studies from the height of the “archival turn,” to contribute to literature reconciling the archive of critical theory with the archive that is a physical place of work and of making, and of action, not stasis. In her doctoral work on the entanglements of archives and curation, researcher and curator Liz
Bruchet describes the archive as “a highly complex and pluralistic construct that draws on many knowledge paradigms, histories and contexts of practice.” This chapter focuses on a small selection of public manifestations of the archive, which evidence activities that, in common with academic research, are practices of taking stock of cultural merchandise, as well as of the personal baggage often tagged onto it, and attempting to re-establish its value anew… it is a way of finding ourselves… through an activity where subject and object are interwoven enough to become indistinguishable.

The currency of the archive in all kinds of popular contexts online, in the media, and in public spaces such as exhibitions, has accelerated a democratization of archives, and an increasing porosity in the boundaries of the spaces that hold and frame them, and in the means by which they are accessed. Multiple factors are at play here, but digitality has, as historian Michael Lynch observed in the last century “disrupt[ed] the traditional exclusiveness of scholarly access [to archives],” and sociologist Harriet Bradley qualifies as driven by “an inversion of the public/private relationship as the contents of the great storehouses of the public sphere flow into the living spaces of private individuals.” Such early assessments pointed to the democratization of access to archives in the U.K., which has driven the practical agendas of archives, and the funding landscape, ever further in the last twenty years, bringing more digitized content into the public sphere and enabling unprecedented individual engagement with archival content in some form. In this archive without walls (after André Malraux’s “museum without walls”), what is the value of the wider contexts of archives and their theories and practices, which contribute to the understanding of the forms, functions, and meanings of the archive?

We can consider its more public engagements in relation to themes in the academic literature, whose focus on the digital points to how we conceive archives in the contemporary moment, and therefore how such characteristics reflect back, either to assimilate or to repel, its binary the analog archive. Firstly, there is a popular notion that the digital archive, freed from the exclusivities of the physical institution, can be all-encompassing. Digital humanities scholars Patricia Prieto Blanco, Mirjami Schuppert, and Jake Lange write that [digital] archives “aim for completeness, at recording everything, being the complete picture of something,” while literary and information scholar Paul Genoni and literary scholar Tanya Dalziell, reflecting on the global ambition of the internet to be the world’s archive, and Google its memory, have observed that the archive as it has been known comes to look inefficient, inactive, indifferent, inaccessible, anti-democratic and in need of a spring clean. The online form, by contrast, promises something better, something more alive, liberal and affective, and as a result begins to shift what is meant by, what comprises and who can assume access to ‘the archive.’

Secondly, once released from the constraints of context within an archive collection, a digitized archive item can appear in multiple places and contexts on the web, removed from
its originary meaning to a variety of contingent locations. Researchers accumulate their own “archives” of primary resources, which are connected around the focal point of their subjective research. That material may also be held in sets produced by digital humanities research that presents archive material in new forms and groupings. This, as the same writers point out, is “an archive without an archivist and an archive without limits… the concept of something being ‘in’ an (or the) archive is erased by the possibility that there may be nothing that is beyond its reach.” A similar vision is expressed by Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, for whom “the distributed, expanded archive of the social media sites is haunted by the absence of a central archivist, whose very absence is compensated for (and overcome) by a becoming archivist of everyone.”

A third characteristic of the digital archive is that it is unfixed. Media theorist Joanna Zylinska discusses the metaphor of liquidity as a “model for understanding cultural objects as permanently unfixed and unfixable.” Her assertion that even analog photographs were always unstable, or only temporarily stabilized, applies equally to a wider range of analog archive objects. It is also a useful concept for thinking about the digital, and the emphasis that the process of digitization places on the materialities of the archive; and also, more significantly here, as a metaphor for the process of encounter, where the different forms of data that now constitute the digital archive object can be technically reconfigured, while a user may selectively connect with parts of the archive’s content, reconfiguring this content around the central node of their own subjectivity, be it their family history or an academic research project. Such “multiple and provisional narratives” are not, and never were, fixed in the analog archive, though the infrastructures of the archive and historical tradition might present as exclusive monocultures. Now, the digital harnesses and advertises its unfixedness and, indeed, even builds new structures around extracted archive content, to hold it in place, in a new place, which may be but one place of many. Archival scholar Laura Millar articulates the change in this archival memory process in the digital age: now, “memory can be kept anywhere; it can be kept everywhere. Information is ‘created’ anew whenever needed, by pulling together the bits and bytes of data, words and ideas, to construct an answer to the question put to the computer.”

There are two contradictory tendencies in this literature about the archive: to talk of its availability, its total reach, its freedom; and conversely, its liquidity, unfixedness, and inherent potential for loss through mutability in the broadest senses of that word. Losses and gains are held in the contradiction between these tendencies; an anxiety haunts the grand vision of loose data, unbounded by predetermined shapes, infinitely realignable, with no gatekeeper controlling entry or exit from a place of archiving; or, we might say, safeguarding an original authentic object (for what do such notions as originality and authenticity even mean now?). The archive thus configured is indeed an archive without walls, the postcustodial archive predicted by archivist and educator Gerald Ham. From an archivist’s perspective, what are the implications of this provocative and seductive vision?

Part of the romance of the analog archive is in the possibility of rescue, still a frequent trope in the appearance of archives in the media—of saving something that was apparently
lost, even if it was listed in the archive catalogue. Historian Carolyn Steedman articulated the particularly personal pleasures of work with the archive, describing it as a “place of dreams,” of “longing and appropriation” in which “the past is searched for something… that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self.”

Bradley notes that “what we find in the archive is ourselves,” picking up on literary scholar Roberto González Echevarría’s assertion that “all criticism is a form of autobiography.” Perhaps this narcissism accounts for the “intoxication” the archive produces. Archive scholar Alexandrina Buchanan has noted that it may be the same qualities of the archive that attract both the historian and the archivist—the stirring of something entirely personal in the viewer in response to the archive. Buchanan suggests that, because “this response in the user can be neither predicted nor predicated on any action by the archivist… the affect depends on a fiction of being alone with the past, as embodied in the archive.”

By taking the document out of the archive, artists bring this moment of encounter to wider publics, and remove the potentially intimidating space of the research room, replacing it with a more familiar public performative or exhibitionary space. Archives are increasingly mobilized in exhibition spaces, within and outside the museum. One of the key distinctions between archives and museums as conventionally conceived is that the primary mode of encounter with the archive was traditionally in the search room, one-to-one, an experience quite distinct from the public space of the museum display or exhibition. The value of going back to source is this that makes the archive seem a more privileged space of encounter. Artists Marysia Lewandowska and Neil Cummings articulated this quality in an early example of a project that understood distinct principles of archives as distinct from other kinds of collections: “An archive designates a territory—and not a particular narrative… it’s a discursive terrain. Interpretations are invited and not already determined.” Grassroots museums and their equivalent community archives chime with socially engaged participative art practices such as Tania El Khoury’s, in the ways they engage audiences to activate/animate the archive, often bringing the archival encounter into a public sphere, opening up archival practices outside the institution and harnessing the particular materiality of analog archives.

Context is a cornerstone of archive theory: the principle that archival texts and objects do not exist in isolation; their meaning is contingent—the context of their production, the function they perform in their creator’s life or in communication with others at that time; their retention in some kind of arranged system (or not); the ways in which they are understood or interpreted by researchers and other viewer-participants; their placing in an institution that has its own collecting subjectivities: all these affect the understanding of the archive. The understanding of one component part is richest when it takes account of its place in a larger body of material. Dalziell and Genoni point out that

[unstructured bodies of data such as those presented by a Google search] are archives that have not been produced with the researcher and his or her needs in mind. The shift of the archive from principles based on curation and scholarship, to those of abundance and commerce, have wrought substantial changes to key factors on which the archive has long relied for its authority.
One of those, of course, is context. Now, these may be the anxieties of the “heritage professional”: the archivist, the museum curator. But there are also more universal anxieties for both research and everyday life. Dalziell and Genoni talk of “contemporary capitalism’s obsession with the now, the immediate, producing vast amounts of material only to render it obsolete the very next moment.”23 The tasks of preservation are not so interesting in this process, and the assumption is that an algorithm is already taking care of it. Media scholar and curator Marquard Smith writes that “today history’s predicament is knowledge’s instrumentalisation as mere data”—and indeed we find the obfuscation of archive and data in many quarters.24 A Google search for anything involving the term “archive” (as it might be construed by an archivist) soon demonstrates this—page after page of useless hits, which are simply the “archives” of web pages; that is, their back issues of noncurrent information. Meanwhile Pinterest, with its beautiful galleries, is flooded with decontextualized images, removed from their places of origin, with no trail of breadcrumbs to follow back to their source, and no access to the context that sheds light on its content, and therefore its full range of potential meanings now. As Smith notes “archives continue to be infused with authority and power but… rather than being embodied as Derrida tells us in the figure and form of the archon, it is embedded in architectures of software.”25 These architectures of software not only curate the archives in such a way as to shape the way we understand them, but also are invested with a control that embodies the archontic attributes which made the structures of the analog archive so politicized.

Many online presentations of archive material seek to open up access and offer content as a resource for all kinds of engagement, to “find fresh creativity by revisiting past practice.”26 Such projects offer a range of themed approaches to the curated content, making a feature of the subjectivity involved in the creation and the reception of the archive. What we see is not the archive as a body, nor does it pretend to be—it is the product of an engagement with the archive. The subjectivities that have informed what we see include what was selected for keeping in the analog “archive” by its creators—either consciously, or accidentally through a studio or office move, or the need for a piece of scrap paper for a shopping list, or a spilt cup of tea; the mediation of any curatorial and cataloguing process carried out on the archive (which is an unacknowledged kind of authorship); what was selected to be made available online (as a subset of what exists in the archive itself); and how the project actors/agents respond to this selection. So, what we see has already gone through various subjectively oriented selection processes. And there are many contingencies at play. Our everyday life is full of these exercises of choice: it is part of the performance of human identity. Interpretation is a selective process, one which depends on subjectivity, and on making a connection between the subjectivities of the creator, the interpreter, and viewer.

Archives can only speak of what is recorded and what survives: they are by their nature incomplete and contingent, though viewers may still approach with an expectation of completeness, a tendency even greater among “digital natives” for whom this constantly recording technological presence is naturalized.27 As Steedman points out, there may be many reasons for this contingent nature, in addition to the fact that archives in institutions perpetuate society’s fault lines:
You cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptinesses, at what is not catalogued, at what was ‘destroyed by enemy action during the Second World War’, nor that it tells of the gentry and not of the poor stockinger. Its condition of being deflects outrage. Its condition of being is a potential subject of investigation, of the forces that shaped it, and the evidence held in that shape, with all its prejudices. What we can ask is for more stories to be represented and for the archive’s biases to be exposed for analysis. Archivist Thomas Osborne suggested that that “a certain innocence” was conferred on Russian KGB archives by the fact that they were never intended to be seen by the public, and that this “makes such archives all the more valuable for the scrutiny of a later public”; while Shane Weller and Ben Hutchinson invoke Yerushalmi to lament that “ideally an archive should be […] created for other purposes than those which historians seek.” Digital archives—and archive resources—are a very different proposition: any illusion of unselfconsciousness in the archive has gone; we might argue that this is indeed their power.

We might frame the contemporary archive, in its forms and engagements, as more conscious, and more consciously political. At its best it not only acknowledges forgotten and marginalized voices but is an agent for addressing global inequalities that have been compounded and perpetuated by the archival cultures and literatures of colonial nations. Literatures of critical archive studies are beginning to respond to and participate in discourses of change: “archival imaginaries” that “rethink the boundaries of our archives and communities” and support “social transformation rather than accommodation or incorporation.” One such model, “858 An archive of resistance” is an online archive of videos documenting the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the result of a conscious decision by activist collectives to film, edit, and broadcast evidence of protest and suppression, including police abuse and scenes from the morgue following the death of protesters. This highly subjective resource embodies Abbas and Abbou-Rahme’s notion of the “self-archiving document as testimony.” “How will these new forms of the archive continue to reshape the archivable?” they ask. Kathy Carbone suggests that the archive thus framed “is not about the past but about the future of the past and is a vital source for inquiry as well as a subject of inquiry that can inspire new ways of envisioning and living in the world.”

By the nature of their work, artists are authorized to challenge and subvert archival and museological conventions. They may explicitly reframe the practices of curatorial and academic convention through the lens of their own subjectivity: their creative mode appropriating, bending, testing, and remaking the curatorial conventions of exhibition-making or of archival practice, so that these become “in essence a contemporary project, and a work of art in its own right” authored by the artist. Artist Susan Hiller frames it rather as a coproduction: “the materials that attract me are the ones that seem to have a lot to say, and I collaborate with them to say it.” Zylinska identifies a model of art practice with archival materials as foregrounding the position of the artist as designator and legislator of what counts as art… the artist as guarantor of the authority of good choices in culture, a gatekeeper of quality, but also a magician who, through careful selection, through the application of the ‘less is more’ principle, transforms trash into gold.
A rather different process of transformation occurs in Tania El Khoury’s *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018), a staged environment in which to experience an archive that was generated by another work, and to hold a conversation about what it means (Figure 1). Authored and placed by the artist in the exhibitionary frame, the meaning that emerges from archival material from *Gardens Speak* (2014) (archival in the sense that it was generated about or around the work, and is part of the documentation of its reception) returns as the source and the medium of a new work, engaging audiences to germinate the letters by further layers of response, cementing and multiplying viewer participation in meaning-making, from the now multilayered work and from each other collectively. It is, literally and powerfully, in the words of writer and director of the Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine, Nathalie Léger, “what remains […] but it is also […] what begins.” The letters give cues to new viewer-participants as to how to understand and respond to the work, and a sense of personal connection to that body of viewer-participants, through shared humanity and affective response to accounts of trauma. In this way the letters are both an interpretive and a presentation device, a material embodiment of the affective responses they articulate for the artist. They speak powerfully and immediately across the miles, literal and figurative, between the lives and experiences of those in Syria (both the dead whose lives are represented, and the viewers who have engaged with these stories), compressing time and space (Figures 2–3).
Figure 2. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2018, p. 8–9. Book published by Tadween Publishing, Washington, D.C.

El Khoury is her own archivist in retaining these records, but her interest in the archive is not in its structures but in the energy and agency of the document as testimony. There are both the stories the archive tells by itself, and those it enables through interaction with the viewer. Tell Me What I Can Do returns us to the essential humanity of the archive, and to its voices and narratives, and is, in its very form, a conversation for future practices. As multiples of the same document form—though each has its distinct content—there is an iterability in which the aggregation of repeated individual instances takes on a distinct identity as a body of papers. There is a sense of the scale of the material body of letters as a single entity, which equates to the sound volume of voices, the weight of an argument, and which is manifested in the display. The work is iterative, both through this repeated form and through the coproduction with the writers of the letters and the new viewer-participants, joined in the exhibitionary space of archival encounter.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme refer to the expanded field of artistic practice in archival modes, and their own interest in how the on-the-ground creation of film from sites of political protest, and other bottom-up documents of activism, have transformed the way the archive is constituted:

For the last 30 years or more, artists (and writers before them) have been engaged in reactivating and questioning the archive… reactivating forgotten, insignificant material, fragments and traces in order to speak about the here and now…. For us the vitality that turns that archive into something living is fundamentally connected to a moment of political becoming. The position that the artist as archivist used to occupy is now being taken up by the activist as archivist… the interrogation of the archive that artists and writers had been dedicated to, through counter-narratives and images, is now coming alive through the practices of the archival multitude.

All these processes involve acts of deliberate and conscious record-keeping, which leads Abbas and Abbou-Rahme to wonder,

Were we not at risk of reproducing the very same problems of traditionally constituted archives? Due to our position as artists we were building a selective collection of this proliferated archive and somehow failed to see that at the heart of these archives were the new archivists… suddenly the artist as archivist did not seem so significant…. Everyone was an archivist. That’s when we became more interested in the archivists than in the archive, in the sense that we feel the possibility for everyone to be an archivist is profoundly reshaping the archives to come.

We are all much more responsible for the survival of archives now than we ever were in the paper environment, where benign neglect did not destroy. “Archiving” is becoming a distributed system. If we don’t actively curate and preserve digital records—within or outside official systems—they will be lost. What media theorist Jussi Parikka has called an “information management society” impels us all to be “mini-archivists” in our own domains.
archive, but also the role of the archivist; not only of history but also the historian, and indeed the academic, the artist, and all the others. The archive is, in the words of Ulrich Raulff, the director of the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, “the locus of ‘fertile contamination’ of discourses and disciplines.” An interaction that was optional or implicit in the analog archive space becomes imperative or explicit in the digital. The Australian artist, archivist, and writer Lisa Cianci argues that if we are all archivists by default—because the medium of our age requires it—then the notion of what constitutes our own archive and how it is made, becomes a site of social and political choice. This returns us to Caswell’s notion of the archival imaginary, and the ambition of making the archive we want to see ourselves in. Cianci uses the idea of sustainable practice to encourage creative practice students to think about the preservation of their own work, a process of empowerment by which preservation becomes “creative acts of resistance”: the vulnerability of the technologies that underpin the world in which they live and work: tendencies that include entropy, decay, and destruction; loss of individual and collective memory; data overwhelm; and the commodification of art through current systems of online artistic networks and communities. Reminding us that “what we remember and how we remember is mediated by the technology we use,” she points out that available technology can offer nothing more consistent and reliable than a “variable media preservation arsenal.” Choices can be made for a variety of subjective reasons including not only the effectiveness of the solution (given that many services may purport to use certain means, but their creators may have very different ends in mind) but also cost and compatibility with other bodies of data that we may want to connect with. Thus, the platform and technology for archive-making is itself another subjective choice. As Cianci points out, “destruction of work is a radical act in a digital, online world where it is now so easy to keep everything but so hard to completely delete anything”—and, we could add, when you cannot control what use will be made in the future when other subjectivities come into play, including perhaps more sinister corporate interests. Students articulate, through their responses to this module, a choice about partaking in collective memory under current conditions.

As researchers working with archives, we need to understand what we’re looking at beyond its face value—its context, materiality, its contingent meaning—and to reflect on our own positionality in that response. Similarly, building on Cianci’s ideas, I suggest that it is through being mini-archivists that all of us—archivists, historians, curators, artists, other users, whoever—can choose a position and even commit acts of resistance in a society which tolerates high levels of technical and information overload, obfuscation, and obsolescence, predicated on a globalized and politicized data economy in which supply and demand, and profitability are more powerful and better funded than the empirically underpinned ambition to preserve cultural heritage and collective memory for collective benefit, deeply flawed though its representation and practices are. The significance, then, is to use this particular contribution to knowledge made by archivists and their practices as a means of empowering individuals with archival awareness.

What then, is the place of the archivist, if much of the engagement with archives takes place outside the archive, with decontextualized material, curatorially mediated? Millar identifies a bind in which twenty-first century archivists find themselves: “to accept the
refashioning of archives as computer memory, and so ever-present and ever-changing, is to reduce the intellectual complexity of archival work to the storage and retrieval of digitised bits of raw data.”

Yet society wants this fluidity—we want archives that we can reuse and repurpose, remold to our present, to our subjective selves, individually and collectively: archives that are inclusive rather than exclusive. What archivists can do is to capture the original context of material, before it is liberated, or animated, to be reformulated and rearticulated into future remakings in the service of an individual or collective entity, be it a hundred research projects, or a hundred disembodied appearances on social media pages. Or, as Millar asserts,

records themselves—as evidence frozen in time—are not changed by the present. It is our interpretation of those records that can change, sometimes dramatically, depending on our present circumstances. It is for this reason that archivists strive to protect the authenticity and contextuality of records so that the past is not continuously altered.

In both analog and digital formats, the future looks like a diversified model of the postcustodial archive—environments, forms, and formats for selection, presentation, and encounter are platforms for another kind of choice, which inadvertently influences the survival (or not) of “evidence of me” in turn to become part of evidence of us. The challenge becomes the means of finding, connecting, accessing collectively, and responding to archives in their new, diversified, continuously moving forms. The activism of archival agency is to actively document, engage (listen, read), and elicit response. In El Khoury’s work, we see writ large the power of knowledge from archives, and of people “transform[ed] into its subjects, authors and witnesses.”

Notes

8. Dalziell and Genoni, “Google Comes to Life.”
9. For discussion of this phenomenon, see William G. Thomas III, “Renegotiating the Archive.”
10. Dalziell and Genoni.
13. Pringle et al., “Provisional Semantics.”
17. See Bradley.
20. See Bruchet, 88.
22. See Dalziell and Genoni.
23. Dalziell and Genoni.
24. See Marquard Smith, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”
25. Marquard Smith.
27. The terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” were popularized by Marc Prensky in his article “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1.”
28. See Steedman.
29. See Breakell, “‘The True Object of Study.’”
33. Mosireen Collective, “858 An archive of resistance.”
34. See Abbas and Abou-Rahme.
36. See Bruchet, 88.
37. See Deller, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.
39. See Zylinska.
40. El Khoury, “‘Tell Me What I Can Do.”
42. See Léger, “Le lieu de l’archive.”
43. See Breakell, “Archival Practices and the Practice of Archives.”
44. See Breakell, “‘The True Object of Study.’”
45. See Abbas and Abou-Rahme.
46. Abbas and Abou-Rahme.
48. See Raulff, “Grand Hotel Abyss.”
55. McKemmish, 184.
56. Bruchet, 76.
The Artist as **Collaborator**
5 The Affective Power of the Everyday: Trauma, Empathy and the Quotidian in the Work of Tania El Khoury

Beth Derderian

To access all audio/visual examples referenced in this essay, please visit the open access version on Fulcrum at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424.

الأطفال درعا
For the children of Daraa

Figure 1. Dictaphone Group, Stories of Refuge [Souad video excerpt], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury, devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers, 6:45–8:06 min. Courtesy of the collective. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.h415pd25c
A white pot on a burner with dinner bubbling away inside, a child playing on a tricycle, a small garden patch outside a house… these recognizable and universal images hint at the theme of the everyday that flows through Dictaphone Group’s immersive video installation *Stories of Refuge* (2013) and Tania El Khoury’s installation *Gardens Speak* (2014). In these works, El Khoury deploys the trope of the everyday to affective ends.

**Theories of the Everyday**

Since philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* (originally *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 1946), the category of the everyday within critical theory “has since been used… to distill the deep banality and emptiness that capitalist society imposes on modern experience.”¹ Sociologist Max Weber famously categorized modernity as a time of disenchantment—in his eyes, bureaucratized, rationalized, and secularized, leaving little room for whimsy, mysticism, or magic.² Lefebvre’s work on the banality of capitalist society thematically extends Weber’s concept of disenchantment, linking it to the idea of the everyday or the banal. “The everyday is associated with habit, repetition, convention, the unthinking performance of routine activities,” literary scholar Rita Felski writes, “all those qualities frequently excoriated in modern art and criticism as indices of existential alienation or of conservatism and petit bourgeois complacency.”³

Paradoxically, however, the everyday comes to represent both this disenchantment and banal repetition and its opposite: re-enchantment. Art historian Lane Relyea writes that the everyday is also used “increasingly to marvel at the pedestrian possibilities for transgressing such impositions.”⁴ In its capacity to showcase such small transgressions and acts of assertion, the concept of the everyday comes to signify “a modest evasion of ‘the system’ and therefore, significantly, allows art to achieve a new degree of re-enchantment.”⁵ Felski has observed that her “fascination with the concept and experience of everyday life stems from the stubborn resistance it offers to such critical theories of defamiliarization and demystification.”⁶ Thus, the everyday comes to signify both automaton-like Marxist alienation and the dissolution of religious “enchantment” in favor of presumably efficient rationality, and the disruption of those processes.

In her works, Tania El Khoury and collaborators draw upon the concept of the everyday but avoid these four primary themes affiliated with the everyday: re-enchantment, mystification, evading the capitalist system, and alienation. Made by the Dictaphone Group, of which El Khoury is a member, *Stories of Refuge* is an immersive video installation consisting of three roughly 10-minute-long videos amid metal-framed beds available to audiences (Figures 1 and 2). *Stories of Refuge* follows Ibrahim, Sipan, and Souad through the spaces and experiences of their daily lives as refugees in Munich.⁷ In this work, Dictaphone Group avoids using the everyday as a technique of re-enchantment. There is no glamour, and the images are stark and fragmented. Because the cameras are discreetly worn and the filming undertaken clandestinely, the dwellings of Souad, Sipan, and Ibrahim appear in normal or dim lighting, rather than an idealized setting. Their living spaces are functional but not aspirational. The stories presented lack happy endings, or even the satisfaction of
closure: for example, the viewer sees a person preparing food but not the food’s consumption (Figure 3). Similarly, in Gardens Speak, an immersive sound installation for ten viewers, El Khoury presents stories of Syrian martyrs that include trauma and death. To access the works, participants are asked to walk barefoot across locally-sourced soil in a darkened theater, lie down at the foot of graves, and dig. Even though protected by plastic suits, they are still required to exercise labor in unideal conditions to join with those who have passed under horrific circumstances. Closely linked to this idea of the unidealized is the idea of mystification: the processes that we see are not romanticized. In Stories of Refuge, the participants in the installation learn about the realities of border crossings and refugee lodging. In Souad’s story, she describes the difficulty of crossing a Bulgarian forest on foot—requiring water to mix formula for her child and the precarity of breastfeeding. There is no music overlaid to present these journeys as triumphs, nor to elicit pity; the voiceovers reveal the difficulties of the refugees’ journeys, but they describe these challenges in unemotional tones, as if they were describing mundane activities. So too, in Gardens Speak, oral histories
are recounted through family members, as the voices of martyrs are unavailable, cut short by death. While they are voiced by actors, the reality that the dead can no longer speak for themselves is palpable.

Furthermore, El Khoury and her collaborators’ works do not fall into tropes of evading the capitalist system and Marxist labor alienation—while we learn a little about these refugees, viewers are introduced to them on affective terms rather than being defined by their work or financial status. The individuals presented here are noteworthy in their individuality, too, prohibiting viewers from writing them off as generic.

The Everyday as Affective

El Khoury and Dictaphone Group depart from these familiar tropes and techniques of the everyday in her works. Gardens Speak and Stories of Refuge do not primarily address constructions of re-enchantment, evading the capitalist system, or alienation and mystification. Rather, they strategically reframe the everyday in affective terms. The juxtaposition of the mundane, domestic everyday with the extraordinary of trauma, disruption, and violence questions the separation between these categories and reveals them to be unstable. This juxtaposition allows viewers to consider the precarity of the banal everyday as it can disintegrate into such trauma. It is perhaps because the features or practices depicted in El Khoury’s work are so repetitive, everyday, trivial—such as cooking a meal, sheets pushed off a bed upon rising, walking on a street, a plastic shampoo bottle stashed in a shower, the sink where someone brushes their teeth, the comforting earthen smell of a modest family garden in Stories of Refuge—that their juxtaposition chafes against the deeply traumatic voiceover content (either in the videos in the stories of refugees or through the speakers in the garden installation) (Figures 4 and 6). By emptying the visual of the extraordinary, Dictaphone
Group centers the trauma in the audio component, allowing us to see it more clearly—but they do so in a way that humanizes the lives of their interlocutors, forcing viewers to identify with their precarity. How their daily lives, these mundane things, can slip so quickly away or change! They use the banal or the everyday to both de-exceptionalize and humanize the Syrian conflict: it is not something far from us, away, over there, an anomaly removed from our reality.

Because these artworks are also situated in the aberrant setting of the Syrian conflict, the ordinary is simultaneously extraordinary for viewers in European and U.S. settings. El Khoury questions the delineations between the categories of ordinary and extraordinary traumas: where are these different categories, where do they overlap? In doing so, she helps us recognize that the extraordinarily traumatic situation in Syria has become ordinary for those who live there. She helps us ask, when does extraordinary trauma become ordinary? How quickly does the banal everyday devolve into extraordinary trauma? These categories are not so distinct. A closer examination of the sometime separation of these categories reveals the demarcations are not as stark as one might first imagine. The domestic everyday is seemingly fragile, and can cascade into trauma—as it has for many Syrians.

In Gardens Speak and Stories of Refuge, El Khoury and her collaborators capture the precarity of the everyday; this not only renders the works affectively compelling, but also serves to humanize the Syrian conflict. Both works draw directly on individuals’ personal accounts of the conflict: either from Syrians who have fled their country, those killed in the conflict (via audio and video footage they left behind), or accounts from the loved ones of the deceased. By sharing the everyday lives and practices of Syrians with viewers, the artist invites them to access more intimate experiences of the Syrian civil war.

The details are also important tools of affect: El Khoury writes, “telling stories of the dead can become an act of resistance against the regime’s attempt to dehumanize the dead.” Yet, it is also that these stories are individual that makes them successful as a mode of resisting dehumanization. In her landmark essay on writing against the totalizing nature of the “culture” concept, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod offers strategies to counter the homogenizing effects of writing about groups of people. One of her core strategies she terms “ethnographies of the particular,” by which she means to tell the stories of individuals.

Thus, instead of writing about “Arab Muslim women” as a category, she shares her conversations with real women from the Egyptian Bedouin community where she worked: Zaynab, Nadia, Gateefa. She writes about them in their individuality. She notes, “Refusing to generalize would highlight the constructed quality of that typicality so regularly produced.” Abu-Lughod argues:

Showing the actual circumstances and detailed histories of individuals and their relationships would suggest that such particulars, which are always present (as we know from our own personal experiences), are also always crucial to the constitution of experience.

While she was referring to how social science accounts are written, these critiques (and suggested solutions) can be extended to news media portrayals, particularly of conflicts or disease in the Global South. In more recent years, the United Nations High Commissioner
for Refugees commissioned the creation of a video game, *Passages*, “to create a better understanding of the problems of refugees.” The brief states, “a game allows participants to experience emotions in a very personal and enduring manner, but on a smaller scale than in real life.” These modes are intended to entice viewers or visitors or players to empathize with the plight of others. El Khoury stops short of such a direct simulation experience, allowing viewers a broad-based sense of experience while retaining details. Individual details, I submit, are also what render the experiences of the particular legible to those outside the (in this instance) Syrian conflict; these details, and the particularities of the real people killed, are an integral part of what gives *Gardens Speak* and *Stories of Refuge* their tremendous affective forces.

![Image](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.ms35tc556)

**Figure 4.** Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge* [Ibrahim video excerpt], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. 0:00–3:19 minutes. Video courtesy of the collective. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.ms35tc556

*Stories of Refuge* follows Ibrahim, Sipan, and Souad through the spaces and experiences of their daily lives as refugees in Munich, and filmmakers wearing discreet cameras on their person, and thus unseen to viewers. We as viewers share their spatial position as they tour through their dwelling spaces and habitual environs—their bedrooms, kitchen areas, bathrooms, a sidewalk leading to the town center. As they walk, they narrate the experiences that led them to their current situations in Germany. Ibrahim, Sipan, and Souad tell viewers why they were forced to leave Syria, about the particulars of their passage, and their hopes for what comes next. Their narrated accounts detail extraordinary trauma—cruelty, suffering, violence, and death—which jars with the banal settings of their homes: their white coffee mugs, orange-flowered curtains, a black and gray stroller. Because the cameras are worn by our subjects, our view tends to tilt downward, as if avoiding eye contact perhaps
from those who stare at them or similarly refuse to look. This sense of an unreturned gaze reinforces a feeling of invisibility that hints at their marginalized positions within German society. The view also feels voyeuristic because of the lack of eye contact or openness in filming. Similarly, both the camera’s and subjects’ constant motion conveys to viewers the anxious, tenuous feeling of needing to be ready to move at a moment’s notice—that is part of the peripatetic experience of being a refugee.

Figure 5. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

In Gardens Speak, El Khoury captures the stories of Syrian martyrs who have been buried in family gardens to avoid the regime coopting their memories or defiling their remains. Early in the Syrian uprising, El Khoury saw a photo of a mother burying her son in the family garden. She noted the “transformation of domestic and safe spaces into morbid and mourning spaces.” The home garden, an ostensible symbol of a tranquil domestic life, can now be resignified as a space of everyday resistance. This image remained in El Khoury’s mind, and she began to collect additional images of Syrian gardens-turned-cemeteries, and then oral histories, speaking to the loved ones of the deceased buried in these gardens, and collecting audio and video from social media of the deceased. The resulting work blends input from all these sources into monologues akin to auto-eulogies, written from the perspectives
of the deceased, but with interventions from the artist and her collaborators. Collectively, the monologues of *Gardens Speak* comprise an archive of the first two years of the conflict.

Produced as a garden space, the interactive sound installation features staggered tombstones. The soil of the garden plot in front of each tombstone masks a speaker, which tells the story of the deceased. Visitors are invited to dig into the soil, to lie on the ground, and to listen to the monologue narrated through the tombstone speaker (Figure 5). The monologues are written from the points of view of the deceased, culled and scripted from bits of videos and social media posts by friends and family, and reinterpreted by the artist and her collaborators. As collages of information, they resemble the chance to hear directly from the deceased subjects themselves, insinuating insights into their personalities, their likes, their loves, and their losses. For example, Basil Shehadeh tells us that he organized a film club at a café in old Damascus, and as a child, Mustafa Karmani shares that he loved books and films. Ahmad Bawwabi recalls that he was a good student in school, and Bilal al-Naimi that he excelled at math. Hassan wanted to be a famous soccer player. In their ordinariness and even familiarity, these details allow the deceased to become intelligible to the visitor as individuals again.

As in *Stories of Refuge*, El Khoury seems to vacate the traditional role of the artist to enable a sense of immediacy between subject and audience-participant. El Khoury notes, “*Gardens Speak* is a performance that functions without a performer.” Or, at least the traditional role of the artist in a work of performance or installation art is conferred to the absent deceased subject. When the audio monologue has finished, visitors are prompted to write a letter back to the deceased person whose story they have just heard, which they can then bury in the garden. This act allows audience-participants to connect with the deceased on individual levels. Many of the response letters, which El Khoury has collected, anonymized, and published, address the deceased by name and in first and second person: “Dear Jalal, Stay strong. You will be looked after now.” “Dear Ahmad, your story hit me right into the heart.” “Dear Ayat, I began crying the moment I read just a few sentences about you.” They are signed in a personal manner, often explicitly affective: “Love, Tas.” “In liebe (love), H.” “With love, a friend, a woman, a sister.” “All my love, Laura.” These responses reveal the sense of individual, unmediated intimacy the viewer felt with the deceased subjects.

What is more everyday than dirt, a home garden? What is more everyday than the domestic residence, the spaces of quotidian life? In these works, everyday spaces become powerful because of their banal nature. These works bring the Syrian civil war into the sphere of the everyday domestic—emphasizing that battles are not always fought on grand battlefields, or in the remote higher echelons of power, in diplomatic hallways and sequestered offices with red phones. The violence of these battles also reveals itself in different ways: through the physical, emotional, slow, and immediate. El Khoury’s subversion of the everyday and the domestic allows viewers to witness another side of the Syrian war, one not seen on international news reports, and perhaps recognize themselves in some element of such banal, everyday acts and spaces. This result is largely achieved through juxtaposition, using contrast to call attention to difference but also to question the precarity and stability of those differences.
Everyday Juxtapositions

To highlight the simultaneously everyday and extraordinary nature of these individuals’ stories, the artist juxtaposes contrasting audio and visuals. This juxtaposition creates a palpable sense of tension in the viewer. At several points in *Stories of Refuge*, for example, viewers watch footage of an everyday domestic space while the audio narration details the trauma experienced by the resident. This dissonance in the audio and visuals dissolves the comfort associated with that space. In Sipan’s home, for example, audience-participants see a bed with a gray and beige pillow, sheets with blue dots, a window; at the same time, Sipan’s voiceover narrates harrowing accounts of people who drowned while crossing the Mediterranean on the same boat: an Iraqi man lost his wife and son, eleven people in one family died (Figure 6). While viewers see his fridge with juice and bread stacked atop it, Sipan notes that he himself was rescued and held by the police. Surviving a drowning and then being detained by authorities he relates as a best case scenario here. In saying “best case,” I do not wish to imply that the temporary accommodations of Ibrahim, Souad, and Sipan are excellent or on par with apartment dwelling; but rather, that the everyday nature of the objects and activities in the videos where the refugees are residing contrasts with the extraordinary violence they describe.

In Souad’s story, the viewer sees a room with mismatched tables and chairs; she shares that her in-laws paid €12,000 in fees to get her family out of Syria. There is a bike leaned up

Figure 6. Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge* [Sipan video excerpt], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. 0:00–1:32 minutes. Video courtesy of the collective. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.gh93h243n
against the wall. Everyday items appear on the table: a shampoo bottle, a carton of table salt, a folded-up newspaper, a loaf of bread, a tub of margarine, a child’s cup with a red dragon emblazoned on it, some roses in a vase—all juxtaposed with human trafficking: the sense of anxiety of putting one’s life into the hands of strangers, and the disempowerment therein, the enormity of money exchanged for one’s safety, the knowledge that fees so enormous will be so difficult to produce again.

In another instance, the camera pans across blankets strewn on Souad’s family beds as Souad narrates that she was pregnant in Syria, that they started cutting her open (presumably to perform a C-section). We see a bed with a blanket and child’s drawing with a board game on it as Souad recounts that her son was stuck, she saw blood, and then, “They forcibly pulled my son from me.” In this juxtaposition, the presumed safety of a bed is undone when reminded of contexts in which medical care is scarce or makeshift. Souad’s trauma began before her journey as a refugee.

There are also other instances in which the audio and video tracks juxtapose routine care with violent bodily harm. As we see Sipan’s shower, a shampoo bottle wedged into a makeshift shelf between the white tile wall and a pipe, Sipan describes the way that soldiers from the Assad regime cut seven veins in his brother’s wrist, requiring extensive surgery. El Khoury contrasts spaces where vulnerable bodies rest or become clean with accounts of violence to produce affective responses from audience-participants.

El Khoury repeatedly includes footage of showers in the videos, forcing viewers to consider the normalization of hygiene, but also what “basic hygiene” looks like. Where are the lines between everyday bodily care and withholding that to cause harm or to demean? Governments exercise tremendous power over such basic needs of detainees, refugees, and migrants: in a most egregiously inhumane example, the U.S. government has decreed that detained migrant children do not need toothbrushes, showers, soap, or towels.

The Munich accommodations for Ibrahim, Souad, and Sipan offer bare minimums, but sadly are better than some of the conditions they faced in their journeys, where the asylum seekers were often robbed of everyday, basic courtesies including personal hygiene. For example, Ibrahim describes being in a camp where there were eight to ten men per room, and no showers available for them. Sipan notes the lack of hot water in the German temporary housing; Souad emphasizes that the women’s bathrooms are located farther away from her room and the lights do not work, the windows will not shut, and only two of the toilets function.

There is also the question of death hygiene and allowable funerary practices that runs through the Stories of Refuge films. Souad comments that back in Syria, “They kill a person and no one notices.” She continues, “Corpses are left lying on the pavement, bloated. Dogs are gathering around them.” The camera shows viewers the hotplate burners in the shared kitchens at the refugees’ housing facility. As the camera turns to capture someone cooking at the end of the counter, stirring a white pot on the burner, Souad comments, “The corpses seem like they are about to explode.” These comments overlap images of cooking that inevitably conjure thoughts of eating.

Because of the civil war, burial and mourning practices have shifted, which Gardens Speak documents. El Khoury notes that funerals, at the outset of the uprising, were an occasion for collective mourning and mobilization. Yet, as the war progressed, these funerals became more and more difficult. El Khoury writes, “the living protected the dead by
concealing their identities and their stories; not allowing their deaths to become instrumentalized by the regime in its attempts to alter reality and shape the discourse about why and how they died.”

In the work, El Khoury relates the stories of individuals who were buried in family gardens to protect them from the regime—although not always their own family gardens. In the case of Ahmad Bawwabi, he was interred in the garden of a stranger in the neighborhood of Bustan al-Qasr. Bawwabi’s friend was with him when he died; the narration through the speakers tells listeners:

He wanted to bury me somewhere, but there was shelling everywhere, and it was too dangerous to be out. An old man in the neighborhood saw him and brought us into his home. He told him, “This is my home garden. You can bury your friend here.”

In this instance, the domestic garden represents both a place of safety, where the regime cannot defile the remains of the dead, where bodies may rest. Yet, the peacefulness of a domestic family garden is also shattered by these narrations, and the audience-participant cannot see it the same way again. In the story of Ayat al Qassab, she shares:

They took me to my grave; the one they dug in the garden of the small house of our relatives. I used to drink tea in the afternoons in that garden. There are no chairs or teapots left. However the trees are still there. There is now a grave next to each of them.

These words conjure up images of a peaceful garden, a chair under a shady branch with a teacup. Other deceased were not so lucky: the loved ones of Abu Khalid are not sure whether his remains were buried in a mass grave or if his organs were sold on the black market. As visitors to the installation hear these accounts, they themselves are lying on the graves of these Syrians (in the installation); they are placing themselves in the spaces of these people murdered by the Assad regime.

Figure 7. Dictaphone Group, Stories of Refuge [Sipan video still], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the collective.
A final juxtaposition truly drives home the precarity of the Syrian community. To close his profile in *Stories of Refuge*, Sipan takes the camera to his favorite place in Munich: a bridge over a canal with “love locks”—couples come and affix a lock to the chain links of the bridge and write their initials or names in markers as a symbol of the permanence of their love. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he is drawn to a place filled with representations of love and permanence. As the camera pans over the colorful locks—pink, green, blue, silver—and the water passing through the canal sparkling in the back of the frame (Figure 7), Sipan notes he was in a coma for three days. If he does not get German residency, he tells the camera, he will have to travel again. The certainty and fixity of the locks parallel Sipan’s lack of certainty, his precarity.

These jarring juxtapositions highlight the fragility of everyday life for these refugees. I would also argue that this tactic can be read as a searing commentary on the way that others—in this case, Germans—have turned a blind eye to the suffering in their midst, and their complicity with the Assad regime through the lack of intervention. The everyday lives of Germans (and most Europeans and Americans) continue while Syrian suffering continues: their suffering becomes the everyday because we are not watching, intervening, or enraged.  

The visual use of the everyday serves to restore what media depictions have torn asunder: the lives of these Syrians are no longer exceptional, out there, anonymous, a story on the nightly news that is far from our daily experience—but they are lives that are deeply embedded in familiar and everyday experiences that are intelligible to European and American audiences. While viewers see, and likely relate to, the daily vestiges of life—an unkempt bed, children’s toys blocking the hallway, dinner bubbling in a pot on the stove—these everyday bits of life are paired with ghastly and devastating tales of war, death, loss, cruelty, and fear. Juxtaposing the visually quotidian with the narration of abject cruelty binds that cruelty to a relatable reality. This juxtaposition also highlights the precarity of the everyday normal—it is not far from war, trauma, and cruelty.

Layering the audio with the visual, and the everyday with the extraordinary, then, becomes a mode by which viewers can better put themselves in the shoes of the individual Syrians featured in El Khoury’s work. El Khoury does not seem to want the banal or the everyday to be comforting, but rather wants viewers to recognize it as tenuous. The everyday is a foil by which audiences can more clearly see the plight of these individual Syrians. Pairing the banal, the everyday, with the traumas of the Syrian civil war becomes a mode of rendering the Syrian conflict relatable to those outside of it. The jarring contrast highlights the precarity of the human condition that we typically disavow.

**The Everyday in Every Day**

El Khoury’s works are powerful because of their affective resonance, because the stories she conveys are relatable in their particularity, in their everyday humanity. And the stories she shares are important in their singularity, but also because they are not solely singular: Basil Shehadeh’s monologue (auto-eulogy?) includes the line, “If my story was ever important, it is only because it carries with it so many other people’s stories.” Through these few,
viewers are better able to understand the many. One of the visitors to *Gardens Speak* left a letter to the deceased that said only: “I was amazingly near to you.”

I was amazingly near to you. You were amazingly near to me. That is what El Khoury’s works entreat the viewer to see and understand in an everyday way and to carry forward every day. We are amazingly near.

Notes

5. Relyea, 73.
6. Relyea, 73.
7. These are pseudonyms created by El Khoury in the work to protect the identities of individuals.
8. As an anthropologist, I am particularly drawn to these works because of their ethnographic nature. Rather than defining artwork by its value within an art-historical canon, the anthropology of art focuses on the social genesis and connections of artwork, including its reception.
10. See Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture.”
11. Offering pseudonyms is a way to simultaneously humanize an individual while also protecting them—a tactic used here by El Khoury and a common strategy among anthropologists.
14. Barthélémy-Ruiz, Carpiere and Clément, “Passages: An awareness game confronting the plight of refugees,” UN Refugee Agency. The game does not appear to be accessible to the public—it does not appear on app stores nor is it for sale online, so it is unclear whether the game was released for widespread use.
27. This show has been travelling since 2014 and exhibited across Western and Eastern Europe, the U.S., Australia, as well as Cairo, Beirut, Tunis, and Abu Dhabi (per the artist’s website).
6 Survival of the Deadest

Kinana Issa

Survival of the Deadest: An Update, 2023

Two years ago, I was both privileged and emotionally overwhelmed to be invited to write about the interdisciplinary themes of diaspora, trauma, and displacement in the creation process of Gardens Speak and this reader, Tania El Khoury’s Live Art: Collaborative Knowledge Production. It took me about a year of reading and soul-searching, a dozen coloring pens and pencils, a recycle bin filled with angry jagged paper sheets, and the inexhaustible support of the conscientious editors, Carrie Robbins and Laurel V. McLaughlin. Being the writer, the witness, the exiled, and the person with lived experience made this contribution equally insane and necessary. The progress was slow, but finally the colored doodlings and the fragmented ideas came together into a meaningful piece on hope and commemoration.

That was two years ago, and extreme experiences change people rapidly and deeply. I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to capture the spirit of that phase, therefore I haven’t edited much in my entry. But I would like to update you with some of my most recent reflections on hope, love, and resilience.

Organic Hope

In 2011 I experienced prison for the first time. I was handcuffed and taken to an interrogation cell underground for my support of the civil rights uprising in Syria, or what the West knows as the “Arab Spring.”\footnote{Prison is an extreme experience, especially if one is not allowed a phone call or any means of contact with the outside world. I was there, alone, robbed of any support system, not knowing when or if I’d ever be released. This was the place that taught me what hope was about: a space for awakening—and a moral suicide note.} I witnessed prisoners wither and close off by being fed false hopes of a next-day release or before meaningful family occasions. The manipulation of a person’s hope by a singular
authority, especially if it’s the only authority that can determine their fate for an indefinite period, can make them desperate. The way I witnessed it, being desperate doesn’t equal having no hope; but the bigger multidimensional life-nurturing hope gets shrunk to the single-dimensionality of finding an end to the suffering caused by the loss of a precious previous hope. Maybe that’s why some Buddhists consider hope as a state of mental grasping that keeps us locked into deluded ways of being. But as a former prisoner myself, I also know how vital hope is, and I witnessed the same prisoners light up and find meaning through the undefeated power of what I like to call “fierce organic hope” as opposed to what I call “codependent hope.”

Similar to what happens in a relationship with a narcissist, gaslighting in prison was a tool to manipulate hope and transform it from being a vital energy of change and progress into a desperate self-defeating force. Sensory deprivation, altered physical and psychological states the prison experience enforces, and separation from any sense of time, be it that of the changing clock or the sunrise and sunset, diminish a person’s ability to reach out to their internal vaults and come up with updated life-affirming hopes. Their hopes become dependent on their manipulators; therefore, I call it a codependent hope pattern. On the other hand, fierce organic hope, the way I experience it, is something that stems out of our life force. It’s what drives delicate roses to endure long winters and bloom again when the world is ready for them. It’s creative, inexhaustible, and always looking for opportunities for growth. Similar to George Bernard Shaw’s life force concept, a fierce organic hope strives to attain greater power of contemplation and self-realization, continually creating something better and greater. I don’t believe we can aspire to what is better without hope.

If we contemplate a climbing vine for instance, it uses certain objects to support its climb. When these objects fail to support, it doesn’t die, it readjusts. Yet, organic doesn’t mean neglected, it also means nurtured and cultivated. One thing they don’t teach in schools is that hope functions as a dynamic and living organism; when it’s lost, there’s a grief process involved. I saw that in my cellmate’s eyes when the release she was promised didn’t come on time. Yet, we were both privileged to experience that grief together. We spoke, held each other’s hands, sang a song about faith and hope, and found ways to write pieces of poems that encourage losing attachment to material things, written by poet Mahmoud Darwish, on the walls. She was a fitness teacher, and eventually she invited me to do some body movements in a very tiny cell. Our hopes in our life forces were mightier than its space. Yet not all prisoners, including myself, always had the privilege to share the detention space with enlightened loving individuals they could feel safe around. Most of the time we needed to nurture our organic hope silently and individually. Hope, as an organic power, is similar to what we know in the world of plants. We get so caught up in our contemporary human culture and the egocentric dividing patterns that drive us to forget that we’re nature too. I like to visualize us as walking trees. This culture also demands that we ignore our inner landscape and feelings so we can respond to the growing complexity of our contemporary survival needs. We’re always under tremendous amounts of stress, and we learn to push away uncomfortable emotions or avoid them through work, motion, TV, and other distracting mechanisms. In a detention cell, we are left with no options but to deal with
these emotions as they arise. There’s no distraction, it’s one fragile human in the face of not only prison but also our most intimate untamed monsters, our own fears and insecurities. Without previous awareness, such feelings can overwhelm our systems even beyond the original trauma of captivity, and take over the vitality of our organic hopes. Fears are organic too. They serve a purpose, but if they’re unattended to and unsupported by a mindful loving awareness to soothe and carry them, we crash under their pressure. Hope loses its compass, and it turns into a dark dehumanizing power.

Oppression, the way I see it, is a life force that lost faith in love and compassion as an essence for human progress. To me, an oppressor is another human whose hopes were manipulated and subdued. Oppression induces a radical state of hatred. To reverse it, we need to radically love the parts it mutilated to help them grow again. In other words, see hope in them. Allowing our senses to accept areas with less light, even those seasoned with despair, and hold a space for accepting this darkness and treating it with love is a mental–somatic–emotional practice I can see no escape from if we want to nurture our organic hopes and allow them to be as fierce as they want in extreme circumstances without losing their purpose. Education about the neural system, trauma, stress, mindfulness, emotions, self, and co-regulation can help create and nurture a culture of critical hope, a concept embedded in Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of Hope* and recently revisited and reintroduced by Kari Grain. If hope, love and freedom remain abstract, or taught as solid non-negotiable truths, they lose their vitality, creativity, and autonomy. Empowering individuals and communities, including ourselves, with the tools and knowledge to access our inner landscapes and our values’ life cycles is what instills resilience and courage to awaken to our innate truths through which our organic hopes can continue to evolve.

**Survival of the Deadest, 2020**

Once I visited the home of a woman who was “living in the past.” Her living room had two sofas and a piano that no one could touch. They have been this way for a few years since her husband died. On the piano there were toys and picture frames. On the sofas there were more toys, souvenirs, and clothing items. All collecting dust. If she has visitors, me included, we sit on an uncomfortable chair in the kitchen, drink our tea, and leave. That place was not welcoming to new memories or friends.

A psychoanalyst friend recently told me that we cannot access hope if the space inside is preoccupied. When I heard his words, all I could think of was that woman’s place. When I came back home after my visit with her, I stared at a few things from Syria displayed on my bookshelf. They were the only few items I saved throughout my long journey of exile. Exodus does not allow much space for accumulating one’s past on shelves. I only got to carry 25 kg of luggage on the plane that brought me from Beirut to Turtle Island, and most of that weight I gave to books and clothes. My carry-on bag was mostly filled with electronics and video archives, and the few souvenirs I was now staring at. In my circumstances, having less than two sofas’ and one piano’s worth of an accumulated past on shelves does not mean that my internal landscape is
not preoccupied with it. But I could not linger with that thought for long then; survival called and did not allow much space to reflect and think. That was three years ago.

No Room for Hope

In 2019, I started writing this essay as a reflection on my experience contributing the monologues for the collaborative installation Gardens Speak. When artist Tania El Khoury approached me to work with her in 2013, I saw in her project a ladder for the spirits of the Syrian dead to reach the skies. The reflection process invited a question with which I have always struggled: how would the rest of the stories besides mine be commemorated? The ten accounts that speak out of the gardens are but a tiny percentage of the loss that Syria has witnessed. Many stories found no closure in burial grounds and still linger in our collective and individual consciousnesses, unprocessed and unresolved.

Recalling the woman’s apartment, I wondered how we can commemorate the past while also surviving it. What if the past is not past? How can we commemorate experiences and stories that we are actively witnessing? My friends’ faces, especially the dead and imprisoned, fill my mind all of the time, occupying all of my internal chambers. There is barely any space left for my own voice or my immediate reality, except for whatever survival necessitates. The hopes I held with my friends back in Syria are still the hopes I have today, even if they were answered by the heavens with torture and barrel bombs.

Commemoration

How can I make room for new hopes when I’m still grappling with my previous version of hope that is no longer accessible? These hopes remain important to me; they deserve to be commemorated, not just lost. Maybe in commemoration I will get to understand them and reshape or update them.

But first, I wanted to consider how commemoration works, and what purpose it serves. I started reviewing research papers, artworks, and written reflections about the subject. They varied among North America, South America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean. During this process, I did not look up the etymology of the term. It is a habit of mine to research first any term I find central to a topic that interests me. But for some reason I did not until I approached the final stages of this writing process.

When I looked up the term online, the first result from Oxford’s Advanced Learner Dictionary defines commemoration as “an action, or a ceremony, etc. that makes people remember and show respect for an important person or event in the past.” Commemoration is something in… the PAST?!

The word “past” popped out of the screen in a rude and abusive manner. My eyes fixated on it. Past. It sounded cruel, even violent! The more I stared at the word, the harsher the images that accompanied it became.
I came back to the dictionary. Oxford, what is past to you?

past

*Adjective:* gone by in time and no longer existing

*Noun:* the time or a period of time before the moment of speaking or writing

*Preposition:* to or on the further side of

*Adverb:* so as to pass from one side of something to the other, also used to indicate the lapse of time?

**Past as a Moving Target**

In August 2011, while the protest movement was at its peak, a friend of mine died. I learned early in the morning from a mutual friend that she was in the ICU. August 2011 was a time in which I would have expected a phone call telling me that an activist friend had died. But this friend was not an activist. Her heart stopped before anyone could resuscitate her. It was quite shocking and deeply personal; I remember screaming my lungs out with another friend in the back of the hospital at 5 a.m., “WHYY?!”

She was our best friend.

It was a death that changed my life. I will carry its scar until the day I die. But it is a death that happened once, in the past. It did not pave my Syrian road of exile, and it’s not the collective death perpetuated to kill a narrative that I now attempt to preserve.

She has her place in the collective memory of those who loved her, but it’s a different kind of death. When she died, she had a burial ceremony. Her friends attended and it was not interrupted. No one got in trouble because of it. I was in the hospital and held her hand before she was declared dead; and I was around her family throughout the first week of grieving. But I couldn’t do that for others; I didn’t get a chance to process my grief for the losses of the friends of the Syrian struggle for hope—be it to death, disappearance, or at the hands of mental chaos. With no closure, the mourning process cannot start.

When a tragedy keeps recurring collectively, only names and faces changing, it compiles in a snowball effect. Our human psyche doesn’t always have enough space to host each tragedy separately. Every new reoccurrence activates what preceded it, and the original incident seems to continue to happen. Time doesn’t heal it; rather, it makes it too complicated to be dealt with. Especially if no justice is served. Or no tangible evidence of life or death is possible. In some cases, you encounter news on social media about a friend, a loved one, or a person you know, found amongst a pile of deformed dead bodies. The face is disfigured; they obviously couldn’t be sure who this person is, yet they talk about it with such certainty! You may end up finding yourself flipping for hours through an archive of graphic images, ending up with the same questions you started with. But what were abstract questions at first are now attached to horrific images, all carrying the face of the person you know somewhere underneath the scars.

How do I accept the understanding of commemoration as past when all of this continues in the present? How do I free up a past that hasn’t passed and is still seeking fulfilment? Not to mention, I am a refugee, a woman of color on my own in the West. I need my full attention on my present and the challenges it presents. I need to survive.
Freeing the Present

I came from the East, where the sun rises and its warmth enforces the intensity of emotions, where coffee cooks slower in the mornings to be savored, and quarter tones were invented for the lamenting ears to yearn. Even yearning is not something I can access! Yearning can free the past. It looks at a past that is behind and cannot be reached. It is a way to distill its memory in a song, and dance with it whenever needed. It admits that a past has passed, therefore it can be yearned for. It frees up space for the present to enter, even if with lament. But yearning isn’t something I can access. None of this is past. Closure is not possible.

What I can do instead, on a personal level, is tell my personal past that it has passed. I can acknowledge that today I am a different person than who I was back in Syria. I can also acknowledge that I have been living in denial of the loss of many friends—whirling in four stages of grief without reaching the fifth. But I cannot say the same for the collective Syria, which is still witnessing similar events, or when it comes to those who have been imprisoned or kidnapped. Their destinies are still unknown; their families are still waiting; that is not past.

To free more space for the present moment, I acknowledge the first time I experienced a specific event or news in the past, then mark that present as a different point on a continuous timeline. I reckon with the linearity of the calendar. Time has passed since I experienced that event’s first trauma. In recognizing the nonlinearity of a traumatic event, I realized how the psyche continues living as if it’s still happening. Being aware of these two dimensions, the linear and nonlinear, allows me to strive to find an equilibrium between the two. For example, Razan Zeitouneh, Samira al-Khalil, Wael Hamada, and Nazem Hammadi were kidnapped in the city of Douma on December 19, 2013. I was in Lebanon then. Today, I’m entering my sixth year in Canada. Other activists have been kidnapped since then, some have even been assassinated. All of this doesn’t make the kidnapping event any less traumatic or tragic, it just means that I can allow the passage of time to teach me how to take deeper breaths when the name of any of the four is mentioned.

Holding space for the linear reality allows for new experiences of the same emotions to unfold, a deeper layer of awareness to arise, and an updated response to evolve. Accepting that invites me to interpret the older emotional responses as separate experiences. This anchors my trauma in the present and creates enough space for other elements in my immediate reality to be acknowledged. There will always be pain, there will always be rage, this won’t change; but I’m learning to build a progressive relationship with those feelings so they hold me up and forward instead of down and back. I learn how to examine the actions, memories, and states of being they trigger so I can find a more profound meaning, and the past that is being revisited gets updated in real time.

Souvenirs

Damascus, 2011, in a small and cozy bar, over cheap local beer, six civil and cultural players were discussing politics. I was one of them. The wisest and the oldest among us said that civil activists are the Syrian revolution’s third line. Without flinching, the five of us agreed. For even though we were some kind of frontliners, when it came to the uprising, we were not the ones
who took to the streets or the ones who steered the events’ wheels. That would ring true especially for most civil activists in Damascus. In the Syrian capital, few protests could survive for more than 10–15 minutes—except in a couple of neighborhoods such as Kafr Sousa and Midan. But none lasted for days like the ones in rural Damascus, or Homs, or Hama, for example.

When I came back home, instead of jumping to monitor the news or my social media activism, I decided to put some light music on and pull a big travel bag down from above my closet. It was where I kept what I considered the most valuable of my late mother’s personal belongings. I did not need to search; I knew exactly what I was looking for and where in the bag it was. I took out an elegant handbag I had never seen her wear, but which was very similar to an older and bigger handbag she used. Holding the unused handbag, I started seeing the red candies she always carried. When I became a teenager, I thought the candies tasted terrible, but as a child they were my favorite.

As I moved away from the red candy world and came back to the room, my smile started to tighten and the conversation in the bar resurfaced. It somehow opened my eyes to the fact that I’m mostly a witness. An active witness perhaps, but a witness nonetheless. I made a choice to stand up for what went beyond, and sometimes conflicted with, my personal rights and interests. Yet, I was merely a witness, I had no control over how the events shaped up and had no intention to take part in the bigger political game. My politics were strictly personal, which meant I had another witnessing mission: that of my own (r)evolution. I had the mission of preserving my individuality even while it merged with the collective until I could reach the other side! I had been protecting this individuality from the male dominant collective ever since I could remember. I would still need my personal independence even if we collectively reached the other side, and probably especially if we didn’t. If I truly wanted freedom, I wanted it for everyone, including me. On that day I realized I owed it to myself to keep a space, no matter how small it was, for nurturing the evolution of my internal landscape and the sacred feminine in my DNA.

I took my mother’s handbag, her special-occasion silver crocheted scarf, and a framed picture of a young version of her I didn’t know. In the picture she had long hair and wore pants; the woman I knew only wore skirts and had her hair short. I emptied a small carry-on bag and placed the three items in it, then tucked it under my bed. In October 2012, the same bag travelled to Beirut with me. Eventually it became the little carry-on that arrived in Canada, but not everything I put in it that night came with me.

When I got back from the lady-of-the-past’s apartment, I looked at the little souvenirs I had from Syria. The crocheted scarf and the elegant bag were there. The framed photo stayed in Damascus, but I had saved a small fabric bag in which I kept some special pictures, paper souvenirs, and greeting cards from my childhood and teenage years. These were the only items related to my ancestral lineage that survived with me. The rest is mostly related to the after-March-2011 period. They are reminders of the open wound of the collective Syria, and the permanence of the unserved justice.

**Becoming Present (By Way of the Past)**

While researching commemoration, one phrase stood out to me, written by Michaela Crimmin: “returning to past histories pulls the past into the present and begins a new conversation.”
I read this phrase at the beginning of my research process in an online archive. The visual and written materials I was exposed to while I was doing this research prompted me to think about what I had accumulated—the amount of past I carry with me as I venture into the future. I started noticing how the present, the anchor point that keeps my feet on the ground, felt absent; it just was not there. It was as if only my body was here, in survival mode, while the rest of me was somewhere else. I needed to pull the there-and-then to the here-and-now to begin a conversation in the present, if I was to follow Crimmin’s recipe. But when all you’re doing is trying to survive—financially, physically, mentally, and emotionally—there doesn’t seem to be time for bringing the past to the present, or the absent home to the present exile. When you have no friends or family members around to help anchor you in the present, you need to focus your efforts on doing that yourself. Once you’ve established your HERE-and-now, THERE-and-then can follow. You can’t invite them for a sleepover to a fake address!

What I needed was to pull myself to the present moment and its pressing challenges. My experience with the Syrian uprisings was about finding presence—the presence we lose when we get stuck in a cycle of violence, depression, learned helplessness, and internalized oppression—and maintaining it despite the odds. To be present is what freedom is like; I tried it once, I know how it feels.

Before March 2011 I did not realize how absent-minded I was and how that was a sign of internalized oppression. At the beginning of the uprisings, I started to discover real presence. Then, I was in the moment all the time; by contrast, I realized how absent I was before that. I used to think I was just “philosophically bored,” as one of my friends used to describe me. But sometimes I felt like my body was too tight for my soul—it always needed more space. In March 2011, it was the first time I discovered the power of the collective in the face of oppression. With others, there was something to be alive for; I could be the change I wanted to see in the world. The colors, the smells, the sounds, the feel of everything became stronger, more vivid and sensationally real. I was no longer absent from my field of existence. On the contrary, I wanted to be here, I wanted to be present, and I wanted my senses to register every moment passing like it never had before.

To experience unity of choice is liberating. One’s own burdens become lighter when shared with the many instead of the few. To experience one’s voice in 3D, resonating with the collective’s in 100D, is beyond empowering. Even if it doesn’t last for long. Its energy stays. I took a vow then, if I am to survive, these dreams and this mutual hope are to survive with me. This feeling of liberation will survive with me, intentionally and full-minded, in the here and now. For all of this to survive, it needs to be preserved rather than commemorated. Breaking the cycle of violence that the thirst for power has globally sought will take generations to come. It’s an active cause and not a latent one. In it, the souls and struggles of my friends, and other friends all over the world that I’ve never met, will keep lighting the way.

preserve, pre·serve

Verb: maintain (something) in its original or existing state
retain (a condition or state of affairs)
maintain or keep alive (a memory or quality)
keep safe from harm or injury

21 لأرواحنا، واروجنا، سلام
Notes

1. The label “Syrian revolution” means different things to different people; civil rights and human dignity was my side of the coin.

2. According to the American Psychological Association online dictionary, codependency is “a dysfunctional relationship pattern in which an individual is psychologically dependent on (or controlled by) a person who has a pathological addiction.” The CPTSD Foundation reports that “People with codependency sometimes form relationships with narcissists and they develop complementary roles.” See “codependency,” APA dictionary website, accessed January 8, 2023, https://dictionary.apa.org/codependency.

3. “The Life Force concept of George Bernard Shaw contains the central idea that Life is a vital force or impulse that strives to attain greater power of contemplation and self-realization. Creative Evolution is the manner in which the Life Force strives to reach this perfect state of contemplation as it continually creates something better and greater beyond the life forms already developed.” (Macintosh, The Origins of George Bernard Shaw’s Life Force Philosophy, 6).


5. See Friere, Pedagogy of Hope; and Grain, Critical Hope.

6. Turtle Island is a name for North America by First Nations peoples. In the Adventures of Asterix comic book series by René Goscinny (a bande dessinée, or Franco-Belgian comic), the character Vitalstatistix (in some translations Macroeconomix or Tonabrix; French: Abraracourcix) is the chief of the last Gaulish village to resist Roman conquest, and whose only fear is “that the sky may fall on his head tomorrow.”


8. The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. See Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying.

9. Known as the Douma Four, the four were human rights defenders, kidnapped from their workplace at the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), a human rights monitoring group that lawyer Razan Zaitouneh established in the city of Douma near Damascus. Ironically, these four were abducted under the control of an armed opposition group.


12. Salam (holds a dual meaning of peace and salute in Arabic) to our friends’ souls, and ours.
A festival presents a constellation of experiences that take the temperature of a time, artistically and politically. These concentrated gatherings that take place over a weekend or a few weeks provide an opportunity for diverse audiences to come together to interact, imagine, witness, and question. To imagine themselves as part of a community brought into being by their attendance. Rather than simply a collection of performances or artworks on view, festivals, in their best form, are built with a series of fundamental curatorial questions in mind: What conversations emerge between the artistic projects included? What do those works mean when installed or performed within a specific architecture or environment? In what ways do performances resonate in this specific locale, and with what diversity of people living there? What are the politics of sharing and staging work in these spaces? What kinds of outreach, access, and invitations to audiences are extended? Who is present? Who is not? In a sense, the festival is like a performance, embodying a confluence of complex political, social, and cultural dynamics; and if a festival is a kind of performance, curating these experiences could be thought of as choreography or dramaturgy, which entails caring for and supporting the temporal, spatial, communal experience of the artistic works on view.

Tania El Khoury’s live works rethink our relationships to public space, the borders of the state and the self, the power of overlooked archives, and the politics and ethics of interactivity. The intimate, multisensory artistic encounters that El Khoury stages, whether a one-on-one performance between an audience member and a refugee through a gallery wall, or a guided, embodied journey through the ephemera of her family history, are uniquely suited to the festival setting and also challenge the format in productive ways. For El Khoury, there is an important ethical distinction between interactivity and participation in her work. She interrogates the dubious nature of participation, citing the realities of how power is allocated and who is invited to meaningfully participate in art and society. Instead, she refers to her work as “interactive,” meaning that it allows for an intimate artistic
encounter that highlights the differences, and in some cases the resonances, between the audiences’ lived experiences and that of the subjects of El Khoury’s work. Appealing to multiple senses, her works not only embody stories of migration and state repression, but also the audience member herself. El Khoury’s interactive encounters implicate the audience member in universally relatable themes—after all, every place is in some way touched by borders—and simultaneously remind her of the stark difference between the privileged journey she has taken as an audience member and the journeys of the subjects of El Khoury’s work. The festival might be an imagined community, but El Khoury reminds us of those at the margins of this imagining.

In her work, El Khoury balances multiple conversations simultaneously: a global conversation, about topics such as “the refugee crisis” but also the local discussions, specific to the site of the performance. Highly collaborative in her process, El Khoury invests deeply in developing relationships with the people and places within which her work is performed. She is concerned with how the city she is entering operates and who is included and excluded from the cultural spaces she is invited to present her work in. In an increasingly divided world, El Khoury’s work reminds us of the urgency of reaching out to listen to and touch one another; to encounter differences not only in our own neighborhood or city, but on an international scale, opening ourselves up to others and other experiences and allowing for exchange and critical debate. El Khoury’s interactive encounters exemplify the power of gathering, of interactivity, of exchange at a time in 2020 when borders are even more contested and enforced. For curators of international performance festivals, there are many lessons El Khoury’s work can provide.

In December 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when curating live performance, festival-making, and international touring were being called into question for political, social, and public health reasons, I spoke with four artistic directors, curators, and programmers who have each curated and collaborated with El Khoury in festival settings. Together we discussed their curatorial perspectives on El Khoury’s work, their collaborations with the artist, and the systems of care and support entailed in presenting live performance in our globalized and increasingly digitized age.

Lisa Kraus was for twelve years the performing arts coordinator at Bryn Mawr College outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and while there produced the 2018 retrospective ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury in association with FringeArts for their Fringe Festival. Kate Craddock is founder and festival director of the Gateshead International Festival of Theatre (GIFT) in Northern England, and co-commissioned and presented the virtual edition of As Far As Isolation Goes, a collaboration between El Khoury and artist Basel Zaraa at the 2020 virtual edition of the festival. Gideon Lester is the artistic director of the Fisher Center at Bard and senior curator at Open Society University Network Center for Human Rights and the Arts, both at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and co-curated the 2019 Live Arts Bard Biennial with El Khoury, which included commissioning and presenting her work Cultural Exchange Rate. Ron Berry and Anna Gallagher-Ross were co-artistic directors of Fusebox Festival in Austin, Texas in 2018, which presented El Khoury’s As Far As My Fingertips Take Me.
Anna Gallagher-Ross (AGR): Could we begin with how each of you met Tania and her work, and what drew you to it in the first place?

Lisa Kraus (LK): I was at the Holland festival in 2016. I happened to go to the Gardens Speak performance and was utterly blown away. My background as a dancer meant that the quality of embodiment and extreme intimacy of that work touched me so much. It was not proscriptive in any way—it was offering me an experience, it was my choice how to respond. It was the most politically affecting work that I’d ever seen. I immediately wanted to present it and build a project around it.

Kate Craddock (KC): Tania actually studied at the same M.A. program that I did at Goldsmiths, but I graduated a few years before her, so there’s always been a connection in terms of a shared training, with shared reference points, and sensibilities around performance work. That program in particular opened up a sense of working internationally and a commitment to creating work that transcended geographical barriers or borders. That is something that has always drawn me to think about Tania’s practice. I finally met Tania at Fusebox in 2018. There was immediately a lot of synergy in terms of the things we were referencing and the ways we were talking, speaking, and thinking. I couldn’t get a ticket to see the work, so I actually first saw the piece Fingertips at Under the Radar in New York in 2019 (Figure 1). It’s bizarre that there was this connection in the U.K., but I first experienced the work in the U.S., which was particularly layered in other ways. We then began a dialogue about bringing the work to GIFT.

Figure 1. Installation view from Fusebox Festival, Prizer Gallery, Austin TX 2018. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass, and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Fusebox Festival. Photo: Tania El Khoury.
Gideon Lester (GL): There are many currents that bring our experiences together. I first heard of Tania from Ruth Mackenzie, who programmed her work at the Holland Festival. Ruth told me I had to see Gardens Speak, but I couldn’t go to Amsterdam or get a ticket for it when it was at Under the Radar. But I heard Tania give a talk about her practice in the Incoming series at Under the Radar and went running up to her afterwards to ask whether she’d have breakfast with me the next morning. She said yes. Part of the reason I asked her to do that was because we’d started thinking about what the next iteration of the Fisher Center’s biennial would be. I thought in some way it was going to be about migration, so when I heard Tania talk about her practice, I wondered whether or not there might be any opportunity for us to work together. Sometimes with artists, the start of a relationship feels very intense and rich—I remembered that about our breakfast. I asked her then whether she would be interested in co-curating the biennial with us. She said yes, but that the subject should be borders rather than migration, which was clearly right. Soon after that she was in Houston to show the Dictaphone Group, so we picked up the conversation and carried it on there. Then I saw Fingertips at Under the Radar which we actually presented at another location in NYC about a year later, just before the festival started.

Ron Berry (RB): I think I first encountered Tania’s work at Forest Fringe. We then did a curatorial exchange with Forest Fringe where they brought a Dictaphone Group piece as part of that, and I think that’s when I first met her in Austin. I hadn’t actually seen her work at that point—I’d only heard of it and heard people talking about it. Then we brought Fingertips to Fusebox in 2018 (Figure 2). I appreciate that piece so much in that it is both very global and local at the same time, and it connects those things in a way that was really striking to me. It also puts yourself in the middle of that—you are implicated, you’re a part of it, your body is part of it. But certainly thinking about the timing of that is significant—we live in Texas and there was a new wall being built. There was this prominent issue of borders, and this project was in some ways about that and in some ways about something very specific.

Figure 2. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, As Far As Isolation Goes, 2019. One-to-one performance on Zoom. Song conception by Basel Zaraa; vocal and lyrics with Jazzar and Shamma Iqbal; music production: Peter Churchill; wall writing by Steaz. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of GIFT Festival. Screenshot: Tania El Khoury.
that was not that. It was interesting for it to be both very specific yet allow for different conversations to emerge. I also just think it was a really exciting piece to emerge in a festival. It has a different rhythm to it. You can pop in between things, you’re seeing people over the course of four or five days, and you start to see more and more people with these traces on their arm of this memory and experience they’ve born witness to. All of those things are so much a part of Tania’s work and its intimacy.

AGR: Ron, I’m so glad you’re raising this because I think the way works resonate within a locale is such an interesting topic. As you say, in Texas under the Trump presidency the work communicated on a number of levels. Could each of you speak to your specific locales and how the works that you presented resonated during the specific time they were presented in?

KC: Quite often, I program around the artists as opposed to programming a specific work. With Tania, it was very much a question of “which work resonates now?” because when I said I wanted to show Fingertips, she wrote back and said that they’d developed this new piece As Far As Isolation Goes, which is sort of the companion piece and is more collaborative with the artist Basel Zaraa (Figure 2). I was very open to Tania bringing a piece to GIFT that felt the most appropriate for them in the context of the pandemic. The context that I would have originally presented the work in would have been in a gallery at The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. Baltic has a long-standing commitment to working with refugee communities as well so there was dialogue around how we could present that, how we could reach out, how we could ensure that the work was situated in a broader conversation happening in Gateshead. But then the pandemic hit. As soon as we realized that we were going to present the work online, we discussed with Tania and Basel the format for how we could achieve that. Originally, the work was dealing with isolation in terms of U.K. detention centers and people who were being held against their will, waiting to find out what was going to happen in terms of their status or whether they were going to be able to stay in the country or not. The notion of isolation that is central to the project was just so pertinent in that pandemic moment when key decisions about how GIFT would manifest were being made; and so, isolation suddenly became a much more universally understood idea than it had in the original conception of that work. That became a really interesting point of conversation for how that work would be experienced by audiences, and that there was no question that it should be the work that was presented.

LK: A main aspect of our project was to put Tania in conversation with local artists or leaders of organizations that represent different populations. Louis Massiah—the head of Scribe Video Center—was interested in her work being presented contemporaneously with developments of Black Lives Matter, especially in Philadelphia, which has been a crucial movement here. He remarked that he was deeply moved that instead of primarily expressing rage, her works seemed to be about honoring martyrs, honoring the people who are suffering, honoring experience. It was an interesting counterpart. We worked with Hazami Sayed from Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture also. Their whole mission is to provide connection to Arabic culture’s music, literature, and language. They provide education and services to refugees. They collaborated with us in forming different kinds of public events. We did have participation from people who had been directly involved in detention and people who are
refugees. Some people did not want to see the work. It was too close, it touched them too deeply to even consider seeing the work.

When we were doing our planning for the retrospective during 2016–17, travel bans were arising and we had major obstacles in attempting to get people to Philadelphia to be a part of the project. We weren’t accustomed to working in Zoom at that time. Kinana Issa and Tania were very much in dialogue in developing the commission, Tell Me What I Can Do. We were supposed to go to Beirut to brainstorm and to experience her context; but instead, we met for about ten days over Zoom. We were affected by those obstacles and all different threads of the global political context at the time.

GL: It’s funny because we started planning the biennial pretty much exactly then, I think it was within a month that the travel ban was first announced in January 2017 and the program evolved over two years. But the two local conditions that we were thinking about were indeed the travel ban, and then also the Hudson Valley. It’s an agricultural region and has a large population of precarious migrant agricultural workers mainly from Central America who tend to the crops that are then sold to fancy restaurants in NYC and farmers markets and who are completely invisible to most of the population of the Hudson Valley. It’s a pretty gentrified region. So, as we were thinking about borders, the plan was to invite artists from countries that were affected by the travel ban.

The other factor for us was that Bard at that time was part of a small network of international campuses which has now become much larger. Tania and I were trying to create a festival that would also have editions at a small college that we’re affiliated with in Berlin where 10% of the students at that time were Syrian in origin. And then we also have a campus on the West Bank in Palestine, and the first idea was to create works that could be seen in all three sites and with some of the projects being local to each. Tania and I went to Berlin together and had a site visit and a conversation with the Volksbühne that was, of course, in total upheaval at the time, but was interested in hosting an edition of the festival. Tania cannot go to Israel and Palestine because she’s Lebanese, so I went, and some of the projects—one in particular that ended up in the festival—were born out of that trip as well. So, we were thinking about Bard in relation to other sites, we were thinking about the effects of the Trump administration’s travel ban and then we were also thinking about the largely invisible local economy in the Hudson Valley as sort of three threads running through the festival. You know how it is, programs emerge over quite a long time, and each of the projects in the program came about through different conversations, personal relationships, and different ways of thinking about juxtaposition between different parts of the program and so on. But it was really led by Tania’s vision, and it was the first time that she had worked in a curatorial capacity too.

LK: I just want to say I came up for the long weekend and it was extraordinary.

AGR: It truly was.

GL: Thank you! It was exciting. First of all, I did get to see Gardens Speak and had exactly the same experience as you—I don’t think I’ve ever been as moved by a political work as I was by that because the experience somehow felt so personal. Tania also taught a course at
On Curating Festivals and Collaborating with Tania El Khoury

Bard in the spring of 2019 called “The Political Potential of Interactive Performance.” It’s a phrase that she uses a lot—this idea of “political potential.” I understand it because I laid on the ground in Gardens Speak and felt the effect of that embodied experience. It’s the same with Fingertips—as you were describing, Kate—the physical intimacy of that experience is so specific and unlike any kind of traditional audience relationship. It has such a profound embodied effect.

As we built the biennial program, Tania and I had been talking with the Palestinian visual artist Emily Jacir, about a new work for the festival. Emily was in residence at Dartmouth College, so Tania and I took a trip up in February 2019 and spent an evening with Emily, persuading her to create a video work for the festival. Tania had just begun teaching and was deeply in the flow of festival building, and was also eager to think about what a life outside Beirut might look like. Her husband was working in Ohio at the time, and we started mulling over the idea of some sort of longer, extended relationship with Bard. On the course of that drive down from Dartmouth, we came up with this idea for a graduate program. We didn’t know at the time that Bard was going to become a lead partner in this new huge international venture called the Open Society University Network. These things came together at exactly the right time. The great thing about what we’re now building is that it’s a natural and organic extension of Tania’s curatorial platform and creative practice during her residency at Bard that year. It’s very exciting, and very specific to time and place.

AGR: Gideon, could you say a bit more about what this new graduate program will look like?

GL: It has two parts. It’s a research center for artists and activists which will be physically based at Bard, but will essentially be a center without boundaries. It can operate throughout the Open Society University Network which has partners almost all over the world. It has a budget for fellowships for artists and activists, faculty fellowships, and student grants. Tania’s the director of the center and I’m the senior curator. The center will continue to create these biennial festivals, so we’re just beginning to think about what the next one will be in a couple of years’ time, on the subject of food justice. Embedded within the festival is a two-year low-cost M.A. program in human rights in the arts, which Ziad Abu-Rish will direct in partnership with the Human Rights Program at Bard. COVID-19 permitting, it will take its first cohort of students in September 2021. We’re in the process of getting the program accredited at the moment. It will likely be for maybe fifteen or so students, some of whom will be artists and some of whom will be activists and scholars. Once we know who they are, we’ll tailor the curriculum around them, but there will be a core curriculum that will be an exploration of specific practices—the ways in which artistic practices are shaping human rights practices and ways that human rights practices are shaping artistic forms. So, that’s the idea. It feels like an art project in the way that it’s being built, because it has an artist at its head.

AGR: I want to attend that program!

GL: I do too! You’re all welcome.

LK: There’s something extraordinary in Tania’s bridging of these two worlds that we’ve talked about: the theoretical, the historical, the academic; and the visceral, the visionary, the
artistic. And how those two synergize with each other I find quite exceptional. They really contribute to the power of the work.

**KC:** Yes, and it’s unashamedly celebratory as well. I think often that side of thinking isn’t as foregrounded in a lot of artists’ work. But the way you just described it, Lisa—that sort of process of thinking and the deep thinking is palpable.

**LK:** And Tania’s so precise with language. I got very involved with writing in the last fifteen years, so I wrote a lot of the materials for our project that were disseminated (descriptive materials and so on) and we would argue for a long time about the right nomenclature for something, what pinpoints it, and what’s comprehensible within our culture because certain things may have particular meaning to her that don’t necessarily translate well. So that was an interesting aspect of working with her.

**AGR:** I’m glad you’re raising that, Lisa. I like to think of curating as building a kind of scaffold, a supportive context for artists and their work. I would love to hear a bit more about these writings, your research process, public programs, community partnerships or collaborations, your challenges, or triumphs in preparation for presenting Tania’s work. Where do you start in building out the curatorial scaffold for *As Far As My Fingers Take Me*, *As Far As Isolation Goes*, and *Cultural Exchange Rate*?

![Figure 3.](image) *Figure 3.* Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
LK: We didn’t start with history so much; we started with the notion that this was an artist who was so deserving of a platform and had the interest in presenting a survey of works, which up until that date had not happened for her (at least definitely not in the U.S.). So, the discussion and the research had to do with familiarization with her body of work to start with, and also beginning to sense who in our community would want to fold in and take part. The question of what would take place on our campus at Bryn Mawr and what would take place with our partner in Philadelphia, FringeArts, was not a big roundtable decision. That was really me and Tania. There was a quality of editorial function for me, because she would bring up older works and we’d start to discuss what belonged and what didn’t belong, or what was strong and what would showcase well in the community and alongside other works. She has made works that have to do with feminist perspectives and other topical issues, but we were mainly addressing works having to do with refugees, the aftermath of war, and martyrdom. Then, specifically, the work that we commissioned arose out of Tania’s own unfinished business. She had something that was burning a hole in her pocket: she didn’t know what to do with the thousands of letters that had come from participants in Gardens Speak (Figure 3). She said, “I have letters piling up in boxes on my balcony. It’s heartbreaking. Everyone puts their heart into them and they’re just sitting there.” And that was the starting point. The whole thing began from the nucleus of “Who is this artist?” “What makes sense in terms of her existing work?” “What’s her urgent need and how can that be realized?” Then it was a question of “What are all the issues and who are all the people?” Access, contextual essays, the website—everything else came much later except the grant writing, which involved some research but not a lot, comparatively.

RB: I think with any of these projects, we’re always trying to hold multiple conversations simultaneously. There’s always one that is local and is about what’s happening here in our city. If we’re going to be bringing a project here, how is that read here? What’s happening here currently both socio-politically and artistically? What would be interesting to talk about with this project in terms of how it is living in relationship to this place that we’re experiencing it in? But also wanting to understand the context it’s coming from—there might be really interesting similarities and differences that are very specific. That’s always a central part of how we begin thinking about scaffolding and context. We consider each project as the hub of a wheel, and about all the things that might be interesting to talk about radiating from the center. It might be something about borders; it might be something about refugees; it might be something about the form of her work, about intimacy, or about being a witness to something as opposed to a spectator. All of these things become points to connect with other people. You think about populations, schools, and people locally who might be interested in experiencing this work, and then you think about the different windows into it.

AGR: I really appreciate what both of you are saying about this artist-centered approach. I think that, curatorially, that’s not always the case. I can say that at Fusebox we really want to start there. Rather than approaching our festival with a preconceived thematic, we are really interested in seeing what emerges when the artists we are working with are considered in proximity to one another. And almost every presentation we do is done in partnership locally. We see our festival, and each project, as an act of community-building. So, there is a
multivocal curatorial approach. We’re also always trying to create different invitations into the work for audiences. For instance, we hosted a podcast interview, so our audiences could hear Tania speak about her work. We also publish a book annually that accompanies our festival; and for it, we ask the artists to pick someone globally to write about their work. We also ensure there are opportunities for people to meet the artists in person, whether through our artist talks (that come with free waffles and coffee) or more informally through meals, meetups, or at night at our festival Hub. Kate and Gideon, could you speak about your curatorial processes?

KC: For me, the guiding principle for how I program is to bring artists together whose works would otherwise not be presented in the region. Their practices wouldn’t be reaching audiences in the north east of England if they weren’t part of GIFT. So, most of the artists I present at GIFT have never had an opportunity to perform in the north east before. Tania was one of those artists. In a way, when I think about the scaffolding, and when I think about how Tania’s work sits against other work I presented over the last year or so, in the year previously I presented Palmyra by Bertrand Lesca and Nasi Voutsas, and invited an academic of Middle Eastern origin to host the post-show conversation. They brought a perspective to the conversation that I could not, which opened up a very different conversation around that work with audiences. You can trace this scaffolding in terms of the type of work that I’m trying to present or the different ways that I’m asking audiences to engage with some of these themes and issues, always in ways that are coming from more of a contemporary experimental practice rather than in such a didactic way.

There was a lot of thinking around how and where we should present As Far As Isolation Goes. Should it just be in a white space in a gallery, or should we work with the architecture of the building to bring a different dimension into the world of the work? There was an elongated process that sadly wasn’t realized. It’s quite strange for me, because when I think about my experience of presenting Tania’s work this year, I still think of the work taking place in Baltic, even though it never happened there. It was going to be presented in what is normally a meeting room, which sounds a bit dull but it’s actually a beautiful room with a glass window that drops straight down to the river. So, there’s a sense that one of the walls of the room that you’re experiencing the work in is looking straight out across the city and across the river. In my mind I almost experience the work in that space even though that’s never where I actually experienced it.

I suppose the scaffolding for bringing it online this year was about the consideration of how audiences were invited to engage with that experience. What was the invitation, what was the wording that was sent to audiences, how were audiences given instructions for what they needed in order to participate in that work, and that being a very specific instruction list that we worked on together. It was very clear that we had to get that right so that audiences knew exactly what they needed next to them and next to their laptop. Even though they’re very practical things, they’re much more than that because there’s such a level of detail and precision. To experience this work, you need to have a white cloth and dish of water and a paintbrush—all of the material objects that you’re working with helped give that digital experience an intimacy and tangibility.
AGR: As an audience member who had the pleasure of experiencing it, that’s where the experience began for me—that accessible and welcoming email which helped me go through my house and assemble whatever I had on hand so that I could participate in the performance. In general, I was inspired by the way you invited audiences along throughout the festival.

GL: I think we may be reaching out soon, Kate, because we’re hosting As Far As Isolation Goes (online) in a couple of months and we’re having these conversations right now about how to make sure that audiences read the emails in advance and have some sense of what’s going to happen without giving the whole thing away. For us, the scaffolding has evolved. Anna was actually a very important part of the evolution of these Biennial festivals—she essentially created the scaffolding for the second edition and we borrowed some of that. Because we’re a teaching institution, the festival includes a resource room and a syllabus in which we ask each of the artists in the festival to suggest texts, films, or digital resources that audiences might want to engage with to deepen their experience. The curatorial principle
is one of disrupting the building that we're in because we're in a very classically structured, Gehry-designed performing arts center with two theatres and generally a traditional performer-audience relationship. These biennials grew up as a way of completely changing the relationship between the public and the building and the performance in the building. So, we turned this classically structured performing arts center into a specific site and opened up as many unconventional locations within the building as possible in which the public could encounter work.

As a college we also have an opportunity to create courses in which some of the artists who we're commissioning through these biennials come and teach. So, in this case, Tania taught, as did the artist Emilio Rojas, whom we also commissioned for the festival. So, some of the artists are in the community already, even though they may not be from our region. In this case—in part because this was the third edition of the festival and we therefore wanted to disrupt it again and in part because the subject was borders and we therefore knew that in some way we had to transcend the borders of the building—we moved outside the building for the first time and commissioned Emilio to create a land art project on our farm (which is located on the campus). And then Tania invited Mirna Bamieh from the Palestine Hosting Society to create a food art project in a village near the campus in an event space. So, although we're not in an urban setting, we try to create methods of engagement that would be in a relationship with our environment as well. Tania made a new work for the festival—Cultural Exchange Rate, which had actually just premiered at Spielart in Munich about a month before it came to us (Figure 4). It's a very personal work because it's so much about her own family's history and ways of creating very secret, intimate moments of engagement with episodes from that history in relation to questions of national identity, transformation, and borders as well. That was at the heart of the building in a backstage industrial space. Then it unfolded through a sequence of boxes that you entered in various ways, so it got more and more intimate encased in these boxes in this room at the heart of the building. And that also created a kind of scaffolding as well.

LK: It was like entering an elegant bank vault. Each person has their own ring of keys and proceeds through the sequence of boxes in a unique way. Everyone in the room is in sequence, so you move from one box to the next one, and onto the next. One you put your head in, one you actually step into, there’s a beautiful library table there—it’s totally immersive and private, but shared. Beautiful work. At Bard, too, I thought the work on the humongous wall coming into the entrance of one of the theatres was so powerful. Jason De León used that wall for a piece, Hostile Terrain 94 (HT94) with the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP), mapping where the remains of people who had tried to cross the border into the U.S. and died in the desert were found. The use of that vast wall helped make it truly powerful.

I have to say a little bit about the scaffolding at Bryn Mawr, especially because the people organizing this essay collection were very involved with that. We had worked with Carrie Robbins, the curator of art and artifacts in Special Collections at Bryn Mawr, on an earlier project and asked if they could host one of the works in Special Collections. And so the work Camp Pause by Dictaphone Group was installed in that space. Laurel McLaughlin, a history of art Ph.D. candidate, partnered with Carrie. Together, they, along with the heads of Middle Eastern studies, history of art, and numerous other departments across the college
collaborated with a group of undergraduate student interns who wrote, hosted, docented, and created a series of weekly programs in that space. Those continued into December for as long as the work was on view—I didn’t even get to take it all in as there was so much. We did an event with Syrian food hosted by a Syrian refugee chef; percussionist Hafez Kotain and musician Jay Fluellen; counselor of human services with Syrian refugees to the U.S., Mohammed Al Juboori; political scientist Samer Abboud; and Kinana Issa, an activist and researcher who worked on Gardens Speak but was not able to travel; and they got into a contentious debate together during this event regarding how to view Syrian history, which was fabulous.

Tania also spoke publicly with Pepón Osorio about the difference between making art for a particular community or for the art market. Pepón was incisive about this as an advisor to the project. That was a really interesting dialogue between them. One other thing about scaffolding and architecture is that at Bryn Mawr we have a 1928 arts building with an insert constructed in 2014, a glass box containing a black box theatre. So, much of what we presented was in both the old and new parts of that building, and the library where Camp Pause was held was up the hill. In between the two venues is a garden, and in that garden there are fountains with tiles from Syria. We decided to present As Far as My Fingertips Take Me under a tree in that garden, so we built a partition between Basel and the audience member shaped to the lowest tree bough. People could make a journey through these architectures—it was like a promenade going from one building into this garden where you could rest and digest and experience Basel’s work before you went up to the library.

The title of our project was ear-whispered. The reason for that was that in Tibetan Buddhism, there’s a tradition that you receive Buddhist teachings directly into your ear from a live, living teacher. And to me, all of Tania’s work has exactly that quality of being so intimate and so alive.

AGR: It’s so interesting to hear all of the careful considerations from all of you about architecture. Ron, could you speak about where we held As Far as My Fingertips Take Me, because that also felt like a beautiful interaction between the public and the private.

RB: It was in the Prizer Gallery, which is basically an old house with our offices in the attic and is on East César Chávez, a main street in Austin in one of the most quickly gentrifying neighborhoods in the country. It used to have about fifteen piñata shops along it and now there are maybe two or three. Basically, the front porch of the house has been enclosed and is part of the gallery, and there are windows facing the street and the sidewalk. We set it up there so you could witness the work from the sidewalk—you could tell there was something happening inside. It made a piece of this work visible, but you weren’t entirely sure what was going on.

AGR: Absolutely. You were able to witness, secondhand, this intimate but political encounter happening in the gallery—you were implicated, even as a passerby. Staging her work in a gallery space with a visible connection to the street reminds us that the white cube of the gallery is not a neutral space. As Far As My Fingertips Takes Me not only stages the symbolic distance between the viewer and the refugee who are separated by a gallery wall, but their embodied encounter which seeks to transcend this boundary poses questions to the gallery
space itself, and does not normally accommodate or necessarily welcome such interactivity.
Speaking of the gallery space, I’m interested in some of the words we use—to go back to the
specificity of language—in curating that are so discipline-specific. Words like “biennial”
and “retrospective” are so connected to visual arts, and yet we employ them in the context
of performing arts frequently. I think Tania’s work is a hybrid of the visual and the perform-
ing arts, and at the same time as she is disrupting these disciplinary labels and question-
ing them…

GL: Tania is one of the most prolific performing artists in the world right now. Often several
of her works are travelling at the same time; she’s part of the international touring market.
Yet, what we’re all talking about is an aspect of her work that is really site-based and local.
And I’d like to talk about how she managed to pull that off—maybe it’s because the work
is all fairly small and doesn’t have much infrastructure, and although she has had various
administrative partners, she’s never really had a manager or producer in a traditional sense.
So, it could be that part of the magic is that she has such a personal relationship with the
places and people who are presenting or commissioning her. It comes from her personality,
interests, and style that she takes such care to create the best possible environment for her
work to be seen, and often that is, as you say, Anna, disruptive.

Tania comes from live art—which, in a U.S. context, doesn’t really exist. It inhabits this
space between visual and performing arts. I’m trying to articulate what it is about her and
her work that we love so much. It’s simultaneously private and public. It’s both intimate and
universal. Inherent in her practice is the care of how the work gets spoken about and seen
and contextualized. It comes from her, she demands it, and there are wonderful projects
I wish I’d seen which have only existed in one place. She’s somehow both a site-specific, “one
time only” artist, yet also creates work that gets circulated to this incredible degree. Gardens
Speak must have been seen in twenty or thirty places around the world. Who is she that she
can do all of this?

RB: I agree—there is a certain magic about her work. It relates to what I was trying to get
at earlier in how it resonates locally in a specific way, but it also feels like it’s something
larger or that also mirrors the private and the public notion as well. I think with regards to
the hybridity of her work, it’s wonderful in that it challenges the performing arts world and
how sometimes it’s not about the commonly considered possibilities of an art form. And
it does the same with the visual arts. It’s wonderfully agitating both of them, at providing
prompts and questions that ask “What if?” I think these worlds can be pretty distinct and
I think the ways we can invite other people into her work is something that we’ve always
been really interested in. The fact that her work is situated in between these worlds some-
times is an opportunity to invite folks from these different worlds to experience it and be
part of it, but there are such huge assumptions in both the performing arts world and the
visual arts world. Sometimes we experience that when we’re presenting a visual artist of
some kind and there are very real assumptions about the economics of the work and how it
is to be installed that are perhaps a bit different from someone who is living and operating
in a performing arts context. There are a lot of layers to translate and traverse in terms of
those assumptions.
LK: In a way, as an observer or participant, Tania’s work spoils me for proscenium performance. It really affects how I think about the power of art. Not that I won’t see and love proscenium performance, but another door has been opened. We’re in a different room.

KC: From my perspective, the title of my festival has “theatre” in it, but I’ve never programmed a conventional play and I don’t work in a theatre venue context. So, it’s interesting because I know that anecdotally there are people, potential audiences from a more visual arts context who’ve been put off by the word “theatre” and haven’t come. I think Tania’s work especially would offer those audience members who may have those reservations an experience or insight into a different type of practice and a different way of thinking about how we experience the world together and how we tell stories.

AGR: We’ve been talking about the unique intimacy of Tania’s work but also its vast international circulation through touring and partnerships. Kate’s virtual commission and presentation of Tania’s *As Far As Isolation Goes* raises the question of the future of the performing arts field right now. With the move to the digital, how are these systems of care and support around live performance shifting for all of you?

GL: I suspect that the kinds of festivals that we all grew up going to have maybe reached the end of their shelf life. The international circulation that meant regardless of which city you were in, you were going to see the same works and have the same experience may be over for all kinds of reasons. As that happens, I would imagine that the kind of site-specific, handmade intimate relational quality of Tania’s work that we’ve been talking about is only going to become more important.

KC: It’s been interesting for me to see which works have been picked up for further touring since GIFT—in moving GIFT online I was not sure if any of those works would exist beyond that initial framework. *As Far As Isolation Goes* is one of the works that has been picked up for further international touring, and it felt so important to me at the time of turning the festival into this digital iteration that it maintained the integrity of being a one-on-one work. There was never the thought that just because it was going to be online it would need to be made available for a larger audience, as then you’d be asking the artist to change and compromise their practice. I think there’s a lot to hold onto in terms of how we continue to shape, frame, and support artists as they think about experimenting with form. I think it’s a big job and something that we really need to be mindful of. But it has been interesting to see which works have had this sense of longevity and further life.

It’s also fascinating in the way it’s opened up opportunity and possibility for works to tour that wouldn’t have had an opportunity before. So now, artists are in a position to either say “I can come,” or “You can have it as an online version.” It gives curators that option to choose and say that by not traveling they’re saving in terms of carbon footprint, etc. So, the conversation grows and it becomes much richer. With Tania’s work especially, it was one that translated to the online context beautifully. The experience of Basel drawing on you in *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* became even stronger for me in the digital iteration of *As Far As Isolation Goes*, because I was then drawing on myself. I was implicating myself in this...
history, this work, and in this relationship. That was something that I hadn’t quite anticipated until I was there and realized what the piece had become.

RB: It’s super interesting to think about our bodies in relation to the virtual. That’s something I’m curious about: how do we continue to imagine experiences that can be shared over a screen that allow for a different kind of distribution and connection around the world, while still also thinking about our bodies so that we’re not just these floating heads? In thinking about the future, the question of place becomes more complicated thinking about virtual events and projects. Basic questions, like who your audience is, become so complicated in this.

KC: I had people fighting online over tickets for our virtual edition, but they were fighting from New Zealand and the United States.

RB: Our biggest viewing populations were first in Austin and then in New York, but then in the Asian Pacific which is not normally our biggest audience demographic. So, I think that’s fascinating. There is certainly an increased concern and awareness about our carbon footprints and what that means. We talked about this with the Norwegian artist Ingri Fiksdal recently. She’s been imagining bits of choreography that can be taught and then performed by local performers.

LK: It’s so interesting to not be in a curatorial role now and to listen to the issues that everyone is now having to work with. I’ve been observing it in terms of what’s been evolving in dance. For the last four weeks I actually taught a dance online to a company that was working in a studio in New York. And who knew that would work, but it did! The question for me is how we can make it work financially. That’s a new paradigm. I love free content! We offered everything during ear-whispered at Bryn Mawr free of charge, with the exception of Gardens Speak, but it means there’s an issue of how to support artists. So, thank you all for wrestling with it.

RB: I still love gathering in person but it feels that there are also possibilities here that could be exciting. There is a quote, “Every time someone says, ‘that’s not what theatre is,’ a star dies.” There have been lots of people saying “No!” to these new things, and I say, “Why not?” I don’t know what the future holds, but it feels like those are concerns and also possibilities.

Notes


2. Although the latter two events, that of the biennial and retrospective, bear different disciplinary names and origins from that of the festival, and although they typically differ significantly in format, in this case, their format shared many characteristics of the live performance festival. Specifically, they featured live performances and installations and were concentrated over the course of a weekend or a few weeks, simultaneously, to local and visiting audiences (and in one case a virtual audience).

3. Throughout the text, roundtable participants refer to the work As Far As My Fingertips Take Me as Fingertips for short.
The Audience as Participant
I first saw Tania El Khoury’s work in my home city of London. The two performances, Gardens Speak and As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, took place in well-trodden theaters across the capital, Battersea Arts Centre and the Royal Court Theatre. These are two venues I have visited many times; their foyers immediately offer a comfortable familiarity, yet both works addressed experiences from distant or transient sites unfamiliar to me.

Reflecting back, the venues both stand on busy roads, which govern the texture and timbre of their environments. The rush of traffic and people maintains a dull hum of metropolitan acoustics, translating into an aural architecture of the city. Crossing the threshold into the venues, the sudden contrast of sound is distinctive, as the vibrating buzz of human life taking place inside the buildings dampens the urban symphony outside. This change in the soundscape marks a first transformation of place. As I move into the performance space, my senses engage as the sounds shift again, and the environments with which I am so familiar fade into the background.

I leave both works with a marked change. After, the aural identity of the theater has been transformed and my physical engagement with the performance has taken precedence: I walk away with the tangible manifestations of connection on my body. I rejoin the bustle outside, soil dusting my hands and painted figures progressing up my arm. The delicate illustration and material residue are both emblematic of a lingering moment of engagement with a distant site. The soil embodies a materiality of another type of place, its organic quality discordant with the busy, metropolitan arts venue, while the drawing on my arm denotes a journey undertaken in a distant place. Walking out of the venues onto the busy streets outside, my aural understanding of London, once so certain, is modified. The remnants of my sensory experiences shift from the resounding pulse of a city to a dull murmur.
Listening Hands

This creative-critical approach serves as a response to the qualities of *affect* inherent within the phenomenological and lasting experience of Tania El Khoury’s creative practice, focusing on two of El Khoury’s pieces, *Gardens Speak* (2014) and *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2016). In El Khoury’s tactile and aural sensory methodologies, bodies become conduits between the original site and the performance space, allowing for an active engagement with narratives and distant, conflicted places: a duality of place re-creation. Audiences gain a nuanced understanding of places and sites that contrasts with that widely available in the media. This chapter will examine the effectiveness of touch and sound in portraying places associated with conflict and transience, specifically analyzing the haptic qualities of *Gardens Speak* and the aural landscape and tactile approach of *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*. I refer to theater scholar Josephine Machon’s definition of “hapticity” as “the tactile perceptual experience of the body as a whole (rather than merely the fingers).” In this analysis, I will question whether sensory aesthetics evoke a more lasting effect or *affect* than that which is often present within more participatory modes of theatrical engagement. “Affect” is here representative of both the capacity for action and a sense of aliveness, where it is this vitality that prompts a person’s desire to connect and engage. Through performance analysis and sections of my own experiential responses to the work, I ultimately question whether El Khoury’s phenomenological approach can *affect* perception of distant places in conflict.

The In-Between Space: *Gardens Speak*

A few months after the beginning of the Syrian uprisings in 2011, I saw an image of a Syrian mother digging a grave for her son in her home garden. The scene conveyed to me the horrors and costs of the uprising, the transformation of domestic and safe spaces into morbid and mourning spaces, and the reality of the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown on its mobilizing population.

Tania El Khoury’s *Gardens Speak* asks audiences to unearth the performance, to dig and uncover stories of those who have been killed by war and conflict in Syria. Barefoot and wearing a protective coat, each member of the audience is ushered into a dark room and invited to dig down into a rectangular graveyard filled with soil that conceals buried speakers. These stories belong to one of ten victims of the Syrian uprisings, each with their own tombstone. Audiences must press their ears into the cold soil and listen closely to what emanates from below. *Gardens Speak* invites audiences “to interact: physically, politically and emotionally,” says El Khoury, “they quite literally have to dirty their hands to uncover the story and to make an effort to uncover the truth. That’s important in Syria, where what is happening is contested.” Described by El Khoury as an interactive sound installation, *Gardens Speak* is designed around the oral histories of ten people who were buried secretly across Syria during the first two years of the conflict. The secrecy surrounding these burials is indicative of private acts of resistance; but El Khoury explains that the causes of these deaths are often
forcibly altered or censored from public record to conceal unlawful fatalities, observing that “in some instances before the burial can take place the families are asked to sign documents exonerating the Assad regime of their loved one’s death.”

After the advent of the Syrian uprisings in 2011, El Khoury began to interview Syrian artists and activists about the emerging conflict: “many of them had fled Syria after being harassed, threatened, and/or arrested.” During the early days of the uprisings, activists’ primary contributions to the growing opposition movement were to attend funerals of the first martyrs: “funerals offered them a space where they could meet one another, organize, and express their rage.” As she interviewed the artists and activists, El Khoury began to collect recounted, personal stories of people who had died as a result of the conflict. Some of those killed were non-violent activists, while others participated in armed resistance. Some simply happened to find themselves in a war zone, like Basil, one of the martyrs in Gardens Speak who was buried in a garden in Homs:

It was five days after the Houla massacre. I was there with Ali, Muhannad, Imad, and Abu Ibrahim. We were filming in old Homs when a mortar shell fell on us. I don’t know why, but this time it didn’t miss us. It came right down on top of us. All of a sudden, four young men whose freedom, faith, and love for the country I respected died. And I died with them.

The development of Gardens Speak expanded from El Khoury’s collecting of photographs of Syrian gardens that had been transformed into informal cemeteries. She observes that “by concealing the bodies of the martyrs under the soil these gardens play out a continuing collaboration between the living and the dead.” War transforms landscapes through immediate, frenetic change or a slower shift; cities and towns become contested zones, territorial space, and sites of conflict. Spaces once demarcated on a map as private are embroiled in the nexus of conflict and therefore rendered public. As El Khoury states, “I wanted to understand the political and social forces that were transforming such intimate living spaces into those of death and mourning.” The transformation of private gardens to graveyards marks this change as a reassignment of the meaning of a place. The nature of gardens as “an uncommon collaboration between nature and culture” underlines their site-specificity.

As a result of conflict, a once private space now absorbs within its soil new histories and complexities, transforming its site-specificity into a place representative of a confrontation between nature and cultural destruction en masse.

In a private garden, a site of intimate and personal making, we see a transformation and a shift of made places: garden to graveyard, site to ruin (Figure 1). Forced onto the public stage through the horrors of conflict and the eradication of privacy from those who are subjected to oppression, the graveyard as a site is emblematic of the tragedies of conflict. In Gardens Speak, graveyards as “ unofficial” locations transform what once was a garden to a site of loss. Lily Kong observes that “death and dying are intensely anchored in space and place”; and, as El Khoury suggests, within the contested space and place of war, people’s narratives are retold, reimagined or even erased for the sake of propaganda, therefore forcibly producing an associated space of death where the identity of the site has been violently mediated.
As I wait in the foyer of London’s Battersea Arts Centre, an elderly member of the public engages me in conversation about the persistent rain outside. “In that space upstairs they’ve created a graveyard,” she goes on to say, referring to Gardens Speak, “apparently it’s really quiet in there.” The paradox of two disparate worlds existing so closely together has kept the memory of this encounter sharp in my mind. Philosopher Jeff Malpas observes that any given place or event is “dependent upon the interconnectedness of the elements within it—as it is also dependent on its interconnection with other places.”

In the foyer of the arts center, with any number of events going on at one time (a talk in the busy café by an artist from Shanghai; a dance recital in a bright studio with local children; the quiet, dark graveyard upstairs), the links between these divergent yet interconnected places exhibits what Doreen Massey refers to as the “throwntogetherness” of place. As I considered the multi-layered arts center, the previous performance of Gardens Speak just coming to a close upstairs, my thoughts dwelt on the individuals in the audience above me, lying on top of the soil, their identities and personal narratives becoming part of the performance space. Simultaneously, somewhere in-between myself and them, was the distant place, a collection of spectral stories and identities, of the graveyard.

Gardens Speak accesses this quality of throwntogetherness, “the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and geography of then and theres).” The “then” and “there,” a collection of stories from people who may never have met, from different parts of Syria, all affected by the same external situation, is encountered.
by the “now” and “here,” a vast array of audience members, each bringing their own consciousness, identity, and understandings. This is further reflective of the in-between space in a conflict zone: an unresolved site in flux that is being violently negotiated. Massey continues to describe this concept as “a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman.”17 Returning to the landscape of war, the forced togetherness of conflict is driven by the connection between human and nonhuman, person and technology, nature and machine. This is mirrored through the use of technology in Gardens Speak, a contrast drawn from the earthy and natural aesthetic of the ground, compared with the technology enabling the aural transmission of the stories.

The process of creation brought to light more nuanced and personal accounts of conflict, assembled from oral histories and compiled with audio traces of final moments, excerpts, and clips found in home videos or diaries shared with El Khoury: “each narrative has been carefully constructed with the friends and family members of the deceased to retell their stories, as they themselves may have recounted it.”18 Gardens Speak is a microcosm of the mass of lives affected by the Syrian uprising and conflict, as well as the changing effect on the landscape and consequent displacement of millions. As a whole, the performance takes the form of an assembled patchwork map, methodologically constructed through technology (the speakers) and organic objects (soil), as artifacts representative of lived experience. Audiences become part of this assembly, lying on the earth.

Fragments of each deceased storyteller live on in this graveyard, and through the arrangement of a collective history including words, music, and singing, these stories embody a communal memorial process. The reimagining of each story resonates beyond the individual, becoming representative of the multitude of lives affected. Experiencing Gardens Speak is to witness individual narratives, the deceased’s story is transmitted to the present day through a collective process of archiving and sharing intangible heritage. Accessing this intangibility through the process of listening situates the audience in an in-between space: presence and absence, the past and present day are woven together to create a plateau of liminality. Ghosts are suspended in time, existing in a performance place whose very existence aims to bring to light the intangibility that was at risk of being altered or disrupted, and to distant people and to places that may no longer exist.

Archaeology of the Present and the Sensual Geography of the Past

Yannis Hamilakis’ book Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect suggests that archaeology has neglected the multisensory experience it embodies, in spite of its apparent links with the material traces of the past. Hamilakis proposes a sensorial archaeology that can unearth the lost, suppressed, and forgotten affective modalities of humans. He argues that social memory is an important factor in understanding history, and that studying archaeology can unearth “a trans-corporeal, sensorial landscape.”19 As in archaeology, an experiential product is generated from the enmeshing of various temporalities, locations, and narratives in the construction of Gardens Speak. Moreover, and akin to the process of physically excavating artifacts or remains, as audience members we
are invited to explore the performance experientially using our bodies. In this way, the performance evinces what Hamilakis describes as a contradiction within archaeology: “the bodily senses, they would say, are ephemeral, intangible, ethereal. How can we therefore pinpoint the concrete, material evidence for sensory interactions amongst people who lived before us?” In *Gardens Speak*, El Khoury is not only attempting to offer a space of mourning denied to those represented, she is also addressing this contradiction: audiences are able to sensorially experience the dead, the place, and their past in the contemporary present.

Drawing together the fields of archaeology and performance in interdisciplinary collaboration, theater-maker Mike Pearson and classicist Michael Shanks in *Theatre/Archaeology* contrast the two fields, exploring the spaces in which “cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities.” Pearson and Shanks observe that the disciplines access the liminal quality associated with in-between spaces, between the past and present, presence and absence. Shanks notes of archaeology:

> Above all, landscape archaeology is centred upon a concept which seems to offer a unifying perspective, cross-cutting culture and nature, like the concept of the “body.” It cuts across both time and space too, with continuities and breaks in a temporal line from past to present, in the traces of past in the present, in the geographical shape of lives around us.

The connection with the body here dovetails with the contradiction that Hamilakis pinpoints in archaeology, as well as the physical and liminal experience in *Gardens Speak*: the dichotomy between the ephemeral and the material. Most crucially, it brings to the fore the role of the senses, which Paul Rodaway observes as being “an important part of everyday experience, not just art… the senses mediate experience.” *Gardens Speak* is a phenomenal performance in that it is meditative and reflective. The audience’s senses allow histories, cultural landscapes, and places to bloom into focus through the referential process of creating the here-and-there in the spectral landscape. The multidimensional and therefore phenomenal quality of the performance means that it is able to “unearth forgotten and unknown sensorial modalities, and reactivate such multi-sensorial experiences”: audiences can experientially touch the place in question.

My experience of *Gardens Speak* felt hurried, then all at once deeply moving. Fortunate in my lack of familiarity and consequent maladroitness around death, before walking into the darkened room I anticipate the same feeling of estrangement I experience when I’m passing through a graveyard, so I enter quickly. I don’t take time to really notice my surroundings and I am acutely conscious of the close proximity of other audience members, so much so that when we walk onto and lie down on the soil, I am immediately aware even in darkness that my toe is suddenly touching the bottom of a stranger’s foot. As I distract myself and dig down into the cold, grainy soil, I hear an echo, like a distant sound played in water. I am able to dig further until I hear his voice. Listening closely, my toe relaxes, retaining its physical connection to the other person. This feels at first jarring, then comforting, and finally transformative: the bottom of their foot, warm and alive, unifies in the dark with the voice I hear of a young boy.

As I’m leaving the theater, and walking outside on the streets of London, I look down and notice the soil left under my nails, a remnant of the performance that continues to catch my attention for the rest of the day.
I would assert that in the physical reenactment employing the audience’s sensory understanding in *Gardens Speak*, we experience the in-between space, the dualism to which Hamilakis makes reference: ephemeral materiality. This sensory experience is undoubtedly heightened by the fact that the performance is in the dark. Upon entering the hushed, shadowy space and seeing the graveyard framed by the doorway, audiences understand that this performance embodies a sacred quality, and that we stand at the threshold of a hallowed place. As we enter, we walk across the soil and choose a gravestone, one for each audience member (Figure 2). We are then invited to lie down and dig for the speaker concealed in the soil, following the first sounds of the track as it begins to play. As we listen, audiences lie on the earth in the dark. The darkness means that our act of excavation is conducted in privacy, a process of secret yet connected reenactment. The performance structure, with multiple showings a day, means that audiences are redigging the same soil that a multitude of anonymous others have. At the end of the performance, after listening to the track, we are asked to re-cover the speaker with soil. In this act, the audience reenacts a burial, a moment with the dead that links directly to Syria. Of course, one could never return the soil to exactly how it was, symbolizing the impossibility of ever returning to the past.

Dance historian Sally Banes and critical dance studies scholar André Lepecki observe that “the senses in performance remain a site of unsuspected critical and performative power.”25 This power is evident in *Gardens Speak* in two ways, in the creation of a place for telling the stories of the deceased and in the reenacted mourning and burial carried out...
by the audience, which pays respects to the dead. Through these acts, the audience holds the power of making the performance occur and this place and time reexist. As audience members in *Gardens Speak*, our hands are “listening” to an abstract subject, in a re-created place and time. We are with a sense, but also without: our sense of touch is heightened but we cannot see. Desensitization to the horrific images of the Syrian conflict may be a product of distance in understanding the conflict, but a haptic understanding of place is not familiar to the audience in the same way. Our positionality is invariably muddled with barriers: the barrier of distance, the barrier of death and absence of body and, most profoundly, the barrier of skin to the soul. Philosopher Jacques Derrida identifies the interval or spacing between two surfaces as the very conditions of contact, and a level of untouchability is therefore perhaps inevitable. This is mirrored through the aesthetic of *Gardens Speak*, the soil akin to a layer of skin, the in-between space like a seam running between the audience and the place of the deceased.

**The Power in Affective Practice**

Hamilakis observes that the majority of people experience contemporary war and conflict through a screen, and, “of course through the sanitized images and sounds that the captains of Western information networks allow.” Considering again the reliance of this mediated visual understanding of the world, some anthropologists have claimed that many in the West today live under conditions that could be described as “a state of cultural anesthesia.” The lack of connection with issues in spite of their prevalence in the news reveals a dis-connect with distant places, which Hamilakis observes is seen through the lack of sensory engagement with the original site. At the end of experiencing *Gardens Speak*, El Khoury offers the opportunity for audiences to write a letter to the owner of the story they listened to. Some of the letters are published in the *Gardens Speak* book, and the following excerpt from one speaks to the performance’s potential to bridge the sensory gap between the original site and the performance location. They write:

> It was extraordinary to hear your story… a very personal, real account of what happened to you. Of resistance and love and the need to fight back. To take time to listen intently to your words, ears next to your voice, the earth in my nose made me pause, think, reflect, connect, in a way that is hard to do when watching images from Syria on the TV or internet or stories/news on the radio.

Applied and social theater scholar James Thompson’s work on affect “refers to emotional, often automatic, embodied responses that occur in relation to something else—be it object of observation, recall of a memory.” Referring to Patricia Clough’s work in affective research, Thompson agrees that affect is connected to a capacity for action and to a sense of aliveness. In *Gardens Speak*, the stark contrast between the living and the dead is present in the relationship between the living audience and the artwork. I am not passive, I am immersed: I am pressed against the ground, I seek out the performance myself, I have soil
under my nails. Clough observes, “it is that vitality that prompts a person’s desire to connect and engage (perhaps with others or ideas).” I am reminded here of my dual experience of connecting with the performance, as well as physically connecting with another audience member. The affective quality of these two moments opens me to the possibility of connectivity, reflecting what literary critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht refers to as “presence culture,” where one can acknowledge the “immediate physical ‘touch’ of cultural objects” and come to feel “in-the-world in a spatial and temporal way.”

A level of untouchability may always be present within barriers, but through the re-creation and reenactment in Gardens Speak there is an overt acknowledgement that this performance is not in situ, and we are visitors to this graveyard. The consciousness of the fact that we are re-creating, and that we as audiences must take an active role in making the performance happen, incites a transformative power within the affective practice. Hamilakis notes that experiencing through the senses “does not attempt to represent the past, or the present,” but simply “to conjure up the interweaving of materials, bodies, things, and substances in motion to reignite their affective power.”

How much impact on understanding can a performance about a distant place have on audiences? In Gardens Speak, we come closer to understanding an experience that is perhaps alien to many in the West, challenging to translate through static and mediated channels. The emotional, affective quality of El Khoury’s work allows an audience a window into genuine nuances behind the collective assumptive experience of those affected by conflict. Theater scholar Silvija Jestrovic observes that “the theatricalization of an actual space reshapes its future meaning in cultural memory” and it is through the transformative and tactile qualities of Gardens Speak that the audience can be affected by experiences of conflict and war, of distant places. As a result, they carry this with them as they walk out of the performance space, through the foyer and into their own cultural surroundings.

**Verbal Pathways: As Far As My Fingertips Take Me**

In the boats, all the faces are stressed
Holding their breaths
Bracing their wounds
They’ve heard so much gunfire
They no longer feel anything
They no longer feel anything.

At the Royal Court Theatre for As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, the performance begins as I gingerly place my arm through the wall, engendering an immediate feeling of both the with and without. As it disappears from view, I become hyper aware of my arm. I imagine how it looks, a limb in isolation, as breezes from passersby become more noticeable and take on a corporeal quality. As the soundtrack begins, I close my eyes and surrender to the presence moving up and down my arm, which has become a part of the artwork that I am experiencing. As the damp traces of the ink whisper across my skin, I know logically that it is a brush touching
me. In the absence of sight however, the soundscape and sensory qualities of the experience are the most prominent; a haptic understanding that centers on the movement alone as the point of connection. The isolation of my arm permeates through my body, separated from my surroundings as I focus on the audio and haptic experiences of my disembodied limb.

![Audio Button]

 Please visit Fulcrum to hear this audio file.

**Figure 3.** Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me [Audio excerpt]*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). 0:00–1:49 min. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.8w32r819t

Tania El Khoury’s *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* is a 12-minute-long, one-on-one installation performance (Figure 3). The work is a meeting of two people who never see one another: a single audience member and a performer, Basel Zaraa, who made the work in collaboration with El Khoury. As described, there is a notion of the with and without in this work that alludes to a relationship between both presence and absence. The experience with a soundscape provides a material understanding that is without a physical form: a presence in the tactile but an absence in the aural. Theater scholar Stephen Di Benedetto observes that:

Recorded voices resonate inside our heads and sound as if they are our voices. These voices become a part of us, as if the speaker shares our space, intimately breathing into our ears. That which is supposedly inaudible is conveyed through sensation, giving shape to an absent body.37

As I listen, the voice I hear describes a journey of movement through space. The transitory narrative etches images in my mind of border crossings and perilous voyages across the sea.
The speech is littered with references to jungles, boats, and an absent home; “take me back, watching the kids from the balcony.” There is a further layering of absence in the narrative of the journey: the storyteller’s verbal pathways lead from home, into transit and then to the unknown, absent from their site of origin. The rich visual imagery of the words spoken into my ears and the sensory experience of the work incites what Thompson calls “an intense awareness of presence” which “can pull a person into critical engagement with his or her surroundings”: Gumbrecht’s “presence culture.” Removing my arm from the wall, I am awash with the intensity of this presence, a feeling enhanced by the drawings on my newly returned arm. I have never visited the places described, but the point of connection gives shape to this absent body and their experiences, allowing for a critical engagement with my previous understanding of these narratives and places in question, coming to feel “in-the-world in a spatial and temporal way.”

The structure of the performance is physically and dramaturgically determined by a wall placed between the audience member and Zaraa, headphones, and a seat adjacent to a punctured border. On the wall is the text that audiences hear through the headphones, transcribed into English. With his audience seated, arm extended, Zaraa illustrates the song and speech of the soundscape with small, delicate drawings. Queues of refugees travel down the participant’s arms, a boat bobs on the palm of the hand and black circles cover each of the fingertips. In the iteration I participated in at the Royal Court Theatre you never see Zaraa, although your hands directly touch for the duration of the work.

Basel Zaraa is a rap and street artist from the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria, where the majority of inhabitants have been stateless for generations. Participants hear his two sisters’ journeys from Damascus to Sweden, plotting places on a map that follow their experiences: travelling from Syria into Turkey, crossing the sea on a boat and facing border discrimination and police intervention in Germany. In the 2019 report, “Everybody Wants a Refugee on Stage,” compiled by the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts in collaboration with Shubbak Festival, information was collated from more than 140 European theater and performance initiatives, mapping creation and displacement to explore new narratives about migration. A predominant finding concerned labeling, from “crisis,” to the concept of “refugeeness,” or “refugee community,” which the report suggests gives rise to a notion of “otherness”: “a concept that there is one homogenous community of refugees who all think and act the same, a group whose culture is somehow separate from that of the hosting community and have a parallel existence.”

The audio track includes Zaraa rapping to music and singing, a plaintive elegy mourning a home (Figure 4). The poetic text addresses the journeys faced by refugees, reflecting stories of families divided, whose immediate geographies of experience are influenced and dictated by wider, global geopolitics that are beyond their control. The report also highlighted that defining a strict delineation between “migrants” and “refugees” is not a useful exercise, as many migrants have fled times of extreme economic hardship and scarcity, and have had similar experiences during their displacement and journey to those faced by people that meet the UN Refugee Agency mandated criteria for refugee status. These terms carry fixed associations, for “only certain kinds of human beings.” “The professional,” as noted by Trilling, “who moves to a neighbouring city for work is not usually described as a
migrant, and neither is the wealthy businessman who acquires new passports,” whereas “it is most often applied to those people who fall foul of border control at the frontiers of the rich world.”

Zaraa hasn’t seen his parents for seven years. Both the story and the artwork embody personal and political borderlines, and hint at hope in overcoming divisions. As Zaraa says, “four generations of refugees are not so easily fooled by humanity. They know, we know how to resist and survive and to cross these borders. All borders.”

As your arm crosses the threshold of two positionalities and contexts, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* offers a chance to cross this border, to share experiences and understanding.

In *Theatre and Migration*, theater scholar Emma Cox states that migrants and refugees are of course produced by movements through space, in fact becoming strangers through forced migration and movement. This suggests an inextricable interrelationship between refugee, migrants, and the varying experience of space and place; and the associations that surround migration and refugees related to experiences in space are inextricably bound up with power held by some and not by others. Geographer Tim Cresswell further suggests that “thinking culturally about contemporary refugees leads to questions about borderlands, limits, margins and liminal spaces.”

*As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* addresses borderlands through its spatial construction, representing the liminality of these discursive sites of transit and precarity. However, its static positioning confronts associations of refugee and migrant identity as being generated by movements through space. Thanks to a momentary pause leading to a point of connection and a lack of visual indicators, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* deconstructs and problematizes potential othering. As Machon states, “removing sight in an immersive performance... heightens those senses often deemed as...
secondary,” including hapticity. The “radical repositioning of the performance/spectator relationship,” in this case a partition that denotes how to participate, addresses the power imbalance in space by placing the meeting on an equal footing, yet still acknowledging the division across a wall in the spatial layout. This relocates “the relationship conceptually, spatially and physically” in order to guide the audience to an assessment of positionality. To place your hand through the wall towards Zaraa is an offering, but it is also an exchange of control with whoever is on the other side of the wall, a further deconstruction and reimagining of power held by some and not by others.

The Body as Map: Haptic Sounds

Along with the physical introduction to Basel Zaraa as the audience member first puts their hand through the wall, he is heard to say, “This is me, touching your arm.” He then begins to tell his story about Palestinian refugees forced to find a home in Syrian camps, in 1948 and still today. In this work, El Khoury and Zaraa aim to deconstruct the European assumption of a strong link between the refugee “crisis” and the Arab Spring: for more than seventy years, generations of Palestinians have been born as refugees. The intimacy of the physical connection, as an unseen stranger paints on my arm, opens new perspectives on the geopolitical situations in the soundscape, more typically encountered as “news” for public discourse. As Zaraa begins to mark my fingertips, with what I later learn to be black circles, I draw connections in my mind between the places he is talking about and physical identity. The associations I draw myself catalyze an active quality as a participant, transforming touch to haptic; artist Rosalyn Driscoll observes that when the haptic is used in performance, “touching grounds the aesthetic experienced in the body.” As Far As My Fingertips Take Me’s form becomes one of corporeal aesthetics, countering the visual, and perhaps distant, semiotics that constitute dominant associations with the places and sites described in Zaraa’s story.

In the soundtrack, we hear an excerpt of a news report: “They’ve been told not to come, but this great migration feels unstoppable.” Reflecting on the migration “crisis,” theater scholars Emma Cox and Caroline Wake suggest that “it is not merely about the number of refugees but their proximity and visibility” in how the media covered this human rights emergency, an “air of crisis is accentuated by a dramatically different media ecology.” Also referenced in the soundscape is Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian Kurdish child whose body washed up on a Turkish beach to become an emblematic and politicized image of migration across the Mediterranean. Discussing the saturation of this image in the media, Cox and Wake note how “images and information circulate differently now,” with information distribution reaching a fever pitch. As Far As My Fingertips Take Me reflects instead a corporeal emphasis on haptic and aural methodologies. The experience is transformative during the experience of the artwork, as well as afterwards with a lingering presence on one’s arm. “Sensory elision, especially between sight and touch,” according to Machon, “directly impacts on the nature of perception and the embodied memory that one has of the work.” What we hear and feel comes first: this is the primary methodology of
understanding. What comes second is a visual recognition of images we are familiar with, but seen in a new light.

During this performance, the body becomes a site for a reenacted journey through places, transposed onto the body in a cartographic way (Figure 5). Zaraa charts his journey in stages directly onto the audience member in a live map, reflective of the precarity of migratory journeys and experiences through places in transit. Each arm is different and no two brushstrokes are alike. This inherent liveness in the drawing leaves a design that is a personal and personalized reflection of Zaraa's story for each individual. The illustration is demonstrative of a haptic moment shared between participant and Zaraa and, like a map, the illustration is a layer of representation of the journey through sites distant from the original place. To refer back to Derrida's assertion that it is the interval or spacing between two surfaces that becomes the very conditions of contact, the haptic map that is left on each audience member is indicative of a communal moment of connection. However, it is also reflective of the reality of hovering on the edge of shared perception, the drawing sitting on the skin, a material and corporeal divide between two people’s realms of understanding.

Figure 5. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

When I participated in As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, the installation was placed in the middle of the bar on the upper level of the Royal Court Theatre in London. The work was programmed as part of LIFT’s On the Move program, which was curated in response to the migration “crisis” in 2016. As a result, the bar area was crowded with people meeting friends,
waiting to see a performance or looking at artwork on the walls. Closing my eyes, I would recognize the familiar harmony of voices, clinking glasses, and the friction of chair legs; my preassociations with the setting are numerous and comforting. Sitting at the installation in the middle of the room and slipping on the headphones, this changes. As the warm, leathery texture of the headphones meets my body, the background noise is abruptly halted like a caesura between two aural entities, and there is an immediate contrast between the murmur of patrons at the bar and Zaraa’s voice solely grabbing the attention of my ear. Hearing him first summons my focus, and as the soundtrack develops with music flowing in and amongst the words, I close my eyes and a world begins to be built.

As the auditory experience begins, I feel separate from my immediate surroundings. Musician and sound artist Peter Cusack observes that “the individual is at the centre of a sonic place” and I operate with a singular position of privacy, an individual moment with the story I’m being told. But how, as theater scholar Lynne Kendrick asks, “does sound in all its sonorous, sensual and sensitising potential form the audience experience,” in this case, one of understanding places in transit as a refugee? Further to this, how does sound form a connection with Zaraa in a moment of fleeting togetherness, someone who as an audience member, you never see? To answer this, I refer to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s seminal theory on listening, in which a listener is never in isolation, but it always in relation to or with. At the heart of Nancy’s theory is a focus on the feeling in sound, and how in feeling “we form a sense of ourselves”: sound as experienced that permeates through the body and becomes material. As you place your hand through the wall and the soundtrack reaches you, the physical connection creates a feeling of sound and allows you to listen. As Far As My Fingertips Take Me is transformative in its haptic-aural potential for audiences to listen. In this work, Zaraa’s holding of the arm is echoed in what is heard, and sound in this case operates in a similar way: “it can literally be felt through our bodies, on our skin.” It is through the combination of the senses, to hear and to touch that we begin to listen, and to grasp an understanding of situations and places that are separate from our own frame of reference.

Zaraa’s recorded performance encompasses song in Arabic and rap. Ethnomusicologist Tom Western’s paper “Sounding Stories, Telling Sounds,” presented at the Refugee Hosts International Conference in 2019, mapped the correlation between sounds and aurality and the experiences of refugee integration. Western observed that “music and sound have long been enrolled in migration and representations of migration.” Voices are considered as not just political subjectivities, but are “deeply felt markers of class, race, geographical origin,” allowing us to think about listening as a dual relationship: “emplacement as much as displacement.” This duality is reminiscent of the feeling of with and without felt when I placed my arm through the wall, a presence and an absence. We are rooted in this space and place with Zaraa, connected through a haptic moment of engagement, but through the music, emblematic both linguistically and culturally of a different place, there is a feeling of the distant. Contrastingly, before the rap begins, Zaraa talks over the sound of the sea lapping at the shore, waves, and seagulls. In this case, the nonverbal noises in the soundscape are as important as the words we hear. The opening sounds of the sea are deeply evocative of the journeys that refugees have been making across the Mediterranean Sea, and the otherwise unspecific sound becomes site-referential.
Referring again to Malpas’ assertion that any given place or event is “dependent upon the interconnectedness of the elements within it—as it is also dependent on its intercon-
nection with other places,” As Far As My Fingertips Take Me’s auditory form allows for an in-between space between referential and nonspecific, distant and present, to be explored through the sensory reverberations of the sound that touches your ear. For Di Benedetto, this provokes “the embodied mind” and invigorates “sensorial perception.” There is no literal embodiment; but rather, a connection of sensory, aural-haptic conduit as the words enter your ears—what theater scholar Misha Myers describes as listening to that “extends or transfers this touch between two subjects.” This work’s use of audio allows the audience to hover on the edge of a migration story, creating an opportunity for the participant to assess their own distance, positionality, and privilege. As Far As My Fingertips Take Me enters the ear and inspires a sensory response that moves beyond physical aesthetics.

Conclusion: Sensing the Position of Place

In both Gardens Speak and As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, qualities of affect are created in the sensory methodologies employed in these participatory works. Using sound and touch, El Khoury asks audiences to consider their position through a duality of place recreation. In these performances, we opt in by participating, hearing about stories and places that have been affected by conflict and the resulting migratory journeys. Audiences can hear, but in Tania El Khoury’s works we begin to listen and therefore feel, gaining the opportunity to have a story affect and transform the embodied experience and perspective of place. This can offer a resistance to the constraints of society and geography, closing the gap in the distance between distant places and one another.

Notes

1. See Hamilakis, Archaeology and the Senses.
3. Clough and Halley, The Affective Turn, quoted in James Thompson, Performance Affects, 117.
4. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 1.
7. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2.
8. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2.
10. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2.
11. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2.
12. Ian Thompson, “Gardens, Parks and Sense of Place,” 159.
14. Malpas, Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography, 39.
15. Massey, For Space, 140.
17. Massey, 14.
19. Hamilakis, 12.
22. Pearson and Shanks, 41.
24. Hamilakis, 228.
27. Hamilakis, 6.
31. Clough and Halley, quoted in James Thompson, 117.
32. Clough and Halley.
34. Hamilakis, 13.
38. El Khoury with Zaraa.
39. James Thompson, 56; Gumbrecht, 2.
40. Gumbrecht, 80.
41. See Gorman and Yazaji, “Everybody Wants a Refugee on Stage.”
42. Gorman and Yazaji.
43. Gorman and Yazaji.
44. Gorman and Yazaji.
45. El Khoury with Zaraa.
46. See Cox, *Theatre and Migration*.
49. Machon, 36.
50. El Khoury with Zaraa.
52. El Khoury with Zaraa.
54. Cox and Wake.
55. Machon, 45.
59. Kendrick.
60. Western, “Sounding Stories, Telling Sounds.”
61. Western.
63. Di Benedetto, 131.
64. Myers, “Vocal Landscaping,” in *Theatre Noise*, 70–81, 70.
Reckoning with Contact within a Performative “Migratory Aesthetics”

Laurel V. McLaughlin

To access all audio/visual examples referenced in this essay, please visit the open access version on Fulcrum at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424.

‘Migratory Aesthetics,’ then, is a non-concept, a ground for experimentation that opens up possible relations with ‘the migratory,’ rather than pinpointing such relations.¹

Mieke Bal

As audiences entered ear-whispered, Tania El Khoury’s survey at Bryn Mawr College, in the Special Collections Rare Book Room-turned gallery to view the multichannel video installation *Camp Pause* (2014), they traversed a darkened corridor, illuminated only by excess light from the other side of the wall, which led them to the artwork’s installation (Figure 1). There, they could access a room—built of four white walls, displaying four different yet simultaneous video projections of scenes from southern Lebanon’s Rashidieh camp for refugees. They encountered the option to sit on one of eight stools—organized in pairs of red, yellow, blue, and green, and facing each of the four projections. But to sit meant picking up the headphones that lay atop each of the stools, and then choosing whether or not to immerse themselves in the projections’ corresponding sound- and imagescapes.

Audiences—a term that El Khoury uses to indicate members who are “part of the story, a political being, a collective, but also a complex individual”—likewise met with invitations, offerings, and choices, configured within *Stories of Refuge* (2013), another immersive video installation by the interdisciplinary research and performative collective Dictaphone Group, comprised of anonymous residents of Munich’s “Yellow Camp” and exhibited at Twelve Gates Arts in Philadelphia—one of the satellite installations within the multisited survey. Metal-frame bunk-beds positioned toward three projections furnished a precarious type of rest for audiences, who could sit or lie down on the bunks with or without headphones, writing (or not) their reflections, epistles, or errant thoughts in blank journals left on the beds. In *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2016), a singular audience member sits next to a wall, dons headphones, and decides whether to thread their arm through a hole in the wall into an unseen space. Sited in the outdoor space of Bryn Mawr College’s Taft Garden, the performance facilitated the potential meeting of the audience member’s arm with the hands of musician and street artist, Basel Zaraa. Through ink drawn on the audience member’s arm and rap lyrics flowing through headphones, Zaraa shares his experiences in Palestinian and Syrian refugee camps. In each of these installations, El Khoury and her collective Dictaphone Group, including collaborators Petra Serhal and Abir Saksouk, construct scenarios with refugees that begin to implicate audiences according to their “real-time” or live decisions to participate or not in the work of art—to see, to listen, to come along with subjects as they film and/or narrate their experiences. In doing so or not, the audience’s actions become politically meaningful as alliance(s) or distantiation(s).

These are some of the mediated, live, and sensory peregrinations in works by El Khoury and Dictaphone Group. Each of the performances and installations configure perceptible passages—immersive, performative, and political, voluntary, or seemingly involuntary. As it is commonly termed, participation, even in the form of nonparticipation, connotes a host of aesthetic and political meanings (alignment, complicity, opposition, absorption, and so on), and, on the surface, seems to epitomize how audiences approach the unwieldy combination of art and migration. In fact, El Khoury and collaborators in the collective Dictaphone Group, among others, resist the term “participation” for the ways in which it potentially manipulates both audiences and communities, establishing unequal modes of engagement for subjects and audiences. It can, as El Khoury explains in an interview with curator Anna Gallagher-Ross, provide a false illusion of choice as many of those same choices have already been made by those in positions of power. Rather, El Khoury and Dictaphone Group realize
another form of engagement, that of “interactive” environments in which seemingly neutral audience members negotiate space and agency, and ultimately cocreate works alongside highly politicized subjects. I argue that such works activate and problematize what cultural theorist Mieke Bal terms “contact,” a tenet within her larger theoretical research paradigm of “migratory aesthetics.” In Bal’s account of “the aesthetic dimension[s] of the migratory experience and its impact and visualization in contemporary artistic practices,” she queries how migration fundamentally affects culture and vice versa. As stated in the epigraph, Bal offers “non-concept,” as “ground for experimentation that opens up possible relations with ‘the migratory.’” Bal’s model examines the media of film, video, and video installation to articulate a shared ontology with the conditions of migration: movement, memory, heterochrony, and contact.

Such a model is successful in its observation of formal properties perceived by the full spectrum of senses that mirror lived experiential conditions, and for the ways in which the system discloses specific observations dependent upon an individual’s migration, while also remaining porous. It thus enables the identification of mutual patterns without being reductive. In this essay, I aim to examine the experiential conditions and formal properties of film in the video installations Camp Pause and Stories of Refuge, and expand, however briefly, its application beyond the media of film, video, and video installation to include aspects of “live art” in the one-on-one performance As Far as My Fingertips Take Me. Such a performance work, which enfolds audiences into its creation, could instantiate, in my perspective, what performance curator Catherine Wood qualifies as “live art,” namely, “carrying the intensity of being in the moment, a mutual presentness, even an element of physical risk,” and likewise extend Bal’s conception of contact beyond the black box and screen to more entangled relations of solidarity and power.

According to El Khoury, live art refuses the presumed passivity of theater and performance audiences and instead stages relational encounters in a variety of contexts and with differing media, or, as she says, “offers a more flexible space between maker and performer, artist and spectator.” In an interview for Full Service Radio, El Khoury describes this encounter as nondependent upon the performer’s body. Instead, the intimacy of the relationship between performer and audience constitutes a “shared vulnerability,” aligning with Wood’s assessment of risk. Rather than projecting her aims for the work upon her audiences, El Khoury orchestrates a scenario in which they relate to the work differently, as they so choose. This embodied, somewhat scripted, yet presumably open relationship between performer and audience concerning the experiences of displaced people necessarily includes Bal’s conceptions of movement, memory, heterochrony, and contact, albeit in expanded ways.

Shared Ontologies between Lived Experiences of Migration and the Live Art of Tania El Khoury

Bal asserts that aesthetics are dependent upon the sensorial, the bodily—rather than a philosophical rationalization via the optical. In the context of contemporary migration,
this strikes me as crucial. Abstractions, such as national borders, and bureaucratic legislation not only threaten to undermine both the people whom they claim to serve and their allies, but also to uphold hierarchical relationships based on citizenship that determine movement across borders. In contradistinction to this rationalization, Bal posits a theoretical research matrix through the alignment of medium-specific ontological characteristics between film with migration—movement, memory, heterochrony, and contact. It provides a common lexicon for formal analysis through experience rather than opticality, while not circumscribing the specificities of those experiences within universal conclusions. As such, it presents a radical commoning of research concerning art and migration, in that, on some level, the researcher can ideally share in the shared part of experience with the artist and subjects, even if this sharing has critical limits. Expanding the application of Bal’s medium-specific theory to performance and especially live art, I recognize these ontological conditions, albeit in modified forms, and their political stakes for a culture of the migratory, as Bal puts it.

Tania El Khoury’s work *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, which I will examine later, and those produced by her collective Dictaphone Group—*Camp Pause* and *Stories of Refuge*—share the ontological qualities with migration that Bal identifies for film. The latter two feature video as a central part of the installation, which aligns their ontologies with that of film. These works not only disclose the migratory journeys of their subjects, but formally and materially they contain movement, memory, heterochrony, and contact.

**Figure 2.** Dictaphone Group, *Camp Pause* [Hussein al-Zaini video excerpt], 2014. Four-channel video installation. Research and art direction: Abir Saksouk and Tania El Khoury; camera: Karam Ghossein; video editing: Ali Beidoun; sound design: Majd Al Hamwi. Participants: Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour. 0:00–0:27 min. Video: courtesy of the collective. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/fulcrum.6w924f619
The four videos at the core of the Camp Pause installation project moving images onto fixed walls to establish image-based movement across a surface as a material basis for the work, and include editing that illuminates movement. At least one of the videos from Camp Pause, for instance, employs quick panning shots of the shoreline that cuts abruptly to a relatively stiller image of a makeshift telephone pole; this pole’s stillness belies the activity encased within its multiple wires rapidly transmitting energy, power, communication unseen (Figure 2). The soundtrack pulses with upbeat, jubilant music, not yet interrupted by the call to prayer from the minaret on-screen and its supplication for stillness. The camera crosscuts recur actively and constantly, frequently between images that juxtapose the motion of the sea with the stillness of a graveyard, an unfinished building, or a beach strewn with trash. Furthermore, interactive movement is required of audience members, as they enter the installation and have the option to shift from each chair in order to listen to the four subjects (Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour) narrate their experiences of migration to Rashidieh refugee camp in Lebanon, situated close to the Mediterranean Sea, and their paths through the camp from their homes to the sea. While a subtle gesture, movement from one stool to the next—handmade by members of the refugee community themselves—performs a gesture of solidarity with the videos’ subjects if one chooses to listen to, look at, and engage with the life-size images.

Movement is one of four ontological qualities in Bal’s account of migratory aesthetics, both inherent to the medium of film as a medium of moving images and the experience of migration. Migration literally means to shift or to move (from the Latin migrare) and, as an experience, indicates movement from one place to another. Of course, manifold factors such as borders, climate, war, natural disasters, human rights violations, persecution, and terrorism, among others, determine, in part, how and why one moves. While the video- and audience-based movements align, they are by no means equal to those of the on-screen subjects. In the video featuring Khadijeh al-Masri, an elder within the community and the subject in one of the four videos, for example, the speedy cuts in the video editing mirror and reinforce the movement in her narrative concerning her migratory exile from Palestine to Lebanon. Movement, inherent to both the video and the condition of migration, theoretically “takes” audiences from one place to another. Audiences hear a voiceover as al-Masri recounts her journey, consisting of what Bal terms involuntary movements, such as the trek without access to water or shelter; while at the same time, shots of rooftop views of the camp, children playing on a makeshift playground, and finally the interior of her apartment with a map of Palestine on the wall behind her flicker across the screen. She relays the shifts and turns that precipitated her present stasis within the borders of the camp.

These instances of movement on the part of audiences within the installation space and within the video itself with editing and narration, ultimately converge in a third and important instance of movement. While each of the four videos is different from the others, each following one of four subjects and his or her account of living in or coming to Rashidieh, all are paced similarly. The videos represent their subjects moving within the camp, before joining them within interior spaces, and then following them to the sea—a prompt that El Khoury asked of her collaborators. As an audience, we experience these journeys across all four screens in the same order as they unfold almost simultaneously.
This onscreen migration through the camp and to the sea, is one that audiences, collective cocreators, and subjects embark upon together, as we follow the subjects to the sea—even if one only chooses to watch but one video, or whether one chooses to watch all four. Across these disparate terrains, all coalesce in an effort to locate a path beyond the camp—a futural imagining. As El Khoury explains in a conversation in this reader, the relationship to the sea, much like the relationship with migratory movement, and the comparison of the audiences to the subjects, is fraught for Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour, but the vision of the water’s effortless, undulating movement nevertheless illumines a potential freedom (Figure 3).

These various instances of movement occur discontinuously. The copresentation of four screens with simultaneous narratives told through eight different headsets provide four different temporalities in which audiences can immerse themselves. Given the fact that they are looped, and one cannot encounter them all at once, audiences encounter and shift to each in medias res, which further emphasizes the experience of disjointed or ruptured time on the part of audiences. Temporality, as Bal describes, is associated with the historically constructed notion of linear time. Migration conjures experiences between and among many different times, rupturing the semblance of linear time in what Bal proposes.
as heterochrony, or the second condition in her research matrix. In contrast to the experience of multiple times that might be organized within the mobilities and technologies of modern life, Bal theorizes heterochrony within the experience of migration as a haunting from, longing for, and clashing of temporalities—a sense of time from which one can “suffer.” According to Bal, “When multi-temporality becomes a problem, an inhibition, and paralyzing contradiction, you ‘have’ heterochrony.” Film too incorporates temporality within its ontology as it is a time-based medium, and renders various orientations to time visible and felt, as Bal relays. It contains the capacity to juxtapose and clash temporalities as in the case of heterochrony.

Not only does the structural framing of Rashidieh across the four screens compose a heterochronic temporal environment for audience-members, as stories elide from adjacent screens; but within each story, residents articulate both their multitemporal and, at times, heterochronic perspectives. Hussein al-Zaini, for instance, sits smoking on a dilapidated porch underneath a flag with symbols of the fida’een, or Palestinian freedom fighters. His story commences with a description of the spatial confines of the camp. As 7,000 people grew to 40,000 over the past forty to fifty years, he describes how residents smuggle in building materials for housing construction—an illegal activity within the camps. Cutting to a shot of a rooftop porch, the camera shows al-Zaini centered in the frame, as he throws away his cigarette and stares forward (Figure 3). His nonconcurrent voiceover recalling childhood events of the death of his four-year-old sister and the loss of his arm at the hands of Israeli fighters who were convinced he was a member of the fida’een is juxtaposed with the image of his present state—seemingly calm within his camp home. Both the editing and the actual narrative manifest heterochrony. In combination with the audience’s disjointed engagement with the videos, Dictaphone Group provides an opportunity for mutual recognition from the interactivity with the installation to the subjects’ conditions; and yet, it is one that could easily go unregistered in its completeness by audiences.

Reminiscing upon the past in each of the videos recalls the condition that Bal characterizes as inextricable from heterochrony—that of memory. Bal’s theory pinpoints the experience of traumatic and fragmented memory that arises involuntarily in the nonlinear temporal experience of migration. But she also acknowledges that one can summon memory through agency, leaving us not completely beholden to involuntary memories. Within film too, memory takes “temporary shelter,” as Bal says, within time. The narrative experience conjures memories diegetically and audiences’ experiences trigger memories extra-diegetically. Al-Zaini’s retrospection upon a violent event that undoubtedly altered his life becomes imagistic by way of the fragmented, discontinuous shots that visualize his potent yet fleeting story. And yet, in keeping with Bal’s characterization of memory, it is not confined to the traumatic alone. Zahraa Faour, a young resident of the camp, embodies the presence of recollected joy sutured wholly to the present. She knows no other reality than life in this camp; she recalls no traumatic displacement. Instead, she recalls playing at preschool and subsequently details the camp’s garbage collection woes. These are her near-present and ecstatic memories of the everyday. Although tethered to her status as a refugee, such harsh experiences do not necessarily confine her; and perhaps more accurately they
signal the oscillation between the traumatic memory and the everyday banality in a migratory reality. Traumatic memory exists too, as evinced in the stories of el-Masri and Al-Zaini, and even in the story of Hassan Ajjawi, who articulates the immense bureaucratic obstacles that impede him from constructing a needed home for his family due to camp- and state-sanctioned restrictions on urban space. These remembered experiences of migration—both before, during, and after its trajectory—Bal would argue, are fragmented by the trauma that they incite.

For audiences, memories of those on-screen are disclosed alongside adjacent personal memories of their own interactivity. When immersed in these four narratives, audience members might dwell upon their own traumatic memories, or revel in Faour’s youthful wonder, among many other possibilities. In the quiet of the installation, with individual earphones, and one’s own thoughts, these opportunities for mutual recognition and recollection have the chance to arise. El Khoury describes the psychological movement between self and other as shared vulnerability. However, one might need to acknowledge this in order to open oneself to one’s own and others’ recollected memories.

And indeed, in so doing, audiences approach—to a certain extent—what Bal understands as contact, her fourth ontological quality shared between film and migration. The experience of meeting the “other” by way of a work of art is what Bal describes as an ontological experience of contact. Bal associates contact with the phenomenon of the “contact zone,” “a social space where cultures meet, clash, and negotiate.” These negotiations take place within the medium of video, and in particular video installation and its spatial dimensionality. Bal draws upon philosopher Henri Bergson’s phenomenological concept of “natural feeling” — a heterogeneous subjective experience, which consists of “extensity,” or a “foreshortened space [that] extends from the ‘other’ towards the subject.” It is this space that frames the encounter between viewers (Bal’s term) and functions within “migratory aesthetics” as a disproportionate power relationship. Indeed, in the field of cultural anthropology, the “contact zone” includes a “highly asymmetrical relation of power, such as those of colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths...” as literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt notes (Pratt, 34). In Bal’s account of contact, the one who reaches out, and constitutes the “self” in the “self-other” dynamic, often wields the power—however relational it may intend to be.

In *Camp Pause*, audiences come to the work in that very position of power and privilege. In the context of Bryn Mawr College, a womxn’s college set in the affluent suburbs of Philadelphia, most audience members do not share the experiences of the subjects. Whether or not the work can definitively provide a horizontal relationship across space, time, memory, and contact remains a question. For El Khoury and her collaborators, this possibility remains doubtful as they are suspicious about empathy. Empathy has become a popular contemporary form of relationality in performance art—one that invites shared feelings as if they are not only possible but also a desired result. As demonstrated in *Camp Pause*, and further defined in *Stories of Refuge* and *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, El Khoury’s conception of interactivity productively intervenes within the problematic conception of empathy as reckoning with contact in varying degrees.
Interactive Potential

Both Dictaphone Group and El Khoury directly challenge relationality beyond the sharing of emotions within empathy. Her conception of interactivity distinguishes itself not only from “participation,” but also from traditional aims of “performance” or “theater.” Participation suggests to El Khoury that choices are available, when in fact they are not. Much like contact, this implies a vertical power dynamic, providing the illusion of a choice to participate. In contrast, “interactivity” suggests an open and notably horizontal dynamic, acknowledging that certain choices are indeed unavailable, and imagining other potential outcomes. Logistically speaking, scenarios are established within which multiple options could take place as its point of conception.25 In a hypothetical performed or theatrical context of Camp Pause, for instance, perhaps the option to leave would not exist (at least not as readily), or the experience would depend upon listening to each subject, one after another, unfolding as a narrative in linear time. In that scenario, the conception of the work forecloses the possibility of leaving, of disavowing oneself from the subjects, or from hearing just one work. These options, to El Khoury are just as important as hearing every word from every speaker, as they relay audience-members’ political positionalities. As she says, “Political potential isn’t about whether the audience agrees with the content of my artwork. It’s about inviting people to embody other’s realities and stories. They can think about their own bodies in relation to state violence, for example.”26 For El Khoury, interactivity enables these positionalities to be recognized within the scenario of the work. Specifically, it “invites people to be involved, to participate in an embodied knowledge, to bear witness… to take sides, even.”27

Stories of Refuge provides a more extended opportunity for audiences to participate, one that is visible to others. The video installation by Dictaphone Group from 2013, originally featured a shipping container in its installation from the Spielart Festival in Munich within which bunk beds occupied the central space and three videos were projected on the walls of the container. The three videos featured asylum seekers “Ibrahim, Sipan, and Souad” in Munich and their meanderings through their housing and journeys to their favorite places in the city through self-shot footage. Within the ear-whispered survey, the work was coproduced with FringeArts Festival at Twelve Gates Arts Gallery, a white-cube space in Old City, Philadelphia. The bunk beds, accompanied by journals, individual headphones, and projected films occupied the entirety of the space. Is this an opportunity for “contact” in Bal’s terms? What is the distribution of power between subject and maker in the video and audiences beholding the video? Has El Khoury equalized choices available to audiences?

Upon entering the gallery, audiences are already immersed within the interactive experience. Even if they never watch the videos, but only absorb the aesthetics of the beds, they perceive part of the austere and restrictive experience. The beds are makeshift, temporary, and hostel-like, or as El Khoury and one of the subjects—Sipan—describes them, “prison-like” beds (Figure 4). If one chooses to partake in watching the videos, they might, as many had to, wait in a queue, in order to use the three headphones—fewer than the number of beds available. Within the space, audiences have the chance to watch the different films while lying down on the beds and possibly journal during or afterwards. The physical position of lying on the beds close to the projected screens, which are situated on the walls in proximity to one’s head when resting, alters the viewing experience. For instance, as I watched the story of Sipan, a twenty-six-year-old refugee in Munich, I heard about a boat that sank with women and children below deck who were unable to escape due to a jammed door. “I slipped from the upper part. I was swimming like this, in [sic] one arm”—Sipan said. While sharing this story, he continuously wields the camera, however shakily, pan-ning across a fluorescent-lit, sparse room, and stumbling over items of belonging, such as a flower-patterned comforter, a roll of toilet paper, and clothes limply hanging from a radiator. The flattened affect of the banal scene and my own casual position on the plain bed sharply contrasted with the searing journey of the narrative. I asked myself, how can we even occupy the same space, albeit meditated? My positionality on the bed, similar to those on-screen, brought me to this interactive conclusion, whereas a scenario of contact might not have. It presented the uncanny juxtaposition of movement, memory, heterochrony, the idea of occupying the same space, and the opportunity to respond via a journal that resisted a perhaps momentary empathy.

The presence of journals, left unceremoniously on the bed with writing utensils, provided this interactive opening. Without a specific prompt, or even directions in the blank-paged book, the chance to record a personal response, an epistle to the subject, or another kind of reaction remained available. One could take these up, as I watched numerous audience members do, during the films or after. This agency mirrored what El Khoury offered to her asylum seeker collaborators. El Khoury explains the cocreative scenario she provided:
I gave each of the three participants a small discrete video camera that they smuggled into their camps, and asked them to film a day in their lives as asylum seekers in Munich. I also asked them to take us to their favorite spot in the city. I recorded an interview with each of them, which serves as the soundscape over the footage that they created.31

Creating a scenario in which asylum seekers depict their otherwise censored living barracks, sharing their relationships to Munich, a place of supposed refuge, empowers El Khoury’s collaborators. Here, the nationally-liminal and politicized “other” leads the privileged citizen “self.” With pen and paper, audiences too have the opportunity to “lead,” to suspend the presumed distance among performer, theater, and audience to offer reflection within the presence of the very work and other audiences that will effectively become part of the work. What will, in fact, such leadership do? El Khoury conceives of such responses as individual acts of political solidarity, whether in the full knowledge of one’s complicity within the nation-state and its militarization of borders, or in the conviction of one’s alliance with the dispossessed.32 Perhaps too similar to empathy for some, El Khoury might say that such an act shifts the balance of power, however small. And in fact, it reverses the power dynamic of contact that Bal describes, as audiences might find themselves “othered” in relation to a “self” that might turn away.

Figure 5. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production), and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
This reversal is never more apparent than in the one-on-one performance, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* (2016). This performance, I argue, even extends the possibilities of a migratory aesthetics in a performative scenario. A collaboration between El Khoury and spoken word artist, percussionist, and street artist Basel Zaraa, the work stages an interactive situation in which Zaraa engages with a single audience member through a hole in a gallery wall. Zaraa is a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in Yarmouk Camp in Damascus, Syria, and he shares his story with each audience member in the form of a rap song that details his journey from Damascus to Sweden with his three sisters and a drawing.

In the work at Bryn Mawr College staged in Taft Garden, an audience member checks in with a host, then puts on a white jacket and sits in a chair next to a white gallery wall arranged under a verdant tree that shades the gallery wall, performer, and audience members under its branches (Figure 5). In an action akin to the small gesture of movement from stool to stool in *Camp Pause*, an audience member cedes her arm through a hole in a wall to an unknown space on the other side where it is received by another, a then unknown artist. Upon her skin, Zaraa draws a representation of his familial migration in ink on the audience-participant’s arm as she listens, recalling both his memories and hers in the storytelling. El Khoury commissioned the piece by Zaraa for the Royal Court Theatre and the London International Festival of Theatre for their *On the Move* edition, amplifying his story through her artistic gesture because, as she says, “These are not my stories.” When asked to make a work about migration for the festival, El Khoury explained that Zaraa and she joked about some audience members who seem so desperate for an intense performative experience, it is as if they actually want to “feel” a refugee. Would radical touch give them access to the insipid experiences of border discrimination for those seeking refuge in SWANA? From this initially private joke, they conceived of the interactive scenario, relating Basel’s story: in 1956 his family’s village in Palestine was invaded by the Israeli army. When displaced in Syria, his family fled yet again at the outbreak of war. As El Khoury relayed, many people live their entire lives as refugees and come from families who were displaced for generations: “it is part of their identity.” Basel recalls multiple times of waiting and journeying throughout the rap song, articulating a heterochronic experience that the audience member too understands on a visceral level as her surroundings in the present Taft Garden grate against those that Basel describes.

But once again, the simplicity of contact and its hierarchal presumption of power is thwarted. Migratory experience, or the “other”—stereotyped, relayed, fingerprinted, and yet unknown—is the very premise of the encounter to be deconstructed. The viewer approaches the interaction without ever meeting Zaraa and is instructed about how one can interact based on the host’s guidance. They have the choice not to participate, to watch from afar, or to engage intimately. If they do choose to cede their arm across the wall, their arm is now literally in Zaraa’s hands. Upon one’s skin, an audience member might feel marks through brush-stroke sensations, or even activities such as fingerprinting, their recognition reinforced by the lyrics heard in a song or in Zaraa’s narrative. The concept of identity, travelling through fingerprints, keenly relates to the experience of border crossing in technologized Europe through 2003, and the Dublin Regulation, the
European Union law which requires participating states to document and archive the fingerprints of refugees. A typical occurrence upon receiving criminal charges, the act is now instated as a performative and surveilled gesture for refugees crossing borders. The audience-member, unlike Zaraa, has the choice to pull her hand back, to not partake in the fingerprinting. If she chooses to continue, she does so on Zaraa’s terms. They do not know what he will do with their fingerprints, the index of their identities. She does not know what exactly Zaraa imprints on her arm. At the end of the song and narrative, the audience member can take back her arm, threading it through the wall to be reunited with her body, and is offered a chance to meet Zaraa by the host. She can accept or decline.

From the beginning, choice is offered to audiences, and this parallels that offered to Zaraa by El Khoury in their creative collaboration. Rather than creating her own work for the commission, she provides a position of power to Zaraa, who then distributes that same power to us. This freedom is markedly different from the nonchoices he faced when crossing multiple borders—physical, cultural, and personal. Audiences do not force him to recount this difficult narrative, nor do they require him to creatively reflect upon the process of recollection through a rap song. Instead, they receive what is offered: touch and inscription of a “self.” Far from magical, healing, or even transformative—terms bandied about in art history and performance studies to describe the result of an encounter—the interaction by fingertips articulates the potential of greater political solidarity. However, much like ink upon skin, it could also potentially be fleeting.

Irresolution: A Conclusion

From a research matrix that depends upon a relationship of power to varying scales of interactivity and its potential, all of which lead to a choice that is still perhaps not actually a choice given social, political, and aesthetic parameters, where do we conclude? In fact, if we have a choice at all, it is only due to what performance curator Alessandra Cianetti understands as the “privilege” of live art as an ephemeral, flexible, and resilient form to investigate borders. In light of this, perhaps the possibility of a conclusion to El Khoury’s work and this analysis is not only downright frustrating but also impossible. If so, then it seems that El Khoury has managed to conjure what Cianetti calls a “praxis of becoming,” that escapes quantification and fixed ends. If one reads this account and feels satisfied in the unknown, or likewise experiences El Khoury’s works and revels in the work to be done, she might welcome both “irresolutions.” But as she says,

I don't like to talk about impact on an audience, to be honest. I feel like it’s a nonquantifiable notion, and it also risks glorifying both the artwork and the artist. But think about the political potential of interactivity [...] it involves all senses and the body, so it’s not just about rationalizing the content of these pieces, but about experiencing it; listening as a radical act, sensing, embodying, et cetera. This allows for a deeper connection with the work that goes
Reckoning with Contact within a Performative “Migratory Aesthetics”

beyond just the rational, the intellectual, and it’s not just emotional either, nor entirely spiritual. Maybe it’s somewhere in between all of that […]\textsuperscript{40}

Even with markers such as the bed that performatively guide the experience of the work, or if one ignores these markers and feels an illusion of choice, the experiential and affective outcome is a litmus test that marks questioning, responsibility, and care. The presumed choices that the work conjures are ones that we cannot deny engaging within; as Bal states, an aesthetics of the migratory is one in which audiences cannot be “aloof and shielded.”\textsuperscript{41} As she proposes:

If aesthetics is primarily an encounter in which the subject, body included, is engaged, that aesthetic encounter is migratory if it takes place in the space of, on the basis of, and on the interface with, the mobility of people as a given, as central, and as at the heart of what matters in the contemporary, that is, “globalized” world.\textsuperscript{42}

What connects across the web of choices, illusions, interactions, and conditions in El Khoury’s work emerged in a conversation between the artist and Pepón Osorio, project consultant artistic director for Bryn Mawr College’s survey \textit{ear-whispered}: the constant work that audience members are asked to perform in relation to the artwork. Whether known or unknown, this labor is carried out by them, the \textit{secondary} actor, and that labor continues beyond the interaction.\textsuperscript{43} Will you listen to the senses, acknowledge the urgency, and inter-\textit{act}?

Notes

2. El Khoury described wanting to innovate within and even deconstruct the “white cube” form within this installation in early conversations with Carrie Robbins, curator of art and artifacts, Special Collections, Bryn Mawr College and curator of the \textit{Camp Pause} exhibition within the \textit{ear-whispered} survey.
3. El Khoury prefers the term “audiences” rather than “viewers” because the former considers the entire embodied experience rather than a sole reliance on the optical, as the latter intimates. She relayed this preference to the author over the course of conversations during the survey \textit{ear-whispered} in 2018. See also Gallagher-Ross, “Tania El Khoury: Where No Walls Remain.”
4. El Khoury defines participation in this way in “Participation—or rather, Interactivity.” See also Gallagher-Ross, “Tania El Khoury: Where No Walls Remain,” when El Khoury productively asks of participation: “I often wonder, who is participating here? Is it the artist allowing these communities to participate in an artwork about them? Or should it be, these communities are allowing that artist to participate in their lives and their everyday politics?”
5. El Khoury differentiates interactivity from participation in “Participation—or rather, Interactivity.” Migrants are increasingly politicized by their refugee, asylum, and immigration statuses within the nation-state and, more broadly, the current era of mass contemporary globalization, prompting the term “crises” and rise of xenophobic and nativist rhetoric in 2020, which was exacerbated by border closures and the spread of the COVID-19 virus.
8. See Bal, “Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement.”
9. This theoretical work carries through Bal’s larger literary output, namely _Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide_, which precipitated her interest in the movement of concepts across fields, as she explored how meaning, metaphor, narrative, and myth journey through various humanities disciplines. They eventually prompted her essay “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library” within the important collected volume _Essays in Migratory Aesthetics_. The essay both recognizes artistic research as a scholarly mode of inquiry and reflects upon the fundamental relationship between the artwork and viewers or audiences. See also Bal, “Lost in Space, Lost in the Library.”
11. El Khoury and Pearson, “Two Live Artists in the Theater,” 125. For more on El Khoury’s understanding of live art, see “I Once Fell in Love With an Audience Member.”
12. El Khoury names risk as a primary component of interactivity, which is at the center of her conception of live art in “Participation—or rather, Interactivity.”
14. Prior to unpacking how migratory experiences and/or conditions manifest in performance, I turn to the deeper stakes of why an association of migratory conditions to the medium’s ontology is significant. This explanation is necessary, especially as a recent conversation in October 2021 with El Khoury reminded me, yet again, about her preference for a focus on borders rather than migration in numerous interviews and most recently an essay about her artistic practice and curatorial process for the Bard College Live Art Biennial _Where No Walls Remain_. Migration is relevant within Bal’s model, or “research imagination,” to borrow a term from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, because it centers the experiences of the migrant and thereby democraticizes the research approach altogether—a chief aim of Appadurai that Bal recognizes. However, this too, runs the risk of politicizing the very people that this research aims to center, as El Khoury might argue. I share El Khoury’s conviction in prioritizing the term of borders over that of migration and migrants in order to place the onus on the structural systems that aim to restrict movement. But I also feel the need to explain that I think Bal’s association of film, video, and video installation with the conditions of migration gives primacy to experience within her conception of aesthetics.
15. The Rashidieh camp has remained a space of refuge for displaced persons throughout numerous conflicts since 1950. For more about the camp, see Dictaphone Group, “Camp Pause: Stories from Rashidieh Camp and the Sea,” on page 11 of this reader.
22. Bryn Mawr College was established in 1885 as a women’s college. I use the term _womxn_ to acknowledge its shift in aims during the 2010s towards gender-inclusive education irrespective of biology.
23. El Khoury shared this with me over the course of our discussions concerning live art during her survey at Bryn Mawr College.
24. El Khoury noted her skepticism concerning the possibilities of empathy alone to communicate across geopolitical, economic, and national disparities during our conversations during the ear-whispered survey.
25. For more on the difference between “participation” and “interactivity,” see El Khoury and Sofaer, “Radio: Joshua Sofaer and Tania El Khoury—On Participation.” See also: El Khoury, “Participation—or rather Interactivity.” And for more information on “intervention,” see Khoury, “I Once Fell in Love With an Audience Member.”
26. Ao, “Art that involves your body,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, September 4, 2018. While I quote El Khoury from this article, I take issue with its title as it fails to relay the nuance concerning touching and embodying that El Khoury intended for the work and which I describe for As Far As My Fingertips Take Me.
28. El Khoury anonymizes the asylum seekers in the work. She provides these pseudonyms in the credits for the work.
29. Stories of Refuge, 2013. Video installation by Dictaphone Group. Concept and video editing Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal Videos; filmed by anonymous asylum seekers; commissioned by the Spielart Festival.
32. El Khoury, interview over Zoom with the author, October 1, 2021.
33. As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, 2016. One-to-one performance by Tania El Khoury with Basel Zaraa.
34. Ghoneim, “This Palestinian Refugee Etches His Journey on People’s Flesh.” Scene Arabia, April 15, 2018.
35. Ghoneim.
36. Ghoneim.
37. El Khoury, “As Far As My Fingertips Take Me: In Conversation with Tania El Khoury.”
43. El Khoury and Osorio, “Artist Discussion with Tania El Khoury and Pepón Osorio.”
Immersive Social Art and Knowledge Production across Disciplines and Histories
Should Life in Refugee Camps Feel “Normal”?
The Ethical Stakes of Social Work among Displaced Palestinians

David S. Byers and Anan Fareed

To access all audio/visual examples referenced in this essay, please visit the open access version on Fulcrum at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424.


Childhood play is a central focus of Camp Pause, a video installation filmed at the Rashidieh refugee camp in Lebanon by Dictaphone Group (Figure 1). Four nine-minute films play simultaneously, taking us through the camp, each following a different resident, each lingering within the first minute on a scene of children’s play. The videos are projected onto
neighboring screens to form a nearly enclosed square. There are eight stools inside, each with its own headphone set, two for each screen. In one of the videos, girls fly through the air on swing sets while boys circle each other nearby with toy guns and pose for the camera. In another, a boy dances to the 2014 pop song “Fartaka Fartaka” by the Egyptian group El Dakhlowya, between young men smoking and laughing. Occasionally the boy sings along to the lyrics in Arabic: / Life is a story, everyone has a story.

These everyday scenes of children playing may initially seem at odds with the conditions of uncertainty in the camp. Children and their families find ways of being together that create predictability, even safety, so essential for children’s fantasy and exploration. Children and families’ active and creative uses of space, or “spatial agency,” for regular play and family and community connection can be a key source of resilience in the face of regular state violence. In some contexts, normalcy and predictability may seem impossible in the condition of precarity—the differential and politically induced exposure of disregarded populations to injury, violence, and death, inflicting material and psychological uncertainty. But sometimes normalcy and precarity become interwoven.

In our teaching and research with clinical social workers in Palestine, we have found cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s concept of “crisis ordinariness” particularly useful—a language to describe traumatic disruption in unexceptional and extended terms. An example of this is the Israeli military’s checkpoint system, which controls regular daily movement of Palestinians throughout the Occupied Territories. Each day, it might take a minute or several hours to pass through a checkpoint. The young soldiers may wave some people through and stop others to search, harass, threaten, and detain them without decipherable reasons or predictable results. The threat and uncertainty amid the constant navigation of these checkpoints structure the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian people—what urban studies scholar Nasser Abourahme describes as “the single most definitive experience in contemporary Palestinian life.” For Berlant, crisis ordinariness is a feature of “slow death”—the “wearing out” of a population “in the space of ordinariness.”

In the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, the danger of the Israeli military is typically more remote, less direct. It unfolds through interfaces with Lebanon nationals and the government bureaucracy, and interactions with aid workers in the camps, punctuated by periodic Israeli flyovers and missiles. In a voiceover from one of four on-screen narrations in Camp Pause, one of the residents, Khadijeh al-Masri, an older woman, recounts her own memories as a child of the Nakba in 1948—when Palestinian people were forced to flee their homes (Figure 2). She remembers the cruel indifference and disgust of villagers when her parents sought water and shelter on their journey. The juxtaposition of children at play and al-Masri’s painful memories from her own childhood might be read to suggest a generational divide, but the four-channel format of Camp Pause with its simultaneous screening of multiple subjects also calls attention to the ongoing simultaneity of these competing yet collective narratives for Palestinian refugees. Loss, precarity, and awareness of cruelty exist alongside warm gatherings of neighbors and children at play in a refugee crisis now more than seventy years old. Each day, moments of normalcy are suspended, fragile, always conditional.
In this chapter, we discuss a central ethical question for Palestinian social workers—along with doctors, educators, and other aid workers—who work to support opportunities for normalcy in precarity: Does working to improve the health and wellbeing of people who have been violently disregarded mean accepting the terms of their displacement? In the case of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Rashidieh camp and millions of Palestinian refugees in other camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza: Does working to create everyday improvements in social services, health, mental health care, and education—and with these services, opportunities for some measure of normalcy and resilience—contribute to normalization of Israel’s occupation of Palestine and its refusal to allow Palestinian people the right to return?

Our reading of Camp Pause aims to reexamine and defamiliarize these tensions of normalcy and precarity in consideration of social work through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as well as local Palestinian Authority-run organizations and international nongovernment organizations. We also draw on our own experiences teaching social work students at Al-Quds University in the West Bank, as well as our research with Palestinian clinics and social service agencies about the ethical dilemmas of training the next generation of Palestinian social workers.

Refugee Status and Care

The interweaving of normalcy and precarity in Rashidieh refugee camp, the casualness and prosaic feel of the playful gatherings depicted in Camp Pause, depends like all forms of community resilience on at least some expectation of social safety nets: direct aid, mental health and medical care, education, and housing, all tied in this case to the camp residents’ unique status as Palestinian refugees.
The United Nations (UN) assigns refugee status to Palestinian people “whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 June 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict,” as well as their descendants. At the outset, the UN set out to provide short-term relief until Palestinian refugees could return to their homes, but expanded its mission to provide psychosocial and medical care, education, and camp improvement projects after establishment of the UNRWA in 1949. Today the UNRWA works with hundreds of local and international organizations to support Palestinian refugees in 58 camps throughout the region. With just under 30,000 teachers, social workers, medical providers, and other paid staff members—most of whom are Palestinian refugees themselves—the UNRWA is the largest employer of Palestinian refugees.

The efforts of UNRWA and other aid providers have often been met by Palestinian people with skepticism and ambivalence for several reasons. These include, for example, the UN’s historical and ongoing role in Palestinian displacement; UNRWA’s longstanding insistence on maintaining a “neutral” stance between Palestinian refugees and political organizations, host country governments, and Israel; and concerns that psychological and social services are a front for a covert agenda to resettle rather than repatriate Palestinian refugees. Displaced Palestinians have nevertheless relied very heavily on UNRWA aid and services, and they have used the UNRWA mandate to remind the world—and themselves—of their refugee status. While Israel and other governments persist in denying responsibility for their displacement—or even the fact of their displacement in some cases—refugee status is international recognition of Palestinian people’s ties to the land, their right to return, as well as their deservingness of care. Anthropologist Julie Peteet outlines a genealogy of Palestinian responses to UNRWA services: from feeling humiliated for needing help, to tolerating some assistance as acknowledgment of the UN’s complicity in their displacement.

The politics of care in Rashidieh are fraught for all involved. Although we do not directly observe clinical care or aid in Camp Pause, ambivalence about UNRWA’s work more broadly is a repeated focus, for example with reference to trash and pollution throughout the camp and at the beach (Figure 3). Zahraa, a young girl who participates in one of the interviews, blames individuals for throwing trash on the street instead of participating in UNRWA’s cleanup and improvement efforts. Her frustration with the community is palpable and shared by others; but her eagerness for camp improvements takes on a different meaning when positioned alongside fellow interviewee al-Masri’s memories of the Nakba and the cruelty she and her family faced on the initial journey to the camp. Though many residents may want the camp to be cleaner and the beach free of trash, aligning with UNRWA’s cleanup efforts might suggest that the camp is home. The juxtaposition of Zahraa and al-Masri’s narratives across three generations holds a central tension about improvements and care within this exiled space.

Anthropologist and political scientist Nell Gabiam details similar dilemmas about built environment and infrastructure improvements in her study of Neirab camp in Syria. There, UNRWA faced significant protest from Palestinian refugees when they first proposed that some people would move to new, larger housing. Many felt the plan risked undermining their sense of interconnectedness and face-to-face knowing in the overcrowded camp. They found safety and protection through their closeness to each other and they valued this more
than new housing. They insisted to Gabiam that they wanted to “keep a camp a camp”—to live with the problems of cramped housing and poor sanitation as reminders that they were not home and that they intended to return to Palestine. Ilana Feldman similarly observes the compelling draw of Jerash camp in Jordan—the close social cohesion and shared routines of community life there meant many residents found comfort in its familiarity.

Concerns about development and improvement projects can extend to softer infrastructure interventions as well—to social services and mental health and medical care. The social safety nets created by UNRWA and other providers are chronically inadequate and ill-prepared, but their persistence has created somewhat steady rhythms of support, or what Feldman calls a “punctuated humanitarianism” that—over time—can “fade into the background of people’s consciousness.” Periods of near “normalcy” or calm within the contained system of the camp hinge on episodic crises and subsequent aid interventions to meet new needs. Changes can be disruptive to daily life and may be experienced as unsettling and alarming.

Moreover, the politics of care within Palestinian refugee camps, even when provided by Palestinian clinicians and aid workers, can work at once to try to address human need and also to contain and quiet persistent political violence and injustice. Anthropologist and sociologist Didier Fassin has argued that humanitarian aid represents a fundamental conflict between its goals of universal care and its inevitable manner of creating hierarchies...
of humanity. Care has coercive and repressive effects whether in the form of material aid or clinical services, but in the latter its rhetorical manipulations are sometimes more stark.

Fassin has described the diagnosis of trauma and its treatment as a new colonialist rationale for international aid work—a framework that allows aid workers to represent experiences of Palestinians in readily generalizable and medicalized terms to themselves and outsiders. As Fassin and others have observed, the discourse of trauma can sometimes work in practice to flatten, dehistoricize, and depoliticize cases of violent injustice. In another example, many services engage Palestinian children through art, theater, games, and community discussions, while emphasizing a clinical and educational aim of teaching nonviolence and conflict resolution. The activities and opportunities to build relationships with peers and adults are likely impactful, and clinicians and teachers within these programs are often well positioned to provide vital affirmation and guidance. The larger treatment and educational goals of the programs, however, seem more a response to outsiders’ projected fears of Palestinian children and less to their actual needs for support or intervention.

Many clinical services do in fact work to ground their approaches in the needs and experiences of the communities they are working with, often emphasizing, for example, a balance of individualized counseling and community-driven projects to promote health and community agency. Still, these clinical and community organizing attempts do not and cannot reach the conditions and structures of disregard, denial, and arbitrary violence, what Berlant calls the “slow death” of everyday life in precarity. Care work here can feel inevitably tied to a biopolitics of palliation. The ethical stakes for social workers and other care providers are necessarily murky.

The Dilemma Facing Palestinian Social Workers and Other Care Providers

Some of the researchers discussed in this chapter make a point to distinguish their criticisms about institutions from the individuals who work within them, noting in fact that many workers encounter the ethical challenges of their work with insight and painful frustration. Fassin notes that aid workers “often denounce themselves either as self-criticism or as critique of others, two sorts of games that many of them practice with delight.” In our experiences of teaching and conducting research with Palestinian social workers, however, reflexivity and criticism are not cause for delight, but rather critical tactics for coping with situations of moral distress—when workers are not able to practice in ways that ethically cohere. Critique and questioning of themselves and others are learned strategies for social workers and other aid workers navigating ethical disappointments while maintaining care about the people and situations they encounter. The International Federation of Social Workers codifies in its “Statement of Ethical Principles and Professional Integrity” an obligation for social workers to “foster and engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions.”

Our current study follows more than 100 Palestinian social workers and social work university students in order to learn about participants’ ethical goals and challenges. The students train alongside the social workers in the field as a component of their coursework, and we are especially interested in the relational process of teaching and mentoring students
beginning in summer 2017, we have met with participants in formal focus groups and individual interviews, as well as shadowed many of them in clinics, crisis centers, and aid offices throughout the West Bank—in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus, Jenin, Jericho, Abu Dis, Tulkarem, Salfit, Yatta, Qalqilya, and Tubas. Many of the clinics and agencies are funded by UNRWA and the Palestinian Authority.

These social workers and students serve similar roles as social workers in other places, but the dynamics of their work are unique. The connectedness of communities can fray under stress; the role of social work is often to help at the seams. They manage and allocate aid and benefits; investigate violence and exploitation of children and try to intervene; develop new programs, like substance use clinics, shelters for women facing intimate partner violence, supports for people with disabilities; and provide mental health services like support groups and psychotherapy.

In our preliminary findings, social workers and students often struggle to apply the clinical theory and research they are trained with, mainly written by scholars and practitioners in Egypt and the Gulf countries, Europe, Australia, and the United States. The textbooks and articles do not imagine the cultural, social, and psychological adaptations and needs of diverse Palestinian communities in the Occupied Territories, and throughout the diaspora. Many draw inspiration from social and psychological theories that start in the West, and from social movements like the civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. But in many ways similar to social workers trying to serve disregarded and stigmatized people and communities elsewhere, social workers and other care providers in Palestine must be “clinical activists”—rather than passively learning and applying clinical, psychological, and social theories, they actively elaborate and redeploy them, reinventing clinical approaches to meet the needs they encounter, often drawing on their own experiences for guidance. Care work in this sense can be critical, co-constructed, and creative. At the same time, many feel isolated and betrayed by the global social work and medical communities, and deeply strained in their efforts. Many of the participants in the study live within the same communities where they work, in or near and marginally part of the refugee camps. They frequently share with their clients the same kinds of problems they are tasked to help with—poverty, grief, experiences of family violence, exclusion and stigma from their community, military violence and harassment, and family members living with disabilities, illnesses, and imprisonment.

In considering the ethics of Palestinian social work in Rashidieh, we draw in this chapter on the accounts of just one of the individuals we have interviewed to date, a seasoned clinical social worker we met in Bethlehem who we will refer to with the pseudonym Anwar. Anwar has worked in counseling centers and other settings for more than twenty years. Like many of the other participants in the study so far, she spoke at length about the difficulties in disappointing students with how much they can help their clients in the face of the problems they live with, and about the uncertainty of sitting with another person in a visceral encounter of painful injustice.

Students ask how to help a child who lives near the checkpoint and who is constantly humiliated at the checkpoint, or how to help a child whose father is constantly being searched at
checkpoints in a humiliating manner … How can I help this son who sees his father, his role model, being humiliated in front of him? Frankly I don’t know how to answer them. I mean how do you help a child who sees his father constantly humiliated at checkpoints? What techniques can be used? Shall I tell them to use breathing exercises? When the self-image is destroyed healing becomes very hard … There is no magic pill to take the pain away.  

The student’s questions about how to help seemed to push Anwar to recognize her own lack of reasonable answers. Her comments convey feelings of helplessness that many of the social workers expressed with reference to their clinical work and the questions their students ask about it. Social workers associate wellbeing with job security, feeling valued and supported in their clinics and agencies, as well as finding opportunities to join in resistance against the violence and ongoing displacement they face—to feel agency in response to the pain.  

The student’s presence felt almost embarrassing to Anwar, like a challenge to the normalcy she could sometimes find even in this work. The student was asking questions that Anwar realized she was rarely allowing herself to ask, and she felt momentarily defensive.  

When we asked Anwar more about the uncertainty she frequently faces in her cases, she took a different approach to understanding it, this time blaming the universities for not teaching her or the students enough treatment techniques:  

I develop myself by taking different courses, but with students I can feel the gap. When I talk to students on the principles of handling clients and the basis of therapy, the students are clueless and it is not their fault. They don’t know anything about handling clients because they were not taught how to do so in the university.  

Like many of her colleagues, Anwar conveys deep investment in clinical practice and her work training students. She wants to share with her students what she has learned over many years and cases, and in trying to do so she encounters their limitations and her own. Sometimes her formulations seem to resist these more vulnerable encounters. On the other side of the “techniques” is a precarity Anwar and many others share with their students and clients, where they go home to their own families after work.  

Later in this interview, however, Anwar turned back again to the issues of uncertainty in response to injustice. She remembered a boy brought to the clinic after a group of Israeli boys tied him to a car and pulled him through the streets.  

This happened to an eight-year-old boy and he came with a trauma [صدمة]. I don’t know if this is the right word to use here because it is such a simple word for what has happened to this child. The student asked me: how are you going to help this child? What can you do for this child who has seen the ugliest form of torture? When a student asks me this I know that the student wants to learn for sure. And I teach them that feeling pain is part of being human, and it is also part of being human to stand helpless in the face of fear.  

This formulation, too, is likely difficult to express to her students, though. The “treatment” she is teaching rests on a premise that she can at once feel outraged and also try to accept
what has happened to her client. She can try to respond to the situation without agreeing with it or normalizing it. She believes, sometimes, that the responsive and caring relationship she has learned to find with her client can help him to grow even with what has happened, and with what continues to happen around them.


**Conclusion: Agency in Care**

*Camp Pause* connects to its far-away audiences with a hint of closeness and familiarity. However, taking in the installation we are also struck by the politeness and reserve of the four main interview participants recounting aspects of their stories to the filmmakers as they likely would with other outsiders (Figure 4). The installation may represent an opportunity for the audience to engage more deeply, but it poses no expectations. Sympathetic social theorists and other academics and audiences from the West tend to engage with Palestine (and Palestinians) at this level, with remote frustration, shaking their heads with well-worn criticisms of UNRWA and social work’s complicity in the occupation from outside of the intimate and intrusive dilemmas of care.

We set out in this chapter to examine the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers and other care providers who support a sense of normalcy with clients and communities in conditions that should not be normalized. Is working to help individuals and communities in Rashidieh refugee camp enabling their continuing displacement? Social workers and
students struggle with and debate this question from many perspectives, but mostly continue very earnestly in the work. Ultimately, they must tolerate the uncertainty without allowing themselves or each other to forget its tensions and perils. The question is unresolvable without, as the UNRWA puts it, a “just and lasting solution” for Palestinian refugees to return, but the dilemma can nevertheless be organizing when care providers can recognize that they share it with their clients and the communities they live and work within. As with Anwar’s case, it is possible to recognize shared precarity with care, sometimes letting go of the “techniques” of differentiation.

Outside of the ethical debates about helping interventions and collaboration with UNRWA, there are countless examples in Palestinian refugee camps of people seeking normalcy and accessing resources of resilience in everyday defiance of the conditions they live in. One evening in summer 2018, we were walking near Am’ari refugee camp in Ramallah when a group of small boys stopped us and demanded our permits. They were carrying toy guns, like the boys in Camp Pause, and playing a game of “checkpoint.” They had blocked the path with a broom and a bucket. “Hold up, arms to your side. Open your bags. Show us your papers. No photos.” Finally, we understood and we played along. They smiled happily and told us we could continue. It’s a common game for Palestinian boys.

Listening to this story later that evening, a Palestinian colleague—a professor at Birzeit University—told us she used to try to keep her small children from playing with toy guns. She changed her approach when she noticed one of her sons had become anxious and couldn’t sleep. He talked repeatedly about the checkpoints they passed through when she took him to school, the soldiers pointing their guns at him and his mother until they were finally allowed to pass. She took him out of the city to visit a cousin in the country, and sat watching the boys play with the cousin’s toy guns. They ran outside together, aiming at the Israeli military planes as they flew overhead. The games allowed them to feel agency in play. She saw him beginning to recover.

The balance of normalcy situated in precarity is one the community at large lives with every day. The challenge to care in this place without normalizing the occupation is not unique to social workers and other clinical providers, but it is one for which they bear particular responsibility and cannot avoid confronting continually, without resolution. Care responses are inevitably inadequate and readily derided. But relationships of care, often meticulously cultivated by social workers and their clients, can seem to disrupt the occupation, even if only momentarily. Recognizing their inherent inadequacy to the situation, their lack of clinical answers or techniques, social workers and other care providers can partner with their clients to creatively denormalize the conditions of ongoing crisis.

Notes

1. See, for example, Veronese et al., “Spatial Agency as a Source of Resistance.” For a review of research on individual and collective resilience, see Sousa et al., “Individual and Collective Dimensions of Resilience.”
2. See Butler’s Frames of War, 25–26. For further discussion of activism and politics of precarity versus precariousness, see Hammami, “Precarious Politics.”
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4. Abourahme, “Spatial Collisions and Discordant Temporalities,” 453. For a further study of the microgeographies of everyday control through checkpoints and related technologies, see Ron Smith, *Freedom is a Place*; for a deeper discussion of the checkpoints and borders as psychological interpolations for Palestinian children, see Akesson, “Arrested in Place.”


6. UNRWA, “Who Are Palestinian Refugees?”


10. Gubiam, 78.


16. See Fassin and Rechtman.

17. See, for example, Massad et al., “Rethinking Resilience for Children and Youth in Conflict Zones”; and Loughry et al., “Structured Activities among Palestinian Children.”


22. Byers and Shapiro, “Renewing the Ethics of Care.”


24. This ongoing study is a collaboration of principal investigators Anan Fareed, David S. Byers, and Khalid Hreish of the Department of Social Work at Al-Quds University.

25. For a broader overview of challenges in social work education in the West Bank, see Kokaliari et al., “Teaching Clinical Social Work Under Occupation.”

26. See also Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation*.

27. See our first article reporting findings from this study: Byers, Fareed, and Hreish, “The Vernacular Ethics of Stigmatized Care.” For further discussion of our use of “clinical activism” with reference to a U.S. case, see Byers, Vider, and Smith, “Clinical Activism in Community-Based Practice.” See also Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief*, 20, on humanitarian workers and their clients at times responding to frustration with creativity; and Sheehi and Sheehi, *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation*, for a rich discussion of psychotherapy as resistance in Palestine.


30. Interview with Anwar.

31. Interview with Anwar.
11 The Ground Speaks: Memorializing and Forgetting the Dead in the Ancient Middle East

Jennie Bradbury

Figure 1. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
Introduction

In the fall of 2019, at the age of 106 years, my grandmother passed away. Being the last of her generation it was decided that she would be cremated, her ashes scattered in the garden of my parents’ home. This decision involved coopting a space normally held outside the mortuary sphere; as a family, however, this was our way of keeping her close, shielded within the nexus of home, family, and love. For the individuals and groups represented in El Khoury’s work, *Gardens Speak*, garden burials were a way to protect both the living and the dead during the beginning of the Syrian uprising (Figure 1). They represented spaces which, through the sociopolitical context of the conflict, could be transformed into locales for continued connection with, and memorialization, mourning, and deliberate concealment of the dead. As a species we have been concerned with the dead and their burial (or manipulation) for at least the past hundred thousand years, if not more. Our reactions, both visible (that is, material) and invisible expressions of grief and mourning, however, have significantly altered during that time, and for certain places and periods it may not be correct to even refer to concepts such as divided living and mortuary spaces. Despite these divergences, strands of connection can be seen; from concepts of keeping the dead close through to the control and invisibility of certain types of dead—the discipline of archaeology provides a lens through which contemporary and ancient practices can be reflected upon. This paper endeavors to draw out a range of cross-temporal parallels between burial practices in the contemporary and ancient Middle East. It will explore some of the underlying themes referred to by El Khoury’s work, including the dichotomies between spaces for the living and dead, and the role of mortuary practices as social, political, and cultural acts. It ultimately seeks to shine a light upon the multiplicity of ways in which humankind deals with and approaches death and the disposal of the deceased.

Burial in the Ancient Middle East: A Short History

Death, a universal force, is not something unique to the human species but neither necessarily is an awareness of death. Animals such as chimpanzees are thought to “mourn” their dead, expressing concern and awareness of death through the grooming and gentle treatment (although aggressive behaviors have also been recorded) of the dying and deceased, as well as surviving group members. In terms of definitive evidence for the specialized treatment of the dead, most scholars would point towards the first formalized human burials (those which are placed within an artificial or deliberately manipulated burial space), which date to between 130,000 and 100,000 years ago. For example, the Middle Paleolithic sites of Skhul and Qafzeh, provide evidence for articulated, deliberately positioned burials of both adults and children. Despite the lack of burial evidence predating these examples, sites like Skhul and Qafzeh are likely to be the outcome of longer-term developments and shifting approaches towards death and dying; although it is during the Middle Paleolithic that they become clearly visible, associated with a wide range of other symbolic behaviors.
these examples are not, however, is indicative of the origins of standardized burial practices; instead, they represent the beginnings, or possibly the first visible beginnings, of the myriad ways in which the living could treat the dead. Rather than providing a comprehensive summary of the ways in which humans in the Middle East, from the Neolithic–Iron Age (c.10,000–330 BCE) have dealt with mortality, what follows is, by necessity, a very brief overview of a selection of these varied ways of dealing with the dead. The summary presented here discusses burial practices up until the end of the Iron Age in the ancient Middle East, rather than continuing its overview into the Classical, Antique, and post-Antique periods. Many of the themes discussed in this paper, however, continue into these later periods. At the heart of the study of these practices is the assumption that these are meaningful choices, made by the living as a deliberate response to the challenges and opportunities represented by the death of a member (or nonmember) of the community.

**Neolithic–Early Bronze Age (c.10,000–2000 BCE): From the Origins of Agriculture to the Beginnings of State Formation**

Over the thousands of years known by archaeologists as the Neolithic (c.10,000 BCE–5200 BCE) and even prior to this, in the Natufian (c.12,500–10,000 BCE), we see not only the origins of dedicated cemeteries or mortuary spaces (for example, Nahal Oren, Natufian and Tell Aswad, Middle–Late pre-pottery Neolithic (MPPNB/LPPNB), but also the burial and incorporation of the dead within the domestic sphere (Jericho, for example). These practices varied over time and space. For example, at Tell Aswad, over the course of the PPNB, we witness a shift from burials being carried out within houses to dedicated funerary areas, outside of the domestic sphere. Dedicated mortuary structures are also found in the archaeological record from this point onwards, with the PPNB “skull building” at Çayönü Tepesi housing around 450 deceased individuals, or at least their skulls and long bones, and being in use for hundreds of years. Burials within the domestic sphere may have taken place both prior to the construction of buildings, possibly as foundation burials, as well as within abandoned domestic structures (for example, WF16, Wadi Faynan) and could consist of both fully articulated primary burials, as well as disarticulated (often referred to in the literature as secondary) remains of specific body components. Many of these examples show evidence for continued engagement with or an awareness of the presence of a burial.

As we move into the period known as the Chalcolithic (c.5500/5200–3500/3000 BCE), traditions seem to diverge between the Levant and wider Middle East, and we can see regional, as well as more localized trends developing. The appearance of these variations is undoubtedly partly a result of increased evidence. There does, however, seem to be a significant shift in burial practices from the end of Neolithic and into the Chalcolithic period and thus, possibly, concepts of death and dying. Burial practices within the Chalcolithic Southern Levant vary from single articulated burials of both adults and children, sometimes within jars (as at Byblos and Sidon Dakerman) to large collective ossuaries containing hundreds of disarticulated individuals (such as Kissufim Road). Formal extramural (outside...
a dwelling space) cemeteries also appear to be a “normative” practice. For those burials identified as secondary deposits, it is not always clear where primary interment took place, and there have been some suggestions that excarnation (exposure of the corpse) might have been carried out. There are also possible indicators of intentional defleshing having taken place prior to reburial.

Beyond the Southern Levant, within Iraq, Northern Syria, and Southern Turkey, cemeteries seem to be the norm during the Ubaid (6th–5th millennia BCE) period, at least for adult burials, with inhumation cemeteries being documented at Eridu, Susa, and Ur. The majority of burials appear to be primary articulated inhumations, although some fractional or secondary burials have been recorded from Susa. In contrast to the Southern Levant, we seem to be seeing a distinct divide between the living and the dead, as well as attention being paid to the integrity of the human body. The one exception to this is for infants and young children, who are still found in association with household or settlement contexts. Towards the end of this period (4th millennium BCE, Uruk and Local Late Chalcolithic periods) we see the almost total disappearance of burials from the archaeological record, save for more occasional subadult and adult burials. While recent discoveries have added to this dataset, especially within northern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, the majority are of young children and infants. It would seem, therefore, that there was a significant break in burial practices between the Ubaid and Uruk periods, presumably associated with changing belief systems or the decreasing relevance of burial practices within the lives of the living.

This distinctive shift is not seen elsewhere within the Middle East. For example, at the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (EBA) in the Southern Levant (c. 3600–3000 BCE) we seem to observe a continuation and elaboration of earlier mortuary traditions. Sites like Megiddo, Jericho, and Bab edh-Dhra, all have evidence for collective, secondary burials; the dominant burial practice of this period. These large, multichambered rock-cut or shaft tombs can contain hundreds of individuals (for example, Tomb K2 at Jericho), although more modest figures are recorded at Bab edh-Dhra. Evidence suggests that postmortem manipulation was taking place, with skeletal remains, once decomposed, being deliberately arranged, and rearranged. At several sites there is also evidence for burning (or cremation) activities.

Individual primary burials do exist from the Early Bronze Age (such as Khirbet Kerak), and even when included in collective secondary or primary burials, some individuals do seem to be marked out (for instance, Inhumation 24, Jericho Tomb A). A default interpretation for this is often associated with the presumed social status of that individual. This brings us to the idea of categorizing the dead, and from the latter half of the 3rd millennium BCE (c.2500–2000 BCE) in the Levant there seems to be a shift in burial practices, from an approach focused on collectivity and communal identity to the burial of individuals. Secondary and collective burial does continue during this period (as at Jericho and Gibeon), but nowhere near to the extent seen in earlier phases, and it is not always clear whether these are deliberately disarticulated remains or have simply been disturbed by later activities. This shift, overall, does seem to reflect a real reorientation, not only in belief, but
potentially also in the ways in which human societies were conceptualizing themselves and their personhood.

For the region of modern Iraq, Northern Syria, and southern Turkey, when burials reappear, individual burial, by and large, seems to have been the predominant mode of funerary treatment, although the presence of disarticulated human and animal remains within the White Monument at Tell Banat also hints towards a more complex relationship between collective and individualized practices. Individualized and highly visible burial practices seem to be present in the region from at least 3000 BCE onwards (for example, Arslantepe). Here, a male individual, aged between 35 and 45 years, was found associated with an array of rich burial goods and four “attendant,” probably sacrificed, individuals. This example, like other evidence for sacrifice from the region, attests to the use of human life as a sociopolitical tool, utilized in order to express state/elite power and authority and “valorized” through the action of sacrifice.

Middle and Late Bronze Age (c. 2000–1200 BCE): City States, Palatial Societies, and Internationalism

For much of the 2nd millennium BCE, mortuary practices, or at least the range of practices available, across the wider Middle East seem to show a degree of comparability and possibly even a concept of shared values and funerary beliefs. In contrast to earlier periods, for example, the numbers of “visible” dead broadly come into the step for both the Southern and Northern Levant during this period. These broad similarities and patterns can, however, obscure the wide variety of burial modes visible across this region, and even within a single site. These variations often seem to show no clear patterning (for example, relationship to biological sex, age, associated material, and so on), although at some sites clusters of similar burial forms do seem to be found in association with one another. These variations, therefore, may be associated with individual or group choice, the cause of death of the individual (something not always obvious from the archaeological record) or even factors such as where and when an individual died.

Although there has been relatively little synthetic work carried out on 2nd-millennium BCE burial practices within Iraq and the surrounding regions, several widespread practices have been noted. These include the use of subfloor chamber tombs, standardized grave assemblages, as well as evidence for post-funerary rituals. Middle Bronze Age burials, while showing some evidence for continuity from the preceding Early Bronze Age, seem to be reenvisaged over the course of the early 2nd millennium BCE. Single (as at Ur, Sippar-Ammanum, and Uruk), as well as collective secondary burials are attested (for example, Tell Arbid) at sites from Northern Syria and Iraq. While most of the evidence documented to date has been found in association with 2nd-millennium BCE settlements, isolated cemeteries have also been documented (like Baghouz and ‘Usiyeh) and have often been interpreted
as the burial sites for mobile groups or nomadic groups who, over time, were moving towards a more settled lifestyle.\textsuperscript{37}

Similarly to Iraq and northern Syria, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE within the Levant, we seem to see some continuity of practice from the preceding late Early Bronze Age, with burials and their accompanying artefacts often emphasizing individual identity or status.\textsuperscript{38} When collective (and secondary) burial practices emerge again as a popular mode of burial (c.1800 BCE), the nearly one-thousand-year time gap suggests that this practice is indicative of a completely separate set of beliefs and ideas to those being expressed during the Early Bronze Age.\textsuperscript{39} Collective and secondary burials from the 2nd millennium BCE are generally smaller in size (that is, the total number of individuals incorporated into the tombs—numbers vary from several individuals to an average of around twenty individuals per tomb), and the rearrangement of skeletal remains often seems to be part of a process of simply making space for further burials.\textsuperscript{40}

Both intramural (as at Ugarit and Ur) and extramural or designated (inframural) burial zones (such as Jericho and Maškan-Šapir) are present during this period, and the subfloor burial of infants and young children within jars is a common practice (for example, Tel Dan), sometimes within simple pits or shaft tombs (for example, Tell Arbid).\textsuperscript{41} We also, however, see children being buried within collective tombs.\textsuperscript{42} Although not present at every archaeological site, Middle Bronze Age–Late Bronze Age intramural tombs are found across the wider region.\textsuperscript{43} Many of these were designed to be accessed and reaccessed and were clearly intended for multiple internments.\textsuperscript{44} Much discussion has been dedicated to the role of these tombs within living society, with many scholars arguing for the existence of a “cult of the dead” within both ancient Iraq and Syria (and possibly the wider Middle East), involving the regular offering of food and drink to the deceased.\textsuperscript{45} These household tombs seem to be strongly tied to the importance of the “household” and generational continuity, creating, as Schloen suggests, a “…household of the dead,” whereby deceased family members continued to play an active role in the lives of the living.\textsuperscript{46}

While we do have substantial evidence for nonroyal burials (although perhaps not nonelite) from this period, a few remarkable discoveries stand out. These include the extraordinary finds from the Royal Tomb at Qatna, dating to the latter half of the 2nd millennium BCE, which clearly illustrate the lengthy and complex interactions that could occur between the living and the dead during this period.\textsuperscript{47} Located underneath the Bronze Age palatial complex, this tomb was accessed by a long subterranean corridor, which led towards a rock-cut tomb, itself composed of four separate chambers.\textsuperscript{48} Evidence from this tomb suggests that regular upkeep was taking place, with newly deceased individuals periodically being brought into the tomb, as well as offerings being placed outside of the tomb entrance, at the feet of two basalt statues.\textsuperscript{49} There is also some discussion of whether the individuals in the royal tomb may have been “heat-treated” prior to their burial, possibly even to preserve the dead for a time while a range of events took place, both within and beyond the tomb.\textsuperscript{50}
Iron Age (c. 1200–330 BCE): Innovation, Empires, and the Emergence of Monotheism

The chronological start of the Iron Age is a debated subject and one which cannot be covered in detail here.\(^5^1\) It does, however, play a role in whether researchers see elements of continuity in burial practices from the Late Bronze Age (LBA) into the early Iron Age or not.\(^5^2\) The presence of material dating to the early part of the Iron Age (commonly referred to as Iron Age I–IAI) within Levantine tombs dating to the LBA suggests that, at least in some parts of the Middle East, the continued use of collective LBA tombs was an observed practice. Based on current evidence, this would seem to suggest continued familial or sociocultural connections between individuals buried in these tombs.\(^5^3\) As many scholars have identified, however, within the southern Levant there appears to be a significant paucity of new “visible” early IA burials.\(^5^4\) The reasons for this have been widely debated, from ideologies of egalitarianism to material shortages following the collapse of the LBA palatial system.\(^5^5\)

As we move beyond the first few hundred years of the Iron Age, burial practices again become more visible in the archaeological record. Variations are apparent, with burial modes and practices differing on geographical, sociocultural, and religious bases. Collective rock-cut or “bench tombs” from the Southern Levant, in this case extramural, dating from the 10th through to 6th centuries BCE, show evidence for secondary burial practices and continued postmortem interaction with the dead, as well as an emphasis on lineage or kinship groups.\(^5^6\) Personal monumental or rock-cut tombs, placed within dedicated cemeteries, also appear in association with several important IA capitals (such as Jerusalem and Samaria).\(^5^7\) Within southern Iraq, the evidence seems to be different, with a wide variety of burial containers, such as double-jar burials, so-called bathtub coffins and simple earthen pits being used from the end of the 2nd millennium and throughout the 1st millennium BCE.\(^5^8\) Individual burial, in these cases, seems to have been the “norm,” with multiple burials usually only consisting of an adult and subadult.\(^5^9\)

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts during this period is the widespread appearance of cremation at sites across the Middle East. Again, regional variations are apparent, with evidence varying from dedicated cremation cemeteries, consisting of cremated remains deposited within jars (Tyre-el Bass, for example) through to “in-situ” or primary cremations (as at Tell Sheikh Hammad).\(^6^0\) While several researchers have argued that this practice is a continuation of the long-term relationships between the dead and fire or heat treatment practices, the evidence for cremation does appear to become much more prolific towards the end of the 2nd millennium and during the 1st millennium BCE; in fact, although new discoveries have been documented, the majority of material discussed by scholars still comes from the Iron Age.\(^6^1\) Explanations for the presence of this practice have varied from foreign influence (now generally dismissed) through to factors associated with the age, gender, status, and mode of death of the cremated individual.\(^6^2\) Moving away from the “foreignness” of this practice, scholars have also highlighted that cremation is a transformative process, allowing for rites of separation, as well as allowing for a multiplicity of post-incineration treatments.\(^6^3\)
Bridging the Divide: Burial within the Ancient and Modern Middle East

Despite the huge range of variations in mortuary practices and burial forms seen within the ancient Middle East, there are still strands of connections and continuities that can be traced to a contemporary setting. We cannot elude the simple but inescapable fact that mortality is a shared human experience; more recently scholars have started to explore how explorations of mortality in antiquity may help with conversations around death and dying in the contemporary world. As Tania El Khoury’s work poignantly highlights, burials are important tools of sociopolitical expression; this concept also applies to the ancient world (Figure 2). There are, however, stark differences between both ancient and modern approaches towards the deceased. By exploring the similarities and differences between contemporary and ancient practices we can start to deconstruct some of the choices, as well as the broader sociocultural and political factors, underlying those patterns.

The Concept of Mortuary Spaces

Alongside the first evidence for an awareness of death, the emergence of dedicated, formal, burial spaces or “cemeteries” is often discussed by scholars. How these early mortuary zones do and do not conform to our contemporary concepts of a cemetery is also a subject
of interest; as Snodgrass suggests, we have specific ideas around what the term “cemetery” does and does not mean.65 As highlighted by the chronological overview, dedicated mortuary zones or “cemeteries” are known from at least the Natufian period onwards in the ancient Middle East, albeit with their form, use, and popularity varying across time and space. Once we move into the Chalcolithic era, it has been suggested that these areas become more specialized, with a clear demarcation of space and function.66

In addition to dedicated funerary spaces, however, there is also significant evidence for the burial of individuals within the domestic sphere; formal cemeteries are only one possible response or way in which to memorialize and dispose of the dead. The sociocultural meaning behind intramural (within the settlement area) versus extramural (outside of the settlement) burial practices have been discussed in detail, with some researchers suggesting that this dichotomy has been “overworked.”67 Others have argued that we should be focusing on ideas of inclusion versus exclusion, taking into consideration audience accessibility or the visibility of the burial process and associated rituals.68 There does, however, seem to be something remarkable about what we can term intramural or perhaps more accurately, residential burials, burials that take place within “active” living spaces.69 From Neolithic subfloor burials to Late Bronze Age subfloor built tombs, household burials in the ancient Middle East can include both adults and nonadults, and their presence can be seen to work in direct contrast to some of the emotions stressed by El Khoury’s work. Given the relatively high percentage of the dead from this region who are deliberately buried within the domestic sphere, and evidence for the continued interaction with the deceased individuals located within these intramural zones, it is clear that these spaces were not necessarily transformed, like those in Gardens Speak, from “…domestic and safe spaces into morbid and mourning spaces….”70 Rather, in contrast, the presence of these burials attests to a less strictly perceived division between the domestic “living” space and that of the dead, and also emphasizes the ways in which the dead may have been perceived to be active participants in daily life in the ancient Middle East.71 This is not to suggest that the Syrian garden burials show no continued collaboration between the living and the dead but rather suggests that parameters around which this interaction was able to continue and the ways in which spaces were used and conceived of have changed over time.

From the Iron Age onwards, however, there does seem to be a tendency for burials, to take place in extramural cemetery areas, albeit often within collective family tombs; burial within the settlement is still observed for young children and infants.72 It is interesting to note that similar trends have been observed within the Iron Age Aegean, with Snodgrass arguing that the shift towards the use of “true” cemeteries is representative of increasing demarcation between the living and the dead and even possible secularization or diminished reverence for the dead.73 There are clear exceptions to this practice in the Middle East, and the burial of the royal dead underneath palatial complexes continues into the Iron Age (for example, the Queens’ Tombs at Nimrud, and possible kings’ burials at Samaria).74 Moreover, this pattern is not as clear cut in the burial record of Iron Age Iraq, where the intramural locations of burials have been debated.75 Whether these shifts are due to broader sociocultural changes, including the way in which the family and generational continuity were conceived of, as well as changing religious practices, requires further examination.
While the heterogeneity of burial practices from this region argues against a set of clearly defined “rules” around burial, it seems likely that there were propensities towards certain types of individuals being buried (or not buried) in certain places (or ways), a topic we will return to again shortly. We can ultimately suggest that the meaning and conception of mortuary spaces is socioculturally and context- or rather moment/event-specific. It is this “moment” specificity that we often lack or overlook within the archaeological record. In some situations, including for my own family in 2019, burying or scattering a loved one in a garden, while involving a renegotiation of space, was perceived of as a positive way of keeping the dead close. Within the context of conflict, however, similar processes of keeping the dead close may necessitate the transformation of a carefully bounded positive domestic space into one of negativity and mortality. Rather than these spaces being inherently “positive” or “negative,” what is at play is a “moment” of individual or communal choice based on what is possible and what is not.

Burial and Nonburial as a Political Act

While a graduate student living in the north of the U.K., I recall passing a funeral director business entitled “Go as you please.” Offering a bewildering array of cardboard coffins with designs from floral backdrops to mock Egyptian sarcophagi and natural burials, this establishment did seem to be aiming to help the deceased, or at least the families of the deceased, to make a “go as you please” selection. For many of the families involved, the abbreviated burials of the Syrian activists in Gardens Speak, could not represent a “proper” burial; the active conflict and circumstances of death simply did not afford these opportunities. To what extent, then, might this be the case with material from the distant past? As this paper has illustrated, the dead were treated and disposed of in a huge variety of ways in the ancient Middle East. It is also clear that many of these practices would go beyond what we would constitute a “good burial,” from the repeated physical interaction with the remains of the deceased, to the deliberate fragmentation of human remains. Who, in the ancient Middle East, was therefore likely to not receive a “good” or “proper” burial, and what constituted a “proper” burial?

Distress and the fear of nonburial and ad hoc disposal of a human corpse, as well as the importance of a “proper” burial, is often stressed by scholars of this region. Indeed, within the textual corpus we have derogatory references to groups and individuals who apparently do not bury their dead, as well as omen literature and laws detailing fears around nonburial. As I have explored, however, what constitutes the “correct” way to deal with the dead varies over time and space, as well as presumably between different contextual situations (for instance, the timing and nature of death, role of the person within society, biological sex, and age, and so on). Richardson, when interpreting the textual sources, has also suggested that distress is often being shown towards the mortality of humankind, rather than towards ad hoc methods of burial/disposal. It may be that we cannot or should not even attempt to identify a burial “norm” for the ancient Middle East. What we can do, however, is work from the patterns that survive to try and interpret the motivations, ideologies, and beliefs behind the evidence we have in the archaeological record.
Perhaps the most remarkable pattern, in this sense, is that for most of the periods under study here there are simply not enough archaeological remains of the deceased to account for the once living population. Nadel, for example, has suggested that for the Middle Paleolithic we are looking at a tiny proportion of the deceased population, the equivalent of around 0.07 skeletons for every 100 years. As archaeologists, it is often difficult to distinguish between evidence we simply have not discovered yet, and evidence that remains “invisible” and will never be archaeologically recoverable. There are many factors to consider: from older excavations, to stray finds of human remains not making it into published reports; from issues of miscounting individuals, to the limited areas of excavation, the clearing out and reuse of old tombs, through to simply not yet looking in the “right” places. In relation to the latter, we can consider several different ideas.

Part of the explanation could lie with the thousands of cairns that have been documented across this region. While often associated in the literature with Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age mobile pastoralist activities, more recent investigations have demonstrated that these structures were used over thousands of years, in some cases by groups who would fall within the nomadic spectrum but likely also by other population groups. Their documentation and investigation, until recently, was hampered due to their location, often in steppe or desert areas that have received less scholarly attention. Another possibility, often used to explain the disparity between reconstructed site population densities and burial numbers, is that not everyone may have been buried within or even nearby the settlements in which they dwelt. For example, researchers have suggested that the lack of 4th-millennium BCE burials in the northern Levant and Iraq can be accounted for via the common practice of burial at the edge of settlements, where only limited excavations have been carried out, and modern agricultural and urban damage can be considerable. Given the almost total absence of “visible” dead from this period, and the fact that we have burial evidence for the periods immediately preceding and following this period, this can only be part of the explanation. We can also think about the deceased being returned to their birth village or “tribal lands”; similar practices are recorded in the 19th century in this region, and here we can also think of the martyrs of El Khoury’s work, some of whom were buried within family gardens. Finally, cremation and the scattering of ashes, without any associated container or materials is another possibility. As Ilan has suggested for the Iron Age, however, given the resources required for cremation, especially if this was a very widespread activity, we might expect signatures of overexploitation or depletion of forest coverage to be visible in the archaeological record which, at least for the end of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age is not the case. It is here we can return to the numbers. As studies have shown, at some sites we are potentially dealing with under 2% of the expected mortuary population, even when limited excavation areas are accounted for. Moreover, these patterns are not even over time and space. Given the sheer numbers of “missing” dead, during some periods and in some areas, we therefore have to consider the idea that there are some types of dead that are simply not making it into the archaeological record in the ways in which we would expect. This idea is perhaps not that remarkable, as research has suggested; nonformal or archaeologically invisible burials are likely to have been a widespread phenomenon across many parts of the world. Here, I just want to consider two types of dead: persons involved in conflict and the non-elite.
As numerous scholars have explored, the treatment of the dead during a time of conflict is a politically charged concept. Just as the burials that El Khoury explores in *Gardens Speak* deliberately sought to protect the dead, so too were there cases of the dead never being recovered or having been used as sociopolitical tools. This process is certainly not unique to the Syrian conflict or the Middle East, although textual, iconographic, and archaeological evidence from this region also attests to the mobilization and disposal of the dead being used as a political tool in the past. Richardson, for example, explores textual references to mounds of enemy dead, in some cases individually known and celebrated and, in other cases, unnamed. The Stele of Vultures has been suggested to show the piling of enemy dead and the construction of a burial mound, although whether as a commemoration, a celebration, a political marker or a combination of all of these is unknown. More recently, the discovery of disarticulated mass burials outside of Tell Brak (Tell Majnuna) have been associated with violent conflict. While, as our discussions above have shown and other scholars such as Richardson point out, the concept of a “normative” burial may be a misnomer for much of the ancient Middle East, I would like to suggest that access to burial and the rights to bury in a certain place and way go beyond periods of conflict and catastrophe and have always been potential tools of sociopolitical expression and control.

Here we can briefly return to the 2nd millennium BCE. During this period, as research has shown, burial numbers in both the southern and northern Levant come into step, and broader similarities in burial practices can also be seen across this wider region. Some scholars have even gone as far as to suggest that we see a set “burial package” during this period; a broad shared ideal of the types of objects that should accompany the dead. Based on the discovery of tombs and burials with both a vast array of associated materials, as well as relatively few or no grave goods, scholars have argued that we have representative samples of both elite and non-elite or poor individuals. Excavations at Middle and Late Bronze Age sites, however, would also seem to suggest that, in some cases, we are dealing with a tiny fraction of the expected mortuary population. While discussed above are numerous factors that might partially explain these disparities, they don’t account for every possibility; the idea that for certain periods of time and in certain regions of the Middle East the right or ability to “formally” bury the dead in an archaeologically recoverable way may have been controlled or restricted in some way. This, I would suggest, is the case for some Middle–Late Bronze Age sites in the Levant, where elite individuals may have had the ability to choose or at least influence who and how non-elite persons could be buried.

**Remembering and Forgetting**

Over the past few decades, increasing attention has been paid to issues of memory, both individual and collective, within the mortuary practices of the ancient Middle East. Scholars have highlighted the long-term use and reuse of mortuary spaces, the role of feasting activities and practices of construction and deposition, to name but a few. The temporality and details of these interactions vary: from the continued utilization of burial spaces (as at Çayönü Tepesi) or the deposition and curation of objects (such as the Royal Tombs of Qatna) over hundreds of years, through to deliberate and structured “forgetting” (for example,
To bring this paper to a close, I want to focus on one particular aspect of this evidence: the potential differences that we see between burials that show no evidence for continued or postmortem interaction (that is, primary articulated burials) and those that do (secondary burials). One of the challenges here is distinguishing between “interrupted” burials, which were originally intended to be returned to and interacted with, and burials which, from the outset, were intended to be placed in the ground and then left. Moreover, we must be cognizant of the fact that continued interactions can occur outside of the burial itself, within the wider mortuary/ritual sphere. Evidence for these practices is accessible to us from textual, as well as archaeological sources, although we have to be cautious in assuming that these examples can be applied cross-temporally and -culturally. The differing locations in which these activities were carried out—within or around tombs (Tell Arbid), in temples and palaces (Ugarit) or within household chapels (Ur)—may also be meaningful, either reflecting sanctioned behaviors and deliberate choices around the “proper” locales for memorialization, or relating to issues of access and material wealth.

What I do, however, want to draw attention to is behavior which centers on the human body as a focus of continued interaction and memorialization. Continued access and interaction with the dead and secondary burial, in all its forms, creates discernable connections.
between the living and the deceased. Whether deliberately selecting and purposefully manipulating the dead or simply “pushing back” human remains in order to make way for later burials, these processes are a form of ongoing interaction between the deceased and the living, facilitating processes of both collective and personal remembrance. These practices echo the performativity that El Khoury’s work encapsulates (Figure 3). Secondary burial activities would have involved the living encountering the “materiality” of death, the smells, textures, and sounds, facilitating a “…(collective) ritual of mourning.”104 Continued manipulation (curation, removal of body parts, the structured reorganization of human remains, and so on) of the dead, in particular, may have been used as coping mechanisms and expressions of grief, with the (physical) dead themselves, rather than just the memory of these persons, playing a role in the lives of the living.105 The exact meanings of these practices and continued interactions are likely to have significantly differed over time, something which scholars have, as yet, been slow to fully recognize and explore. Some of these variations come down to a fundamental question, is there something materially significant or different about the “pushing back” of human remains as opposed to the remodeling, selection, and manipulation of the dead. While these considerations and questions take us beyond the remit of the current paper, I would argue yes, that there is a fundamental difference, and that these variations perhaps remind us of the diverse ways in which personhood can be conceived of and portrayed, and how these ideals are reflected and transformed in both life and death.

**Conclusion: Stories of the Dead**

The origins of this paper lie with a series of programs at Bryn Mawr College in the fall of 2018, organized around a retrospective of Tania El Khoury’s work. As an archaeologist whose research interests lay in the mortuary world, and who had previously worked in Syria, *Gardens Speak* had both a personal and academic connection for me. Along with students from my class, I took part in the interactive installation, listening to the stories and collectively entering a moment of mourning. Rather than trying to encapsulate the complex emotions raised by that experience, this paper has taken a geographically and temporally broad approach to the exploration of mortuary practices in the ancient Middle East and, as such, has touched upon a great many different themes and ideas, very few of which have been considered in detail. What I hope it has demonstrated, however, is the huge diversity of burial practices present in the ancient Middle East, many of which would seem completely contrary to contemporary values and are likely to point towards fundamental differences in the ways in which relationships between the dead and living were conceived of. Despite these differences, however, cross-temporal links can be drawn. From ideas of grief and mourning, through to the ways in which access to “choice” may have been influenced by broader sociopolitical factors, this paper is ultimately about the possible stories behind those who have, and continue to be buried and mourned in this region.
Acknowledgments

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I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to those involved in this project for starting me off along this path. Thanks should also be given to the editors of this volume, who kindly invited me to participate in this project. Finally, to Tania El Khoury, whose work, Gardens Speak, inspired me to re-engage with ideas of death and burial in the ancient Middle East.

Notes

1. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 1.
6. Stordeur et al., “L’aire funéraire de Tell Aswad (PPNB),”
7. Croucher, Death and Dying in the Neolithic Near East, 45.
8. Mithen et al., WF16 Excavations, 673–682.
9. The Levant refers to the region covering the modern countries of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Western Syria.
10. For the frequency of burials see Rowan and Ilan, “Subterranean Landscape of the Southern Levant,” 89; and Rowan and Golden, “The Chalcolithic Period of the Southern Levant,” 50.
11. For single articulated burials of adults and children and cemeteries see, Rowan and Ilan, 89; Rowan and Golden, 50. For Byblos, see Artin, La “Nécropole Énéolithique” de Byblos. For Sidon, see Dakerman in Artin, “Ensemble et pratiques funéraires,” 40–41, 24–7. For Kissufim Road, see Goren and Fabian, Kissufim Road.
14. Inhumation refers to the practice of placing the dead within a burial space such as a pit, constructed chamber, or grave. McMahon and Stone, “Edge of the City,” 90–1; Pollock, Ancient Mesopotamia, 199–204.
15. For primary articulated inhumations, see McMahon and Stone, 90. For Susa, see Pollock, 199–201.
18. Pollock, 204.
19. McMahon and Stone, 92.
20. For example, Bradbury and Philip, “Shifting Identities,” 90; Brereton, “Mortuary Rites,” 209.
22. For Jericho, see Kenyon, *Excavations at Jericho. Volume 2*, 8–27. At Bab edh-Dhra, between one and seven individuals have been recorded from each EBIA tomb chamber, with a maximum of five chambers in each tomb. Chesson, “Households, Houses, Neighborhoods and Corporate Villages,” 94. Figures only move into hundreds of individuals per tomb once we move into the later Early Bronze Age; the larger EB II-III charnel houses contained between 46 and 200 individuals per charnel house. Chesson, “Remembering and Forgetting,” 119.

23. For example, Chesson, “Remembering and Forgetting,” 116–119, 120; Polcaro, “Fire and Death,” 139.

24. For Khirbet Kerak, see Mazar, Amiran, and Haas, “Early Bronze Age II Tomb.” For Jericho and status discussions, see Polcaro, “La Tomba A,” 49–70; 90–108.


26. For Jericho, see Kenyon, *Volume 2*. For Gibeon, see Pritchard, *Bronze Age Cemetery at Gibeon*.

27. For individual burial, see Cooper, “Early Bronze Age Burial Types,” 214. For Tell Banat, see Porter, “The Dynamics of Death.”

28. McMahon and Stone, 94–96; Pollock, 205–216.

29. Frangipane, “The Arslantepe ‘Royal Tomb’.”

30. For evidence for sacrifice, see Baadsgaard et al., “Human Sacrifice and Intentional Corpse Preservation.”; Hassett and Sağlamtimur, “Radical ‘Royals’?; Porter, “Mortal Mirrors.” For expressions of state/elite power and authority communicated through the action of sacrifice, see Hassett and Sağlamtimur, 652–3.


32. For example, Cradic, “Residential Burial and Social Memory,” 192; Wygnańska, “Burial in the Time of the Amorites,” 413.

33. Ilan, “Mortuary Practices at Tel Dan,” 128.

34. Wygnańska, 381.

35. Wygnańska, 413–4.

36. For Ur, Sippar-Ammanum and Uruk, see Wygnańska, 406 and for Tell Arbid, see Wygnańska, 391.

37. For Baghouz, see Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Baghouz, L'ancienne Corsôte*. For ‘Usiyeh, see Kazumi Oguchi and Hiromichi Oguchi, “Japanese Excavations at ‘Usiyeh.” For discussions concerning mobile groups who moved towards a more settled lifestyle, see Kepinksi, “Tribal Links between the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle Euphrates”; Wygnańska, 399–400.

38. For example, Bradbury and Philip, “The Invisible Dead Project.”


40. For examples of several individuals within the same tomb, see Wygnańska, 406. For examples of twenty or so individuals within the same tomb, see Kenyon, *Volume 2*, 169. For scholarship concerning the rearrangement of skeletal remains for spatial purposes, see Cohen, “Weaponry and Warrior Burials”; Kenyon, *Volume 2*, 169; Wygnańska, 394.


42. Cradic, 199; Wygnańska, 394.


44. Schloen, 342; Wygnańska, 406.
46. Schloen, 346.
47. Lange, “The Next Level and the Final Stage”; Pfälzner, “How Did They Bury the Kings of Qatna”; Pfälzner, “Royal Corpses, Royal Ancestors and the Living,” 241–70.
49. See Pfälzner, “Royal Corpses, Royal Ancestors and the Living.”
51. For a useful overview of the debates see Ilan, “The ‘Conquest’ of the Highlands in the Iron Age I,” 284–88. The main debates center on whether the beginning of the Iron Age in the Southern Levant corresponds with the withdrawal and end of Egyptian rule (c.1140 BCE), or begins fifty to a hundred years earlier.
52. Ilan, “Iron Age Mortuary Practices and Beliefs,” 52.
55. For context concerning the paucity of IA burials and egalitarian ideologies, see Kletter. Ilan, “Iron Age Mortuary Practices and Beliefs,” 53, discusses the paucity of IA burials from the perspective of material shortages following the collapse of the LBA palatial system.
56. Osborne, “Secondary Mortuary Practice and the Bench Tomb”; Winnet and Reed, Excavations at Dibon (Dhibân) in Moab, 57–60.
63. For example, Barrett, “The Living, the Dead and the Ancestors,” 398; Felli, 77; Rebay-Salisbury, “Cremations: Fragmented Bodies,” 64–66; Sørensen and Rebay, “From Substantial Bodies to the Substance of Bodies,” 66; Louis-Vincent Thomas, “Funerary Rites: An Overview,” 3240.
64. Croucher, “Living with the Dead, Past and Present,” 206.
65. For comparisons between early mortuary zones and contemporary concepts of a cemetery, see, for example, Nativ, Prioritizing Death and Society; Snodgrass, “Putting Death in Its Place,” 187.
66. Nativ, 25; Rowan and Ilan, 89.
67. See Adams and King, “Residential Burial in Global Perspective”; Cradic; Laneri, “A Family Affair.” Snodgrass suggests that the dichotomy is cited too frequently in “Putting Death in Its Place,” 187.
68. Peltenburg, “Enclosing the Ancestors.”
69. For example, Adams and King, “Residential Burial in Global Perspective.”
70. El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 1.
71. Schloen, 346.
72. For collective family tombs, see Ilan, “Iron Age Mortuary Practices and Beliefs.” The majority of Levantine Iron Age burials recorded during the Invisible Dead Project (2012–2014, Durham University) are nonresidential in nature with only a few exceptions, such as Tell Dothan. Bloch-Smith, Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead, reveals evidence for burials associated with occupation deposits. These burials are generally of infants or children.
73. Snodgrass, “Putting Death in Its Place,” 198.
75. For example, H. Baker, 218.
76. Go As You Please Funerals.
78. For example, Buccellati, *The Amorites of the Ur III Period*, 331; Richardson, “Death and Dismemberment in Mesopotamia,” 200–203. For an alternative translation of the Buccellati example, see Porter, *Mobile Pastoralism*, 293.
79. Richardson, 203.
86. For example, van der Steen, *Near Eastern Tribal Societies during the Nineteenth Centuries*, 89.
89. Richardson, 203; Robb, “Burial Treatment as Transformations of Bodily Ideology”; Snodgrass, “Putting Death in Its Place,” 192.
90. For example, McMahon, Sołtysiak, and Weber, “Late Chalcolithic Mass Graves at Tell Brak”; Richardson.
91. Richardson.
92. For Stele of Vultures, see Winter, “After the Battle Is Over.” For unknown uses, see Richardson, 195.
93. See McMahon, Sołtysiak, and Weber.
94. See Richardson.
96. See Jill L. Baker, *The Funeral Kit*.
97. For example, Genz, “The Northern Levant,” 624–5.
98. Bradbury and Philip, “Mapping and Modelling the ‘Invisible Dead’.”
101. For Çayönü Tepesi, see Croucher, *Death and Dying in the Neolithic Near East*, 45. For Qatna, see Pfälzner, “Cultural Memory and the Invisible Dead,” 154. For Bab edh-Dhra, see Chesson, “Remembering and Forgetting.”
103. For Tell Arbid, see Wygnańska, 391. For Ugarit, see Lange, “Food and Libation Offerings for the Royal Dead in Ugarit,” 175–8. For Ur, see Wygnańska, 407.
105. For example, Croucher, “Living with the Dead, Past and Present,” 205.
A Case Study in Immersive Social Art as Knowledge Production

Tania El Khoury at Bryn Mawr College
ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury
Bryn Mawr College, Twelve Gates Arts, and PII Gallery
September 6–23, 2018

Camp Pause
Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College
September 12–December 14, 2018
12 Foreword to the Case Study

Lisa Kraus

To access all audio/visual examples referenced in this essay, please visit the open access version on Fulcrum at https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424.

I was introduced to Tania El Khoury’s work in an Amsterdam theater during the 2016 Holland Festival. Ten audience members at a time gathered for performances of Gardens Speak to hear the true stories of individuals martyred during the Syrian uprisings. In a hushed and darkened space, within a constructed garden, each of us placed our ear to the ground to listen to one story with the sound rising from below. We were then invited to write a letter to the person whose story we heard, to be shared with their family. As a long-time arts professional I have sat in innumerable theater seats, witnessing carefully calibrated and sometimes stunning performances. Performers might surround audience members, or invite us to engage directly in their show. But never had I experienced the feeling of being communicated with so deeply and directly as I did in Gardens Speak.
It’s easy to feel disconnected from worldwide headlines with images of injustice and violence coming at us nonstop. Seeing them may engender a sense of pathos but also futility—how could we possibly relate to such large-scale suffering? In experiencing Gardens Speak I felt the artist had crafted a key for unlocking a sense of intimacy with those impacted. Her live art work moves us beyond disengagement through an embodied experience of stories of people forced to flee homelands, confined in refugee camps, or living or dying under oppressive regimes. Each story is told within a meticulously crafted visual environment. The sequences of experience are sensitively designed. The stories seep into us, getting under our skin, lodging in our hearts.

By the time I left Amsterdam, I felt compelled to connect with El Khoury and her collaborators in order to create a platform for her works in my capacity as coordinator of performing arts at Bryn Mawr College.1 Gathering partners and funding, in 2018 we put together a survey of four existing works and one new commission. Talks, panels, related performances, and a dedicated website made for a rich totality hosted in a variety of arts institutions, academic departments, and college spaces. The umbrella title for all the activities was ear-whispered. This is a term that Tibetan Buddhists use to describe how their teaching passes from teacher to student. The transmission is that intimate, that personal.

To determine which pieces we would feature, El Khoury and I considered a range of past works. Some were site-reliant, as with work about access to the sea just off the coast of Beirut. Some she was reluctant to revisit as they involved her as a performer in vulnerable ways. And some seemed to belong to an earlier time, as with work centered on an earlier relationship. While her works have addressed a wide range of issues and interests, frequently with a strong feminist cast, the four that we chose all cohere through conveying the realities of living in the midst of political upheaval or under oppression. They feature individuals’ stories communicated with immediacy. We feel the teller’s warm breath, their heart beating close by.

The works unfold in a variety of scales and media, from intimate one-on-one performance As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, to a shared experience in a theatrically-lit environment in Gardens Speak. The multisensory nature of these two works is foregrounded through the touch of ink, of a human hand, or with the feel and smell of earth on our skin. They are finely choreographed. Two other works, Camp Pause and Stories of Refuge are gallery installations with multiscreen video projection where the viewer chooses their own vantage points and sequence. We knew there would be a fifth work as well, born of the wish to provide El Khoury with resources and production capacity for the creation of the next piece she felt she needed to make.

Identifying locations for each of the works’ presentation was a stimulating part of the creative conversation. Touring Bryn Mawr’s campus with El Khoury and Pepón Osorio, whose own large-scale, multimedia installations merge conceptual art and community dynamics, we saw an exhibition space in Canaday Library as a fitting space for one of the pieces. We developed a partnership with the college’s department of special collections within library and information technology services (LITS) and Camp Pause was presented under their auspices. The performing arts building, Goodhart Hall, would offer fitting sites for other works; both Gardens Speak and the new commission Tell Me What I Can Do would be presented there. When surveying spaces, we gravitated to a garden between Goodhart and Canaday with a fountain ornamented with Syrian tiles. A venerable tree at its entrance became our preferred site for As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, with the dividing wall between performer and witness built to conform to the shape of the tree’s lowest branch.
Visualizing the possibility for a viewer to move from one piece to another, and to rest for contemplation in the garden, we saw how this choice created an accommodating circuit for a viewer witnessing all of the works.

Stories of Refuge was presented through another partner, FringeArts, at Twelve Gates Arts in Old City, Philadelphia. Connecting the project to our urban neighbors was a critical aim, achieved also with an event with speakers, live music, and Syrian food cohosted by Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture and the Slought Foundation in West Philadelphia.

As for the commission, Tell Me What I Can Do, at the conclusion of Gardens Speak each audience member is invited to write a letter to the deceased martyr whose story they heard, to be shared with their family. It’s a crucial moment for facing the fullness of that death and its meaning. El Khoury said that when more and more performances of Gardens Speak were presented around the world, sharing those letters with family members as originally intended could potentially open old wounds, and many letters are centered on the person who wrote them and their own struggles. They had been written to be shared though, and El Khoury was interested by the common thread that ran through them—the quandary many viewers expressed of what to do with the experience of witnessing Gardens Speak.

Tell Me What I Can Do became El Khoury’s way of resolving the question of what to do with the letters. It evolved initially through provocative conversations with Pepón Osorio and later with frequent collaborator, architect Abir Saksouk. In a room looking out on a garden was an installation of long unfurling rolls of fabric, each with letters written about a particular one of the martyrs attached. Opposite those, collections of letters in multiple languages were displayed on a wall, grouped by the city or country where they were written. In listening stations we hear El Khoury’s collaborators speaking about their experiences collecting the Gardens Speak stories, or working with the letters. Audiences move in and around all this at will, reading, pausing, listening. The sheer number of letters is stunning in scale.

Collaboration is a natural element for El Khoury. She is energized by engaging with others who share her passion for creating from the space where art and activism collide. For those making work with her, there can be special challenges. At Bryn Mawr, valued collaborators’ travel and participation was threatened by Trump’s (now reversed) “Muslim ban.” Collaborator Mohamad Ali “Dali” Agrebi was arrested in Tunis when scanning Gardens Speak letters because police there thought that the box of letters shipped to him from Lebanon could be aimed at inciting revolutionary activity. Many letters, confiscated, have never been returned. That El Khoury has created her works against an ongoing backdrop of danger, repression, and dysfunction while steering clear of stridency greatly contributes to their power. The works connect us in a gentle but penetrating way with the lived experience of people whose suffering we would not wish on anyone. They are tender, ear-whispered.

After experiencing them, it’s up to us—what do we make of them? And what do we do?

Note

1. Major support for ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury was provided to Bryn Mawr College by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage. This project was presented in association with FringeArts. Additional support for ear-whispered was provided by Bryn Mawr College’s Middle Eastern studies program, and additional support for Camp Pause was provided by Bryn Mawr College’s Special Collections and Friends of the Library.
In the fall of 2018, Bryn Mawr College presented *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, a landmark survey of artworks by El Khoury, an artist working between Beirut and London and sometimes as part of the artistic collective Dictaphone Group. El Khoury’s residency and its multisited exhibition on the suburban campus of Bryn Mawr College was organized at the college by the arts program as part of its Performing Arts Series and in collaboration with the library’s department of special collections. It was also listed as part of the Fringe Festival in nearby Philadelphia, with works located at Twelve Gates Arts and PII Gallery. El Khoury and her artistic partners, Abir Saksouk (of the collective Dictaphone Group), Basel Zaraa, and Naya Salamé, worked with staffs of each organization as well as ten student interns at Bryn Mawr to train them on the performances and technologies required to facilitate audience interactions with the works.

At Bryn Mawr, *Gardens Speak* ran hourly with a changing daily schedule. It required purchased tickets and was available to ten participants at a time, who upon entry were asked to remove their shoes and wear a protective hooded jacket, before being invited to lie down in a plot of dirt (local to the area of Bryn Mawr) at reproduced headstones meant to represent those of ordinary people killed in the early days of the Syrian uprising and buried in domestic gardens. Listening to that person’s life story involved placing one’s ear closer to the dirt in a strained effort to hear a voice whispering as if from underground. El Khoury worked with friends and families of the deceased to construct narratives that aimed to be authentically first-person—represented and performed as such. After listening to these stories, participants were invited to write a letter to the individual whose story they had heard and then bury it in front of their headstone. An archive of these letters, accumulated over the course of each *Gardens Speak* performance in over twenty-eight cities, formed the material displayed as a new work, commissioned by the college for this series. Entitled *Tell Me What I Can Do* and based on an exclamation in one of the letters, the artwork/archive served as a reflective space that was free and open to the public during slightly expanded hours from those of *Gardens Speak*. Selected letters from *Gardens Speak* performed at Bryn Mawr are archived in the college’s special collections.
As Far as My Fingertips Take Me is a conceptual collaboration between Tania El Khoury and Basel Zarraa, in which Zarraa is the central performer. The piece required Zarraa, a former resident of the Yarmouk camp for Palestinian refugees in Syria, to travel to the Philadelphia area, where he performed at both PII Gallery and Bryn Mawr College. At the college, an elaborate wall with a small hole was built underneath a tree in Taft Garden. Participants signed up for a twelve-minute, one-on-one encounter with a refugee subject, during which they reached one of their arms through the small hole to feel Zarraa’s immediate physical presence while listening to recorded accounts of border discrimination. Zarraa, in turn, took their fingerprints, and then drew a picture of his family’s journey from Syria to Sweden on one of their forearms.

For her video installation piece *Stories of Refuge*, El Khoury hands over the camera to Syrian refugees living in Munich, asking them to film their daily lives and favorite places in this new city. She then overlays the footage with interviews of the maker-subjects to produce a work that gallery visitors experience while seated on metal bunk beds. For *ear-whispered*, this work was located at Ten Arts Gallery in Philadelphia; it was free and open to the public.

Another video installation piece, *Camp Pause*, operates across four channels that are displayed simultaneously. In these videos, four different subjects, all residents of the Rashidieh refugee camp in Lebanon, are seen in their homes, while describing life in the camp. Eventually, each subject leads the camera, per El Khoury’s instruction, to a place of their choosing on the nearby seashore. At Bryn Mawr, the piece was installed in the Rare Book Room of the college’s main library, where an impromptu white-cube projection room was erected. Visitors entered to sit on a stool made by residents of the camp and to listen through headphones to the story of the person represented on one of four facing screens. As they do this, they are simultaneously aware of the surrounding stories to which they are not (yet) listening, aware that they are making choices: to listen to one person over another, to change seats in order to listen to another person, to each person, or not. The video experience was free and open to the public, operating on a loop so that the subjects’ stories were told over and over again.

*Camp Pause* remained on view at Bryn Mawr College for the entire semester in an exhibition organized by Special Collections. Eleven weeks of programming was funded by the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Libraries to facilitate engagement with the work and its complex content. These programs included a performance with Nimisha Ladva; a poetry reading with Tarfia Faizullah; lectures with Bryn Mawr professors Alicia Walker, Sofia Fenner, Zeinab Saleh, and Sylvia Houghteling; an undergraduate symposium engaging memory and diaspora; a keynote lecture and conversation with associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Claire Davies; a keynote with activist and legal scholar Noura Erakat; a diasporic seed workshop with former Bryn Mawr College archivist, Christiana Dobyrzynski; a reflective conversation with undergraduate student workers on the survey: Akili Davis, Rachel Adler Maryam Jahanbin, Talia Shiroma, Dalia Mahgoub, Tanjuma Haque, Claire Knight, Maya Stucky, and Elizabeth MacKenzie Somers; and conversations with Tania El Khoury, Abir Saksouk, Laurel V. McLaughlin, Carrie Robbins, and Azade Seyhan (included in this volume).
Each piece had different dates and times, as well as different procedures for access. While administratively challenging, especially when managing the expectations of visitors who wanted convenient access to all the works in a single trip to a suburban campus, there was something meaningful about preserving and adhering to the individual specificity of each piece and its particular demands. Dispersed within and across sites, administered to individual specifications, and produced via collaboration rather than individual control, in addition to the participants’ experiences of insecurity, discomfort, even exclusion—of confronting walls and reaching through openings; of encounter; of listening and responding to others—might be more meaningfully definitive of art and migration in the 21st century than even her collaborations with refugees as subjects.
**ear-whispered**: Checklist

1. **Tania El Khoury/Dictaphone Group, Stories of Refuge, 2013. Four-channel interactive video installation. Dimensions variable.**

   Location: Twelve Gates Arts Gallery, Philadelphia  
   Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury  
   Devised with Petra Serhal  
   Videos shot by Ibrahim, Seplan, and Souad (names anonymized).  
   Commissioner: Spielart Festival in Munich  
   Presented 2013–2020: Spielart Festival, Munich; Pergine Festival, Pergine; Bo:M Festival, Seoul; Krisis, Nottingham Trent University; La Bellone, Brussels; Cities as Communal Spaces, Valletta; CounterCurrent, Houston; Synikismos Festival, Elefsina; FringeArts, Philadelphia; Kennedy Museum, Athens Ohio; UMS, Michigan


   Location: Hepburn Theater, Bryn Mawr College  
   Bryn Mawr College staff: Rachel Adler, Tanjuma Haque, Claire Knight, Elizabeth MacKenzie Somers, Talia Shiroma, Maya Stucky  
   Collaborators: Interactive sound installation performance by Tania El Khoury; Production manager, Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish; set construction (in London): SPLEX Flexible Designs and Presentation; Hassan Hassan’s text was written by his friend, Abo Gabi; sound programming: Barbara Lambert; recording assistant: Petra Serhal; voice artists: Zac Allaf, Khaled Omran, Mais Istanbull, Khairy

Cocomicmissioners: Fierce Festival, Birmingham; and Next Wave Festival, Melbourne

Financial support: Artsadmin Artists’ Bursary Scheme, Arts Council of England

Awards: Shortlisted, Artraker Award, 2014; Artsadmin Artist Bursary Scheme, 2013

Presented 2014–2020: Artsadmin, London; Next Wave, Melbourne; Fierce, Birmingham; Forest Fringe, Edinburgh; BEAR, Bucharest; Spielart, Munich; Festival of Questions, Lancaster; Battersea Arts Centre, London; National Building Museum, Washington DC; D-CAF, Cairo; Fast Forward Festival, Athens; Spring Festival, Beirut; Holland Festival, Amsterdam; Belluard Festival, Marseille; Festival De Marseille, Marseille; City Of Women, Ljubljana; Under The Radar, New York; Tandem, Douai; Adelaide Festival, Adelaide; Kulturkirken Jacob, Oslo; Moussem, Brussels; SAAAL, Tallinn; Centrale Fies, Trento; Belfast International Festival, Belfast; Arts Emerson, Boston; MDC Live Arts, Miami Art Basel; NYUAD, Abu Dhabi; Galway Arts Festival; Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia; Teatro do Bairro Alto, Lisbon; Synikismous, Eleusis; Dream City, Tunis; brut Wien, Vienna; PuSh Festival, Vancouver


Location: Special Collections Rare Book Room, Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College

Bryn Mawr College staff: Rachel Adler, Akili Davis, Tanjuma Haque, Dalia Mahgoub, Laurel V. McLaughlin, Carrie Robbins, Talia Shiroma

Collaborators: Research and art direction: Abir Saksouk and Tania El Khoury; camera: Karam Ghossein; video editing, Ali Beidoun; sound design, Majd Al Hamwi; participants: Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour

Commissioner: Dar el-Nimr for Art and Culture, Beirut

Previous Shows: Dar el-Nimr, Qalandia International Festival, Beirut, 2016; CounterCurrent Festival, Houston, 2017; Sakakini Cultural Center, Ramallah, 2017


Location: Taft Garden, Bryn Mawr College; and PII Gallery, Philadelphia

Bryn Mawr College staff: Maryam Jahanbin, Maya Stucky

Collaborators: One-to-one performance: Tania El Khoury; performance: Basel Zaraa; song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass, and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production), and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet)
Commissioned by LIFT in partnership with Royal Court Theatre
Awards: NY Dance and Performance Award, Outstanding Production, The Bessies, 2019
Presented 2016–2020: Royal Court Theatre, London; Santiago Mil, Santiago; In-between Times, Bristol; Mosaic Rooms, London; Latitudes Contemporaines, Lille; Belluard, Fribourg; Arab Arts Festival, Liverpool; Mladi Levi, Ljubljana; Bodies Beyond Borders, Copenhagen; MDC Live Arts, Miami Art Basel; Cabaret de Curiosité, Valenciennes; D-Caf, Cairo; Vooruit, Ghent; Fusebox, Austin; Synikismos Festival, Elefsina; Santarcangelo Festival; Arab Focus, Avignon Festival; Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia; FringeArts, Philadelphia; 4+4 Days in Motion, Prague; Divadelná Nitra, Nitra; Anti Festival, Finland; Kaserne Basel, Basel; MAIF Social Club, Paris; Trisolini Gallery, Athens Ohio; Les Rencontres a l’échelle, Marseille; Under The Radar, New York; Woolly Mammoth, Washington, D.C.; Atelier 201, Brussels; CAC, Cincinnati; Freehand Hotel, New York; Cork Midsummer Festival, Cork; IDEM Festival, Madrid; Materiais Diversos, Minde; Without Walls, La Jolla; Spielart, Munich; UMS, Michigan; Arab American National Museum, Dearborn

Dimensions variable.

Location: Goodhart Theater, Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr College staff: Claire Knight, Talia Shiroma, Elizabeth MacKenzie Somers
Collaborators: Interactive installation: Tania El Khoury; space design: Abir Saksouk; sound pieces: Kinana Issa, Mohamed Nour “Abo Gabi” Ahmed, Mohamed Ali “Dali” Agrebi; English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish; installation coordinator: Jon Weary
Commissioner: Bryn Mawr College for *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*
Presented 2018–2020: Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia; Synikismos Festival, Elefsina; PuSh Festival, Vancouver

List of Artists and Collaborators:

Tania El Khoury, artist
Angela Dowdy, arts administrator, Office for the Arts, Bryn Mawr College
Johanna Austin, photographer
Lisa Kraus, artistic director and performing arts coordinator, Bryn Mawr College
Sara Nye, project manager
Amelia Couderc, project assistant
Lauren Tracy, project production manager (Flannel & Hammer scene shop)
Jon Weary, installation coordinator
Basel Zaraa, performer
Naya Salamé, production manager
Abir Saksouk, installation designer, collaborator
Pepón Osorio, consultant
Hazami Sayed, community connector
Louis Massiah, documentation consultant
Josh McIlvain, content editor
Sharene Azimi, communications consultant
Benjamin Brown, graphic designer (Masters Group Design)
Sean Brodbeck, web designer (Sean Brodbeck Graphic & Interactive Design)
Dave Tavani, videographer
Johanna Austin, photographer

Bryn Mawr College Staff

Justin McDaniel, technical director, Goodhart Theater
Amy Radbill, theater production manager
Alicia Walker, professor of history of art
Dawn DiGiovanni, associate director of Facilities for Grounds
Carrie Robbins, curator and academic liaison for Art and Artifacts
Laurel V. McLaughlin, Bryn Mawr College Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway Curatorial Fellow and history of art Ph.D. candidate

Bryn Mawr College Undergraduate Interns

Rachel Adler
Akili Davis
Tanjuma Haque
Maryam Jahanbin
Claire Knight
Dalia Mahgoub
Talia Shiroma
Elizabeth MacKenzie Somers
Maya Stucky

FringeArts Staff

Zach Blackwood, programming manager
Keighty McLallen, interim production manager
Raina Searies, marketing coordinator
Sabrina Carter, communications coordinator
Christopher Munden, guide editor
ear-whispered: Project Chronology

2016

- Lisa Kraus attends the Holland Festival in Amsterdam and sees artist Tania El Khoury’s touring work Gardens Speak, 2014.
- Kraus contacts Tania El Khoury proposing a project showcasing multiple works at Bryn Mawr College and in Philadelphia. She invites Pepón Osorio, artist and Laura H. Carnell Professor of Community Art at Temple University; Hazami Sayed, founding executive director of Al-Bustan, Seeds of Culture; and Louis Massiah, founder of Scribe Video Center to be project consultants and FringeArts to be associate presenters. With the team of partners in place, Kraus on behalf of the Bryn Mawr College Performing Arts Series applies for funding from the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage (PCAH).

2017

- Funding is awarded from PCAH for ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, to showcase multiple works at Bryn Mawr College and in the FringeFestival in fall of 2018.
- Tania El Khoury visits Bryn Mawr College in fall 2017, meeting faculty and consultants, viewing spaces and begins to choose works and select sites.
- Kraus approaches Carrie Robbins about creating an exhibition in the Rare Book Room of Bryn Mawr College for Camp Pause and collaborating on accompanying programming, also contacting faculty in academic departments for potential involvement.
- Kraus hires Sarah Nye as project manager and Amelia Courdec as project assistant in addition to Lauren Tracy as project production manager of Flannel & Hammer scene shop and Jon Weary as installation designer.
2018

- January: Pepón Osorio and Lisa Kraus conduct multiple Zoom conversations with El Khoury and several of her collaborators, beginning to flesh out ideas for the commissioned work. Additional support for *ear-whispered* is provided by Bryn Mawr College’s Middle Eastern studies program. Additional support for *Camp Pause* was provided by Bryn Mawr College’s Special Collections and Friends of the Library.

- February: Kraus hires Benjamin Brown as graphic designer of Masters Group Design, Sean Brodbeck as web designer of Sean Brodbeck Graphic & Interactive Design for the survey printed materials.

- March: Kraus consults with Louis Massiah as documentation consultant, Josh McIlvain as content editor, and Dave Tavani as videographer, and Sharene Azimi as communications consultant for promotional materials and collaborates with Bryn Mawr staff Justin McDaniel, the technical director of Goodhart Theater, Amy Radbill, the Theater Production Manager, Dawn DiGiovanni, the associate director of Facilities for Grounds for installation plans.

- April: Tania El Khoury, Laurel V. McLaughlin (Bryn Mawr College history of art Ph.D. candidate), Carrie Robbins (Bryn Mawr College curator/academic liaison for art and artifacts in the department of special collections), and Abir Saksouk (Dictaphone Group member) partake in a public conversation introducing Tania El Khoury and her collaborators to the college community. Tania El Khoury visits Bryn Mawr again for a week to firm up plans for the programming, marketing, and documentation.

- May: Kraus collaborates with FringeArts personnel Zach Blackwood, Programming Manager; Keighty McLallen, interim production manager; Raina Searies, marketing coordinator; Sabrina Carter, communications coordinator; and Christopher Munden, guide editor to integrate El Khoury’s work within the festival.

- June–July: Kraus, El Khoury, and collaborators continue production plans and scheduling.

- August: Laurel V. McLaughlin receives Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway Fellowship to collaborate further with Carrie Robbins and history of art professor Alicia Walker, creating nine paid internship positions for undergraduates Rachel Adler, Akili Davis, Tanjuma Haque, Maryam Jahanbin, Claire Knight, Dalia Mahgoub, Talia Shiroma, Maya Stucky, and Elizabeth MacKenzie Somers to work with Tania El Khoury at Bryn Mawr.

- September: El Khoury and her collaborators, Basel Zaraa (performer), Naya Salamé (production manager), and Abir Saksouk (installation designer and collaborator) arrive at Bryn Mawr College.

- September 6–23: *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury* is presented to the public at Bryn Mawr College, and the Fringe Festival at Twelve Gates Arts.
○ September 8: Slought Foundation, Bryn Mawr College Performing Art Series, and Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture cohost Reflections on Syria at Slought Foundation, featuring a conversation among: Villanova University associate professor of global interdisciplinary studies, Samer Abboud; refugee resettlement worker, Mohammed Al-Juboori; Tania El Khoury and collaborator Kinana Issa; and musicians Hafez Kotain and Jay Fluellen; moderated by founding executive director of Al-Bustan, Hazami Sayed.

○ September 12: Tania El Khoury, Laurel V. McLaughlin, Abir Saksouk, and Fairbank Professor in the Humanities Emerita and research professor in German and comparative literature at Bryn Mawr College, Azade Seyhan, hold a public conversation in the Rare Book Room of Canaday Library, Bryn Mawr College as the opening program for the Special Collections Camp Pause exhibition. Discussion centers on the working methodologies and research practices of Dictaphone Group.

○ September 14: Noura Erakat, professor in the humanities department at George Mason University, Palestinian-American activist, and legal scholar, delivers keynote “Understanding the Question of Palestine as an Anti-Racist Struggle” at Bryn Mawr College.

○ September 15: Tania El Khoury and Temple University Laura H. Carnell Professor of Community Art, Pepón Osorio give an artist conversation in Taft Garden concerning their collaboration on the project and work with communities.

○ September 16: Tania El Khoury and Basel Zaraa lead project staff in a closing event in which the letters from Gardens Speak are ceremonially buried behind Goodhart Hall at Bryn Mawr College.

○ September 21: Christiana Dobrzynski, (former) Bryn Mawr College archivist, leads a public storytelling workshop concerning strategies of diasporic storytelling in dialogue with the work Camp Pause in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition.

● September 23–December 14: Camp Pause remains on view in the Rare Book Room at Bryn Mawr College beyond the ear-whispered project dates; exhibition programming continues.

○ September 28: Tania El Khoury project undergraduate interns Rachel Adler, Akili Davis, Tanjuma Haque, Maryam Jahanbin, Claire Knight, Dalia Mahgoub, Talia Shiroma, Maya Stucky, and MacK Somers lead a reflection conversation on their experiences working on the survey with the artist as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition.

○ October 5: Tarfia Faizullah, poet and lecturer in the Bryn Mawr Reading Series, speaks with English majors Liana Thomason, Cassidy Gruber, and Laurel V. McLaughlin in conversation about diasporic poetry, traumatic memory,
and the processes of writing as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition.

- October 26: Zainab Saleh, assistant professor of anthropology and coordinator of Middle East and Islamic Studies at Haverford College gives a lecture entitled “‘Toppling’ Saddam Hussein in London: Media, Meaning, and the Construction of an Iraqi Diasporic Community” as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition.

- November 2: Sylvia Houghteling, assistant professor in the history of art at Bryn Mawr College delivers a lecture entitled “On Loss and Memory in Textiles” concerning an object study of the badla-work wedding shawl, late 19th–early 20th century: cotton, metal foil, 85 1/16 × 19 11/16 × 5/64 in. (216 × 50 × 0.2 cm), Bryn Mawr College Special Collections, 2010.4.13. This program was held in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition, *Camp Pause*.

- November 16: Jennie Bradbury, assistant professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at Bryn Mawr College lectures on “The Remembered Dead: Burial Practices in the Ancient Near East” as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition, *Camp Pause*.

- November 30: Nimisha Ladva, visiting assistant professor of writing at Haverford College and performer, presents new works in a series on migration as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition, *Camp Pause*.

- December 7: Alicia Walker, professor of history of art at Bryn Mawr College, delivers a lecture entitled “Diaspora, Migration, and Identity: Medieval Perspectives on Modern Experience,” as a program in conjunction with the Special Collections exhibition, *Camp Pause*.

2019 (afterlife)

- February 14: Laurel V. McLaughlin and Carrie Robbins present “Learning from Tania El Khoury’s ear-whispered” at Bryn Mawr College,” as part of the panel “When Home Won’t Let You Stay”: Art and Migration in the 21st Century,” (panel organizers: Ruth Erickson and Ellen Tani, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston) at the College Art Association Annual Conference in New York.

Notes

1. This conversation is included in this reader on page 193.
2. This conversation is included on this reader on page 200.
ear-whispered: Acknowledgments

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On April 9, 2018 artist Tania El Khoury joined Carrie Robbins, curator for art and artifacts in special collections at Bryn Mawr College, and Laurel V. McLaughlin, history of art Ph.D. candidate and Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway Curatorial Fellow at Bryn Mawr College, for a conversation introducing the college community to four of the interactive artworks that would be showcased in the most extensive survey of her work to date, *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury* (September 6–23, 2018). This survey, organized as part of the Performing Arts Series at Bryn Mawr College, included four monumental works: *Gardens Speak* (2014), *As Far as My Fingertips Take Me* (2016), *Camp Pause* (2016), and *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018). In this conversation, El Khoury discusses each of the works, alongside conceptual points of her practice.

**Carrie Robbins (CR):** As curator and academic liaison, I’m very pleased to announce that this coming fall semester Special Collections will exhibit a video installation work by Tania El Khoury, entitled *Camp Pause*. Throughout the next several months, we’ll have an increased opportunity to get to know Tania during her residency, especially through the works of art she’ll bring to campus, but also through conversations with her such as this one and those forthcoming.

We find ourselves in the Bryn Mawr College Special Collections Rare Book Room, where we’ll install the video installation by Tania’s collective, Dictaphone Group, next semester. So let’s begin our discussion with *Camp Pause* and proceed through the four pieces coming to campus for the survey.

**Laurel V. McLaughlin (LVM):** Before we get into the form of the work itself, Tania, I wonder if you could briefly guide us through the current conflicts in the region from your perspective, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that create and continue to affect refugee residents of the camp.

**Tania El Khoury (TEK):** Well, as you know, Israel was created in 1948 as the result of colonial rule in the Levant, but also the Zionist movement and ethnic cleansing during the
1948 war. The Israeli government has conducted various military raids in Lebanon since the 1950s and it expelled the majority of non-Jewish and indigenous people living there. Approximately 400,000 Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon. Israel has also collaborated with and supported some of the most right-wing movements in the region. For instance, they offered cover for the Phalange group, or Kataeb militia, who in 1982 massacred many unarmed Palestinians in refugee camps in Sabra and Shatila. The military raids and support of these violent right-wing groups harmed these refugee populations who no longer have access to return.

CR: When you’re trying to examine some of that history for a work like *Camp Pause*, in a four-channel video work, how do you select the four individuals? Do they represent different kinds of stories?

TEK: Dictaphone Group works mainly with site-specificity. Our projects take place on a site directly connecting with the politics of that space. The choice of collaborators is often a result of our encounters on that site. Connecting with people we encounter needs to be reciprocal, and not forced. In *Camp Pause*, we were interested in understanding people’s relationships to the sea as one of the borders of a surveilled and securitized refugee camp. Naturally, we aimed to speak to people with various relationships to the camp and the sea: a child whose house is adjacent to the water, an elderly woman who was born in Palestine, a fisherman, and a fighter. The artwork is set in a room with four different projections, each one follows one of these characters. It starts inside their home inside the Rashidieh camp and ends with the sea. You, as an audience member, are invited to enter the installation space, pick up headphones hooked up to one of the four soundscapes (you can decide which you watch first); and at the end, you find yourself surrounded by the sea.

LVM: I’m curious about this form, as you give the audience members an experience within an immersive video installation—or an environment. In this refugee camp context, the power dynamics of agency strike me as unexpected. How are you conceiving of this negotiation of agencies?

TEK: I’ll start with the agency of both the residents and audience. For the audience it’s straightforward, as they can choose if they just want to listen to the original sound in Arabic, or just watch in silence while reading the English subtitles, or listen to multiple stories, in the order of their choice. Regarding the agency of the participants in this piece, it was interesting to realize that as outsiders of the camp, we had a different conception of how the residents related to the sea. Our collective Dictaphone Group has long worked about the right to access the sea and enjoy it freely. We approached this project believing that the sea is bliss for Rashidieh residents. We thought it is the place where one can feel closer to Palestine as it links them geographically and historically to their home. We quickly realized that we were romanticizing the sea and life in the camp. The residents told us that the less wanted houses were the ones that are adjacent to the shore as they flood and get rusty. As in all collaborative encounters, the work was transformed by the various conversations and by the participants challenging our perception.
CR: This is all informing the decision to ask someone to walk to the sea. This suddenly becomes something very different—you're asking them to do something that they might actively avoid for our viewing pleasure.

TEK: Yes, exactly. This is where our original concept gets discussed and negotiated between collaborators. We approached the project with a specific idea and said, “We want to film you in your home and map the journey you take to reach the sea,” with the understanding that there is always a space for people to shift the concept. In this case, one person told us, “Oh, I don’t usually go to the sea”; but since it was close, she said, “I’ll go now as I haven’t been in a while.” She finally decided to stop before reaching the sand and instead watch the sea from a distance.

CR: Do you consider the editing process to be your creative input? Because this isn’t photojournalism or documentary per se. Could you describe what it is that distinguishes these modes of storytelling?

TEK: There is an editing process in most publicly shared work, including journalism. While Camp Pause shares the stories of real people, it is not offered as a documentary but as scenes from four people’s lives with a focus on the journey and link between their homes and the sea. The choice of the soundscape over each video is where most of the editing happened. We spoke to each person for hours but only chose a few minutes to share. The stories needed to be varied, real, and engaging but not sensational or untrue to the encounter we had with them. The sound was also a documentation of people's oral history, and here lies an enormous responsibility in sharing these publicly. In the case of the elderly woman, she was one of the very few remaining camp residents who were born in Palestine. Sharing her memory is important on an individual and political level. She was aware of this responsibility herself and kept repeating that by telling us her and her family’s stories, she is telling us a collective story of her people.

Additionally, I think the main difference between this type of storytelling and others is the audience’s involvement in the work—the invitation to the audience is to embody these stories by bearing witness to them and allowing them to become part of who they are. The audience interaction is very much part of the concept from the beginning of the work.

CR: Yes, it might be interesting to think about how this creative direction changes in a work like As Far As My Fingertips Take Me, which is an installation work that will be sited under a tree on Bryn Mawr’s campus. In this work there’s a particular encounter for an individual. Could you describe the situation as you intended it?

TEK: As Far As My Fingertips Take Me is a conversation between one audience member and a refugee—Basel Zaraa—through a gallery wall with a hole in it. The audience member places their arm through the hole and Basel touches it and draws a line of people crossing a border. Basel is a musician and an artist. He was born a Palestinian refugee in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus. He created a song inspired by the journey that his sisters took from Yarmouk to Sweden. I won’t spoil it for you, but this is a tactile, sensory, and intimate one-on-one performance, centered on that encounter between one audience and one performer.
LVM: Could you talk to us about the process of collaborating with Basel as an artist and refugee in this work? There have been other artists who have attempted similar aims, but there are ethical concerns, of course.

TEK: I was commissioned by LIFT Festival and the Royal Court Theatre in London that wanted to commission an art program on migration. I had a long conversation with them about why they are referring to it as “migration” when they are clearly talking about asylum seekers and refugees and how that classification implies that people have choices when they don’t. Fortunately, they changed the name, and still encouraged me to propose an idea.

I felt that this isn’t my story to tell. I proposed a project where I would invite an artist who was born as a refugee to tell their story. That was important because many of us now talk about a “refugee crisis,” as if it’s uniquely a recent issue and as if it is our crisis rather than the crisis of those who were displaced. The mainstream discourse is centered around those who have been made refugees in the last few years, forgetting that this is a long term process in which people are born and spend entire lives in so-called “temporary” housing. I thought at the time that it was—and still is—very important to talk about that. The case of Yarmouk refugee camp, where Basel is from, is particular because it is populated by Palestinian refugees who were forced into a second displacement when their camp was besieged and attacked by the Syrian regime.

In this work, the theater commissioned me and I commissioned Basel to create a rap song as a central element in the piece. While sharing the project, it was clear to us that the work is about how certain audiences needed to literally feel and touch a refugee in order to feel their plight—we often joked about this. The piece ended up being touching—emotionally—for a lot of audiences who shared their experiences with us. It is now touring, which is great as Basel gets to travel with it.

LVM: In this work, it’s meaningful in many ways that you commissioned Basel. Apart from a radical gesture of solidarity, this could also be seen as an artistic gesture. Looking at your practice more broadly, this seems to align with your stance as a “live artist.” “Live” as an adjective could refer to the process of living, an in-person state, and/or actual use. In a performative context, this term was used in the 1970s to distinguish Euro-centric avant-garde practices from that of the theater, but it strikes me that you use this term in another sense—could you explain what the term “live” means for you?

TEK: “Live art” is a term is mainly used in the U.K., where I studied and lived for most of my adult life. I find the term much broader than “performance art” because I think that performance—at least from my understanding—centers around the presence of a performer’s body. That presence is important aesthetically and politically and has been employed by feminist art practices and protests. “Live art” as an umbrella term may include such performances, but I understand it to be a practice and a research engine that centers around “liveness” enabling a direct relationship between the audience and the work. This sometimes may include performers, and at other times it is the audience themselves who activate the work. That’s why I use that term.

My own work as a maker is different in each work. Sometimes I perform in intimate one-on-one encounters with the audience. In other places, I’m proposing experiences wherein
the audience experiences other people’s stories and I take myself out of the equation as I don’t want to channel the stories as mine. For example, in Gardens Speak, the interactive sound installation in which an audience is led by a guide into the space of graves, listens to martyr accounts, and can choose to write a letter to the dead after, I originally acted as an audience guide in that work. And then I decided to remove myself because it’s such a strong experience for many audiences, that, when they come out of it, they would ask me questions about myself—like “How did you get these stories? What did you feel? Is it too hard to listen to these stories?” etc. And I realized that it was becoming about me, due to people’s fascination with the persona of the artist.

CR: You’ve started to share this with us, but I would imagine that it’s a complex concern when a project turns too much into telling a story that isn’t one’s to tell.

TEK: A way to answer this is to think about the collection of oral history. I think about collecting oral history as a performance in itself. The interviews are a kind of one-on-one performances. What is interesting to me in a one-on-one performance setting is this intimate encounter that is different on each occasion—it doesn’t just rely on the artist, or oral historian, or interviewer, but also on the relationship between the two people. It’s also a solidarity act. So, I wouldn’t go to collect oral histories from people that I have no connection to or that I’m not in solidarity with. It very much starts from a place of sharing care and solidarity and commitment to tell certain stories that counter the grand narratives of governments and mainstream media. If you already come from a place of solidarity, then you’re approaching the project together and you’re putting people’s safety and collaborative input before the outcome of the art.

CR: Is it important that the presentation then is of that experience of connection between you and the subject?

TEK: Yes. There are three layers: the collection, the editing, and the presentation to an audience. I believe each of these three steps need to be interactive, collaborative, and aware of the power dynamics and ethical boundaries of the work.

LVM: That’s a great segue into our Gardens Speak. Could you describe what audiences encounter, specifically with subjects who are deceased, and thus the collaboration is with family members?

TEK: Yes, so this is a work of oral histories of ten people who were killed at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and they were buried in their home or public gardens for various reasons. The collection of these oral histories was from interviews with their friends and families—sometimes with several people and sometimes with one person. Other than the interviews, we sometimes had access to their written materials—videos if they were activists, and sound recordings from before they were killed. So, it was a combination of sources within a narrative text written by activist and writer Kinana Issa. These pieces were written in the first person. Then they were sometimes sent back to the families so they could check how their loved ones were presented in their voices using their own dialects. The stories were later translated into English and other languages such as French, Greek, Italian, and Portuguese.
The audiences are invited to walk into a garden space where ten speakers are buried under four tons of soil, and dig with their own hands in the soil to get closer to the sound source and lie down to listen to the stories whispered into their ears.

**LVM:** How did you come to this particular form, with a pseudo-sacred encounter on the soil, marked tombstones, and audience members as performers? It’s not reenacting actuality; instead it seems to access a collective imaginary?

**TEK:** Some of the gardens in Syria that were transformed into cemeteries were marked, but usually they are written on a piece of cardboard, like “the martyr, Tania.” So, we created tombstone markers in different shapes, each unique with their own calligraphy designed by artist Dia Batal. The garden in the set is not a literal representation of these spaces as it is conspicuously designed. This type of distancing from reality is necessary for the audience in order to access this strong experience that deals with mortality and death. Many people who see the work have lost people, even if it’s not in the same context—they understand loss. I wanted this complex relationship to be intimate, but also soothing and not antagonistic or sensationalist in literal terms. The critical distance to reality allows people to decide how much they want to invest in the work. The same goes for how they relate to the story. I see their experience very much as a one-on-one piece, because they’re listening and connecting to only one story and one person who was made absent. At the same time, it’s a collective experience as they’re entering the space with a group of strangers, or perhaps friends. Sometimes you notice yourself as part of a group forming an aesthetic image in the space. It’s both immersive and distant.

**LVM:** Earlier, Carrie brought up storytelling, and here, it functions as carrying on memory—how does that work after the work ends?

**TEK:** All oral histories are necessary to sustain memories and challenge the dominant narratives that get more attention, because they’re written by those who win wars, control the media, and make policies. Oral histories are necessary, whether they’re about the deceased, or marginalized people within society. And they’ve been used to counter grander histories in the past. They’ve been used in the context of the Arab uprisings too in order to document crimes by different regimes, and to tell the stories of those who have been killed and tell the stories of those who remain living, and form various types of resistances. It happens all the time; for instance, I’m hearing colleagues in Puerto Rico saying that they’re going to work on documentation in the aftermath of the hurricane because certain stories need to be told. There’s a sense of urgency that happens with these projects when there are political movements, wars, or occupations. I don’t think because these people were killed that their stories become more urgent, but I think that all of these oral histories are similarly urgent.

We cannot grasp how these memories are carried by those who witnessed them after the work. The hope is that they become embodied by the audience, carried on with them as their own bodily memory of that experience. The decision to print the stories into a bilingual book is also an attempt to make those stories live on beyond the touring of *Gardens Speak.*
CR: And this idea of documentation is a good place to end with the last piece—the newly commissioned work by Bryn Mawr College—Tell Me What I Can Do. Can you tell us about how the letters function differently here in documentary form than they do in Gardens Speak?

TEK: Yes, so this is a new piece, but at the same time it’s part of Gardens Speak. This is an installation in which we will share all the letters that were written by audiences around the world during the touring of Gardens Speak. As you know, towards the end of Gardens Speak, audience members are invited to write letters addressed to the person whose story they just heard and bury the letters in the soil. For a long time, I didn’t know what to do with these letters. I didn’t feel the need to share them as information per se, but I wanted to share their scale, the different aspects of them, and use them as a space to open many of these conversations. For example, to speak about what has happened since the making of Gardens Speak in 2014. Our hopes as Arab artists and activists were crushed since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, and since the writings of many of these letters. There will also be sound pieces made with the initial collaborators on Gardens Speak making these collaborations and initial encounters visible, reflecting on what it meant for all of us to make the work back in Beirut in 2013 where many Syrian activists and artists were residing. The majority of these collaborators found themselves moving again, often to a long-term exile. I used this new piece to reconnect with them and discuss what happened to all of us since and share how people responded to Gardens Speak.

While digitizing Gardens Speak letters, two of the boxes of letters were seized by the Tunisian police. I was working with a Tunisian activist and artist Dali Agrebi on the digitization of the letters, and he received from me boxes of audience letters from London and others from Beirut. Two weeks after he received the mail from Beirut, the anti-terrorism police raided his apartment and arrested him. Before being released on the same day, he was interrogated about the letters as the police believed that the audience letters from Gardens Speak were used as propaganda to incite Tunisians to join the armed fighting against the Syrian regime. These unfortunate occurrences will be part of the piece as well.

CR: And this reinforces that the audience’s encounter, through reading, becomes a very political act.

Note

1. This interview is excerpted from a larger transcript and edited for written clarity.
On September 12, 2018, on the opening of Camp Pause as an exhibition within the larger survey, ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, artist Tania El Khoury and architect and urbanist Abir Saksouk of the collective Dictaphone Group joined Laurel V. McLaughlin, history of art Ph.D. candidate, and Azade Seyhan, the Fairbank Professor in the Humanities and professor of German and comparative literature, Bryn Mawr College in a conversation about their working methods, research, and conception of collaboration in Camp Pause since beginning to work together as a collective in 2009.1

Laurel V. McLaughlin (LVM): We’re gathered here today to discuss the various forms of collaboration that Dictaphone Group invokes in their performance and video works. Camp Pause, shown here in the Rare Book Room, is a collaboration of the Dictaphone Group collective, for which Abir Saksouk and Tania El Khoury orchestrated research and artistic direction. Could you both introduce yourselves, tell us about your areas of expertise, and share how Dictaphone Group came into being?

Tania El Khoury (TEK): Hi, thank you for having us. I’m Tania El Khoury, I’m a live artist and cofounder of Dictaphone Group.

Abir Saksouk (AS): I’m Abir, and I was originally trained as an architect and then studied urban planning. I work across research, advocacy and storytelling in the field of urbanism.

TEK: The collective was founded in 2009 in London when Abir and I were studying for our masters degrees and had many conversations about our relationship to our city back home, Beirut. We spoke about the lack of public space and how we could counter it. I was studying in the performance department, and she was in urban research studies. We dreamed of actions that connected both disciplines: multidisciplinary study on space and site-specific performances. A year later, we were in Lebanon researching and performing our very first project Bit Téléférique in 2010.
LVM: Could you describe the immersive, four-channel video work, Camp Pause, on which you collaborated?

TEK: Camp Pause is a video installation that follows four residents of Rashidieh Palestinian refugee camp in the south of Lebanon from their homes to the sea, which is adjacent to the camp. It’s about their relationship to the camp, to the sea, and their everyday life and struggles as refugees in Lebanon. The installation invites the audience to follow one story closely or watch the four together from a distance. At the end, the audience is surrounded by images of the sea.

AS: The project is also a narrative of many untold stories about Palestinian camps in Lebanon and how they came to be. And we believe that recounting the history of spaces is key to understanding the present state of things. The early recollection of Palestinians arriving to Lebanon in 1948 revealed a lack of understanding and lack of organization by the Lebanese state that we are now witnessing with Syrian refugees arriving in vast numbers since 2011. In this sense, the project could also be described as a historical testimony.

LVM: You define the aims of Dictaphone Group as a “research and performance collective aiming at questioning our relationship to the city, and redefining its public space.” In your description of the work, you name some of these working methods, which include: interviewing with Rashidieh residents, consulting of aerial photos, maps, and the cadastral registry, meeting with planner Nasr Charafeddine and researchers Ismael Sheikh Hassan and Lina Abu Rislan, reviewing the examination of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Camp Profile, Palestinians in Lebanon: Refugees Living with Long-term Displacement by Rebecca Roberts, and reports concerning the Ras al-Ain waters by cultural heritage conservation group, the Green Southerners. Could you walk me through your research process?

AS: It was a very lengthy process of discoveries on site. I think one of the main aims was for the work to engage the context. So, for example, Camp Pause was commissioned by a Palestinian museum in Beirut, the Dar el-Nimr for Art and Culture, and it focuses on refugees’ relationships with the sea. We worked in the Rashidieh refugee camp, a camp on the coast of Lebanon, to the south of the city of Tyre, because it’s the camp that’s situated closest to the sea. It always had a contested history in terms of land ownership and refugee rights within the camp. Our approach was grounded in direct engagement with this site and its contemporary context. We did preliminary research to understand its history in the current literature. In general, the history of Palestinian camps is not well documented, so we had to rely on spoken narrative. That’s where the fieldwork started, with a set of in-depth interviews. From this fieldwork, we identified four characters, Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour, and they led us in developing the artistic approach and the research. We relied on several interviews with them in which we developed a set of questions that were semi-structured.

TEK: The artistic approach is different in each case. Abir mentioned in the beginning that it’s an ongoing transformation of how we work together. At the start of our collaboration,
we divided labor between Abir leading the research and me in charge of coming up with an artistic concept that we would work with, such as audience interactivity (as in how the audience experiences the work), or community participation (as in how we approach and collaborate with a community). It depends on the project and our encounter with the site and the inhabitants that determines how we work. For this particular project, *Camp Pause*, we were interested in the work site specifically and I feel that we're stronger when we engage with people and build a memory with the site.

**LVM:** What did you learn about the history of Rashidieh through your research? And how did this knowledge shape this approach to the project?

**TEK:** We discovered many things, as we know very little about refugee camps in Lebanon. The fact that struck me the most is that it was an Armenian refugee camp before it became a Palestinian camp; and, for some time, both refugee communities lived side by side. I was also interested in the urban legends that the camp residents repeat, such as the Armenian refugees who left the camp because the sea climate somehow made them infertile.

**AS:** From a research perspective, we discovered that camp residents are practically under siege, as they are restricted by demarcated boundaries and the sea in a context where the camp cannot expand due to a ban on the entry of construction materials by Lebanese authorities. These findings very much shaped the selection of those we worked with to narrate their stories. It also became the basis for long-term advocacy to challenge this situation.

**LVM:** Dictaphone Group is quoted in a text about your work with Dictaphone Group that the aims of the collective seek to take art and research outside of the center—or Beirut—to the “outside.” How did this negotiation between center and periphery shift when working with refugees, especially as their status in Lebanon is liminal?

**TEK:** Contemporary art production in Lebanon is heavily invested in the capital Beirut. We wanted to look outside the center and research the peripheries, the camps, the abandoned state projects, the disused train stations, and the contested spaces in other smaller and less researched cities. While in *Camp Pause*, we were commissioned by Dar al-Nimr, which is a Beirut-based art gallery. We chose to do field research and film outside the city, in a southern refugee camp. We did, however, bring the installation back to the city. So, in a way, we couldn’t entirely be outside the center as it was still bounding us with funding and resources to be able to create the work.

**AS:** Our vision of our role very much revolves around the possibility of networking and collaborating with marginalized social groups or communities outside the capital, with an emphasis on the importance of creating art *for* the local community and not just *about* it. Through this process, we say that people are represented in the way they want to be represented while preserving the idea of the artwork. It is a political choice. Through this vision we also aim to challenge the centrality of major art institutions, and our potential in producing projects that deal with all groups of society, and with the city as a space for experimentation and learning.
Conversation with Tania El Khoury and Abir Saksouk of Dictaphone Group

LVM: Some of your research for Camp Pause seems to rely upon methods of storytelling—such as attempting to capture real life in the camps, from the sewage system to moments of leisure. In Camp Pause, as you described just now, and as you wrote in your essay on the work, you film residents in a type of monologue. You then ask the residents to narrate their journeys in the camp to the sea, which, in many ways, recalls their migratory and exilic journeys from Palestine. In this process, the residents lead the camera, operated by Karam Ghossein (with video editing by Ali Beidoun and sound design by Majd Al Hamwi). You are the artistic directors, and yet the subjects lead the process of creation—creating new routes and reconfiguring conceptions of the Mediterranean Sea and its contemporary relationship to Lebanon and Palestine. How do you qualify this unique positioning of collaborative documentary? And seen altogether here, how do these various routes reconceptualize this particular social space?

TEK: I would say that we’re interested in documentary strategies for the ways in which they enable collaboration. I think collaboration here is a very interesting aspect because it includes us, as people who are activists and artists, in collaboration with people we encounter, and those who are editing and making the work with us. That said, the installation is very much a designed space; it isn’t about transforming the relationship between viewers and characters in an embodied sense.

LVM: So, in gathering these oral histories, you use various methods of documentation—letters, like in Gardens Speak, or sound bites, as in the Sea is Mine; but the medium of video is specific to Camp Pause, and I’m hoping you can tell us more about the process of interviewing Zahraa, Khadijeh, Hassan, and Hussein, and how they’re actually filmed.

TEK: In Camp Pause, we started with the concept of interviewing people inside their homes and then following their journeys to the sea. The camps are usually built as a maze of roads without directions, and you must know your way around. And this camp is situated by the sea, so all of the roads lead to the sea. So, there was this concept of beginning in a domestic intimate place, then following their journeys. The initial idea was to ask them to position themselves in relation to the sea, with the sea as the background. Where would they sit, what is the best shot for them? This is what we suggested. But each person took it somewhere else from their homes.

The case with each camp that we’ve visited was that the residents were very willing to collaborate with us and gave a lot of their time to our project. So, people would invite us in, and they would decide how they wanted to be filmed. For instance, the elderly lady, Khadijeh, wanted the map of Palestine behind her. This collaboration evolved to filming their routes to the sea. And this is where it was very interesting for us as we come from a place on the Mediterranean where it is easy to romanticize the sea. Though we’re gradually losing our connection to the sea due to pollution and privatization. This might also romanticize it because we are losing it. But with our concept of having the sea in the background, some of the participants in Camp Pause contested this idea and we learned a lot from these discussions. The youngest participant, Zahraa, was pointing out that the beach was so dirty, and likewise the fishermen told us about how it is cheaper for the residents to live by the sea.
because it can flood the houses nearby. And then the elderly woman blamed everything on the sea—it gave her headaches, back pain, everything else! She didn’t like the sea and she didn’t go there. So, all of this was important to learn and re-examine our own preconceptions of the place.

LVM: So, in *Camp Pause*, you collaborate with these residents to narrate their journeys to the sea. But it seems as if you’re not asking them to revisit trauma, but instead providing them with narrative tools to discuss their journeys past and present—traumatic or otherwise.

Azade Seyhan (AZ): Yes, and as the person asked to join this discussion for my investment in exile literatures, it seems to me that your approach is incredibly rare. You’re talking about research and an artistic perspective. In another life, I was a Brechtian scholar—an actress and a director. The Brechtian theory stated that actors had to alienate themselves from the audience because if the audience members had too much empathy with what occurred on stage, they were never going to revolutionize. They would only get lost in the emotion. But of course, it didn’t work that way, because everyone empathized. The main problem of Brechtian theater was that it appealed to an elite audience rather than to the proletariat. We took the theater to the workers in factories and they were shocked! But to return to your work, I think what you’re doing with this collaborative research is adding a layer that’s immediate, and it’s a technique that could be enduring. So, I’m wondering, how do you imagine people taking this work with them afterward?

AS: Building on what you’ve said, there are two aspects to the work in terms of how it endures. We focus our efforts on how to document these narratives, stories, and histories when the performance ends. We see the performance itself as a step within an ongoing project—

TEK: —It’s never-ending!

AS: Yes! It’s never-ending. But sometimes we document them in a book that’s available online, or a sound piece.

TEK: And those works have been used by other networks—activist networks that we work with. They use them in campaigns, journalists have used them, academics have used this research—both written and performative. I don’t like to artificially make a division between performance and research. It took me a while to understand that performance is research. So, I think of it more as written and embodied research. And these continued to be used by others, so in another way, the project never ends.

AZ: I like your idea of the interdisciplinarity in your projects because you’re also attempting to take the research out of the “temple of academia.” It’s very interesting because this is not playing the professional anthropologist—listening to testimonials—and of course there is a major critique in this practice of appropriating the voice of the informant. But the way you’re going about this—because of your interdisciplinary approach and your political motivations—your project leaves that professionalized realm. It makes the impact stronger. Yes, you are using the research methods of anthropologists and sociologists, but I think you’re cross-disciplining—if that’s a word—to lighten the academic mentality.
TEK: And what I like about collaborating with Abir specifically—since I’ve worked with many other collaborators in my solo work—is that even if it’s based on oral history, like *Camp Pause*, we still very much start from the geographical space. It often starts with us bringing a map that we’ve put together of the place and asking people to show us on the map where and how things occur. From there we build into other areas of research.

LVM: Could you talk more about the sea as both a symbol and reality in your research and for this group of people as migrants?

AK: Well, for them the sea is a contested space. I think as Tania was saying, for us, the sea is something that we’re struggling to gain, but once you look at the history of the camp, we started understanding that a lot of Palestinian camps were built by the sea because the land was cheaper. So, we started understanding the historical context about why the camp was even there. Then throughout the years, because the camp was at the Lebanese–Palestinian border, the sea was used to transport Palestinian freedom fighters and military resistance attacks along the border. This resonates with what the sea has grown to mean today with the influx of Syrian refugees and as the sea is used to transport their bodies to other contexts. This is something that emerged from that camp and wouldn’t have happened in another place besides Rashidieh.

LVM: I’m curious if these notions of exile by sea connect with your scholarship, Azade?

AZ: Not particularly by sea, but conventional wisdom says that living by the sea gives you a sense of freedom, whether real or imaginary, because the proximity to sea takes one somewhere else. It gives you possibilities that you can’t imagine on land. You mentioned the metaphor of the Syrians transporting their bodies, but then of course in the 2015 “refugee crisis” that turned into a dangerous metaphor with the body of the little boy, Alan Kurdi, that washed ashore. That image became an iconic symbol of the negative power of the sea. This resonates with me a lot because I was in that area only a few days before this occurred...

I don’t expect an answer to this question, but do you ever envision using the power of art within the context of another group? Let’s say the Syrians living today, almost four million, in Turkey, or in the Mediterranean basin. Can art help with their integration or return? They each have such different cultural contexts, which prompts this question. For example, in Istanbul there is a bookshop where many Syrian refugees go to, since they find community there and can read Arabic books. This is their sole social outlet, as their rights and resources are so limited. And I don’t think that anyone is bringing art as a type of solution for this particular group of people.

TEK: We’re very realistic concerning what art can do; and this is why we’re both also engaged in activism. We use tools and methods as activism at times, but we question whether this type of work can change the lives of people stuck in border zones or washed ashore like Alan Kurdi. I don’t think so. And I don’t want to think so because I don’t want to glorify my position as an artist, as a savior, or as a solution to society’s problems. Throughout history, art has been used by governments to force certain agendas like gentrification, migrant community integration, or by throwing artists at society with the hope of “saving” marginalized communities. We try to remain realistic about what we can do in the arts. At the same time,
it’s not very useful to try to measure what it can do, especially when it’s very intimate in relationship to the audience, and when we’re dealing with embodiment. It’s a long process to ask someone to bear witness to the work, rather than offer a simple medicine pill.

We’ve worked a lot with the Syrian cause both as activists and as Dictaphone Group working with asylum seekers in Munich with a project called Stories of Refugee, which is on view at Twelve Gates Arts in this survey ear-whispered. I personally have worked with others in my solo work as well. There’s a lot that art can respond to, and I think it’s not responding enough to border discrimination. We’re seeing those that cross borders become demonized, but we’re also seeing activists who are helping those people are also being demonized and imprisoned. Art needs to respond to this. But I wouldn’t say it can save it.

AZ: I completely understand. I was asking about this in that context because I was trying to see if your practice was translatable and self-generative—not because you as an artist should or need to save the world.

TEK: Yes, I understand what you’re saying. I’m preempting that question though!

AS: I also wanted to add that not just one action will make change. This idea is seeping into political organizations. In Lebanon, for example, in the past five years, there’s this inclination to go beyond political slogans and engage with activism that is research-based. There is a necessity to build a public opinion, and this is a cumulative process. People that are now organizing come from very different political positionalities and they haven’t all been privileged to think in certain ways. I think this idea of performance falls into so many other fields. How can we politically organize based on this type of emergent knowledge and on wanting to build an informed public? It’s this that’s going to facilitate long-term change.

Notes

1. This interview is excerpted from a larger transcript and edited for written clarity.
When its usual markers become irrelevant, time seems to unfurl itself like a large sheet of linen, so that days and nights disappear in a seamless haze. Time feels like this now: I scroll through pictures from my years in college and feel as though I’m looking at artifacts from someone else’s life—the same unfamiliarity and fascination with the passage of time as finding photos of your grandparents when they were young. When I was asked to reflect on my time as an intern during Tania El Khoury’s live art works at Bryn Mawr College, part of me panicked because I remember very little of who I was at that time and what I was thinking and doing. And what does remain is not exactly the most enlightening stuff: feelings, mostly, that relate to my own sense of inadequacy at the time; ethical uncertainty about my role facilitating the live works; and the desperate need to prove myself and please others—the type of self-centered ruminations that plague the young and ill-adjusted.

What I do remember comes in the fragmentary form of facts and feelings rather than fully narrated events. The duration of the survey *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury* was short, only two weeks during the fall semester, although preparations for the project with the interns began a month in advance, and for the larger project, years. All interns were assigned to work shifts on three of the four installations on campus (Figure 1).

I was a stagehand for *Gardens Speak* and remember doing homework by the light of my phone flashlight in the nocturnal backstage area where crew members waited during each installation activation. I was an attendant in the white, sunny room of the archival installation *Tell Me What I Can Do* and passed time by reading audience letters gathered from *Gardens Speak* on the walls. I was also a gallery attendant for the four-channel video installation of *Camp Pause*, and I vividly recall several scenes of the ocean and the joyous kicking of two childrens’ legs on swings. I remember, during a break, sitting in Taft Garden with several other interns and laughing, likely disturbing a nearby one-on-one performance of *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*. It was lightly raining that day and nobody had an umbrella or raincoat. The drops, when they landed, gave everyone’s hair the appearance of being frosted.
I was both intimidated by and admiring of El Khoury and her rigorous requirements for the works. The interns underwent several training sessions with her on proper conduct for each live artwork. The purpose of the instructions was to behave in a manner that would create an atmosphere of openness for audiences. We were to occupy the space but not surveil it, because the artist wanted audience members to feel free to interact with the work how they liked. If an audience member seriously trespassed a boundary of works, we were not to scold but to right the ship in the gentlest manner possible. We could enter into dialogue with audience members if they engaged us, although what I found myself doing most of the time was timidly issuing directives. Particularly in *Tell Me What I Can Do*—although I realize, as I write this, that the work’s title does suggest a certain behavior—people wanted to know what to do; they wanted to play by the rules. Even in spaces conceived as unbounded, audience members perceived the artwork’s invisible armatures and found comfort in its strictures. For many, it seemed, art with a political bent was expected to exceed mere experience: it needed to teach a lesson. Sometimes, in the *Camp Pause* installation space, people asked me what the meaning of the video work was. I don’t remember how I responded—I probably spoke in vague, unhelpful terms about El Khoury’s residency on campus—but I do remember that the idea of assuming authority terrified me. Really, who was I to decide anything, for anyone?

Although El Khoury physically evacuated the space of her live art works, her presence loomed large in my experience of them. This can be partly attributed to the fact that I was
congenitally desperate to please, but also because her ideal audience-member experience hinged upon the creation of conditions that were often inscrutable and delicate to maintain. We were there to carry out the artist’s instructions, and to protect and ensure the smooth operation of the works, but not to behave in a way that manifested order. In effect, the artist’s directive to not impose authority in the space became a precept in its own right, and, consequently, she became a figure of ultimate authority despite her rejection of the appearance of control in the works themselves. While this contradiction is an interesting tension to me, I’m not convinced that critiquing this aspect of the works really demonstrates anything, except maybe the difficulty of building utopia, or that striving for something better in compromised conditions often produces compromised results. However, I did begin to wonder what, exactly, constituted the expression of authority when it felt like my mere presence in the space signaled supervision to visitors, or at least a kind of institutional haunting. Hovering near an installation, our role in most of the works—with the exception of Gardens Speak—seemed to combine that of a gallery attendant, a sentient wayfinder, and sometimes a conversation partner for the rare, exceptionally engaged audience member. Mostly, my being there seemed to confirm what people expected when they entered an art space: the familiar, near invisible figure of a receptionist or security guard. After one particularly dull shift in Camp Pause, in which only a single student ambled in, I began to contemplate abandoning my post. I wondered whether the space would descend into an illegible kind of anarchy, if people would glance at the empty chair at the table near the door and believe that something was awry, or if everything would proceed exactly as before.

My role predominantly consisted of spectatorship. In El Khoury’s conception of the works, the audience members assumed the artist’s role as interactive agent, and during my shifts for Camp Pause and Tell Me What I Can Do, I was less a participant than an audience of one. I enjoyed watching how people oriented themselves when they first entered the space. I noticed it was often with an eye towards taking pictures of the installations. For one of the writing responses the project’s supervisors solicited from interns, I wrote about my misgivings regarding the ethics of photographing the Camp Pause video installation. I wondered whether this was a symptom of the way that many U.S. viewers might apprehend this work and perhaps all of the works—as a kind of emotional diversion not unlike a theme park ride, a momentary transportation to an apparently exotic, distant, and depleted locale. I was concerned that the audience member’s camera, as a receptacle for images, represented a type of anthropological collecting practice that objectified and further marginalized the subjects of the video installation. Now, I wonder whether my moral hand-wringing missed the point, adding another layer of abstraction that distanced me from the immediate, actual, emotional experience of the piece. Unable to tolerate a lack of clear authority, I seem to have devised a system of my own that privately dictated appropriate ways of responding to the video installation. Even now, my self-criticisms suggest that I still wish to revise and exert control over my experience of the work, if not others’ as well.

When I press deeper on these memories to locate the reason for my discomfort, they shatter once more into the elusive stuff of feelings once more. I had the nagging suspicion that I was not the right person to act as a facilitator for these works, which emerged from a place where the colonial extraction of life and resources formed the substrate of my own
more comfortable living conditions. Examining this anxiety in hindsight, in retrospect I think that what I reacted to was not really inherent to the works, or even the rarefied location of their display on a college campus, but rather the intractable difficulty of U.S. imperialism itself and its attendant conditions of oppression. I am not sure what to do with this realization, whose scope seems to lend itself to theorization rather than action. In general, when faced with art depicting inequity and injustice I often revert to introspection or guilt, but these emotions tend to paralyze rather than galvanize, and I inevitably find myself, as El Khoury anticipated, longing for instruction, for someone to tell me what I can do.

It might be for selfish reasons, then, that I remember Gardens Speak as the most powerful, arresting, and demanding of the live art works. Working alongside the full-time stage crew members who operated the installation, I’d sweep away stray dirt, retape electrical cords, and mist water onto the mounds of soil before retreating into the small backstage area where we waited while each performance took place. We’d sit in silence until our cue—the plangent tones of a male singer—when we’d creep onto the dimly lit stage, drop writing materials off near the feet of each participant, and then return to the wings. After each day of performances, we would retrieve the letters the audience had buried in the soil, and then sweep, mop, and mist the dirt again. I initially feared that I had ruined Gardens Speak for myself by encountering it first as a litany of chores, and I wondered what it would be like to be unencumbered with the knowledge of the technical innards of the installation. When I finally experienced Gardens Speak as a member of the audience rather than the crew, I remember being astonished at how unfamiliar it felt and how certain elements that typically irritated me were now imbued with a numinous quality. First digging and then lying in the earth, I felt a haptic closeness to the dirt that I had swept the night before and a primeval connection to the smell of wet soil that hung in the air. The piece was so absorbing, bodily and emotionally, that I hardly noticed the shuffling of feet around me when crew members came around to drop off the pens and paper.

I don’t remember the specifics of the story I listened to in the audio recording, or the letter I wrote in response and then buried, but what did stay with me was the psychic power of a close encounter with the individual whose story was narrated to me (albeit at a distance in English). There was something sublime about the work, which translated the ineffable and abstract nature of suffering and loss into an imperishable moment of identification. But feelings, like memories, dissipate, and more recently I’ve been wondering what to do with art that elicits an emotional response in relation to tragedy and injustice. Feelings—and, especially with the embodied nature of El Khoury’s work, I’m probably referring to what people call “affect”—often seem to be the primary yield of art with a political dimension. This is not a criticism, because art reigns in the realm of feelings, and perhaps there is something liberatory about the fact that a work of art can resist the logic of the market to produce an outcome that is not useful in a conventional sense. I remember thinking that the dirt-stained letters that people wrote at the end of Gardens Speak, which were amassed and then deposited in the college’s archives and in a buried archive on the grounds of the campus facilitated by the artist, were really only valuable for their ability to testify to and elicit emotional responses. I also remember feeling unsettled by the open-endedness of the sound installation and dissatisfied by the lack of direction it gave on how to act on my surfeit
of emotion. But I concluded that it was not up to the work, or the artist, to do my thinking for me. It feels too easy to indulge in a sense of helplessness because then one does not have to sacrifice anything.

Looking back, I find the letter writing—an orientation towards action, or rather, interaction—to be an important part of the process. Recently, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, I saw a video installation by Alfredo Jaar that reenacted the somatic experience of a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020 in D.C. Jaar’s video was composed of grainy on-the-ground footage of a group of protestors, thinly clothed and vulnerable, beset by police in militarized gear, who first deployed rubber bullets and tear gas, and then helicopters flying heart-stoppingly low. When the helicopters descended, a grid of industrial fans installed on the ceiling of the room roared to life, producing wind and a deafening noise that powerfully replicated the on-screen scenes of abuse. At the end of the video, I left feeling disturbed. It was an oppressive installation. Visitors were not actors, as in El Khoury’s interactive works, but instead acted upon; the audience’s identification emerged from a shared state of subjection rather than empowerment.

While the passage of time can obscure experience, it can also provide clarity. In the years following my time as an intern, it quickly became apparent how empathy, and the means to cultivate it, could be a potent catalyst for change. I did not live in the U.S. during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and I was not there for the protests. Every morning I would wake up, click through the news back home, and read Twitter. Events felt distant and abstract through the telescopic filter of social media, which can’t help but quicken and aestheticize the moment—Instagram photos and Twitter threads, brief soundbites and granular video clips, and pastel-colored sans-serif slideshows. Everyone had an opinion on how to take action. I donated to bail funds and signed petitions. Although I was not there, I do remember an astonishing sense of hope and solidarity that erupted under conditions of despair. In Thailand, the country where I lived at the time, student protests against the government, assailed by a similarly ruthless and militarized police force, remained remarkably resilient, creative, and hopeful. Without romanticizing the reality of protest and state violence, although these events were characterized by oppression, they were carried by an element of human connection that emerged under duress. There is a strong affinity between this type of miraculous, ephemeral bond and the relatability elicited by El Khoury’s works. While there is not much that one can do with just a feeling alone, when shared with others, a field of possibilities can bloom.
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Samer Abboud is an associate professor of global interdisciplinary studies at Villanova University and a senior fellow at the Center for Syrian Studies at St. Andrew’s University. He has published a number of book chapters and journal articles about contemporary Syria and is the author of a book dealing with the conflict, entitled *Syria* (Polity, 2018).

Ron Berry is the founder and co-artistic director of Fusebox Austin and has guided the organization through seventeen years of critically acclaimed programming. The organization is most known for its annual Fusebox Festival that features local, national, and international artists exploring the possibilities of live performance. Fusebox also uses the festival as an opportunity to work hand-in-hand with community members to identify creative, out-of-the-box solutions to some of the most pressing issues facing the city. These efforts have resulted in new initiatives related to community health, affordable housing, and transportation. Ron has served as a panelist for numerous organizations and foundations including the NEA, Creative Capital, the MAP Fund, Texas Commission on the Arts, and SXSW, and he regularly speaks at festivals and conferences all over the world.

Jennie Bradbury is an assistant professor of Classical and Near Eastern archaeology at Bryn Mawr College. Her research interests range from social complexity in the ancient Near East and the use of GIS and archaeological survey techniques, to culture heritage practices and aspects of identity and personhood as seen through the mortuary record. She has worked in Syria, Kuwait, Oman, and Jordan and is currently codirector of two field projects in Lebanon.

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**Dr. Kate Craddock** is the founder and festival director of GIFT: Gateshead International Festival of Theatre, an annual artist-led festival celebrating contemporary theatre. Kate established GIFT in 2011 to provide a platform for international and experimental performance practices in northeast England (www.giftfestival.co.uk). In 2010 Kate completed her practice led Ph.D. with the title *Collaboration in Performance Practice: Trust, Longevity and Challenging Proximity*, and since 2005 has combined working in academic contexts alongside creative projects and roles in the cultural sector. In 2019, she was appointed as research associate in the School of English at Newcastle University. Prior to this, Kate was a senior lecturer at Northumbria University, where she led on the industry-focused MA Theatre and Performance program. As a theatre-maker, Kate has presented performance works across the U.K. and in multiple international festival contexts. She is a trustee for ARC, Stockton Arts Centre, and the Paper Birds Theatre Company. Kate was awarded the theatre fellowship with the Clore Cultural Leadership Programme (2018/19). Kate was part of the British Council and Arts Council England GENERATE program (2019/2020) and is part of the core consortium leading on the Arts Council England commissioned international showcase: *Horizon – Performance Created in England*.

**Beth Derderian** is an assistant professor of museum studies and anthropology at the College of Wooster, and was previously a postdoctoral associate at the Council on Middle East Studies at Yale University. Dr. Derderian received her doctorate in anthropology from Northwestern University, and also holds a master’s degree in museum studies and Near Eastern studies from New York University. Her first project, now a book manuscript, focuses on shifts in arts organization and artists’ practices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) between 2007, when plans for the Louvre Abu Dhabi were announced, and 2017, when the museum opened. She is currently at work on a new project, which follows objects excavated on the Arabian Peninsula to their later homes in U.S. and European museums.

**Tania El Khoury** is a live artist whose work focuses on audience interactivity and its political potential. Tania’s work has been translated into multiple languages and shown in 32 countries across 6 continents in spaces ranging from museums to cable cars. She is the recipient of a Soros Art fellowship, the Bessies Outstanding Production Award, the International Live Art Prize, the Total Theatre Innovation Award, and the Arches Brick Award. Tania is Distinguished Artist in Residence of Theater and Performance and Director of the OSUN Center for Human Rights and the Arts at Bard College in New York. She holds a Ph.D. from Royal Holloway, University of London. She is a cofounder of Dictaphone Group in Lebanon, a research and live art collective aiming at questioning our relationship to the city, and redefining its public space.

**Anan Fareed** is a faculty member in the social work department at Al-Quds University in Palestine. Anan earned a BA and MA in social work from Bethlehem University in Palestine and Simmons University in the United States, respectively. She also holds an MA in sociology from Jordan University in Amman, Jordan. Her social work research has been
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**Anna Gallagher-Ross** is a curator and writer working across performance, dance, and visual arts, with an emphasis on site-specific and socially engaged practices. Currently, she is senior manager of programming at the Bentway, an innovative public space in downtown Toronto, Canada, that commissions and presents performances, installations, and community events that ignite the urban imagination. From 2017–2021, Anna was co-artistic director and curator of Fusebox Festival, the acclaimed international performance festival, which features interdisciplinary artists from Austin, the U.S., and around the world. Before Fusebox, Anna’s work in the arts sector spanned community arts organizations and large-scale museums and theatres in Canada and the U.S. She was assistant curator for the 2017 Live Arts Biennial at the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, and curatorial fellow for the 2016–17 interdisciplinary exhibition *Merce Cunningham: Common Time* at the Walker Art Center. Anna has held curatorial, producing, and administrative positions at Toronto’s Nightwood Theatre, the Paprika Festival, Theatre Revolve, and Sister Writes. She has also independently curated and produced performances, public art projects, exhibitions, and programming in Canada, the U.S., France, and the U.K. Anna’s writing and interviews have appeared in *Art Papers, C Magazine, The Walker Reader, Theater, Imagined Theatres, Written & Spoken*, as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. In 2020, Anna was a guest curator at Performance Space Sydney’s Live Works Festival. She was also part of the inaugural cohort of GENERATE (2019–20), a joint program of the British Council and Arts Council England that promotes exchange between a select group of U.S. and U.K. performance curators and producers.

**Sue Breakell** is archive director and principal research fellow at the University of Brighton Design Archives, U.K. She formerly worked in U.K. national museums, most recently as head of Tate Archive, London. She also began her career at Tate, cataloguing collections including the extensive archive of art historian and arts administrator Kenneth Clark (1903–1983). Between these two appointments she was war artists archivist and museum archivist at the Imperial War Museums, and the first professional company archivist at Marks & Spencer plc. As a curator and writer, her research bridges critical archive studies, twentieth-century art and design history, and material culture. Recent and forthcoming publications include “Memory’s Instruments and its Very Medium: the Archival Practices of Émigré Designers” in *Designing Transformation: Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism* (ed. E. Shapira, Bloomsbury, 2021); “Beginning with What Remains” in *the Archive of the Misspelling of Graham Fagen*, (Matts Gallery, London, 2021); and *The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context*, (co-edited with Wendy Russell, Routledge, in press). She coleads the “Museums, Archives, Exhibitions” strand of the University of Brighton’s Centre for Design History, and is a member of the editorial board of *Archives and Records*. 
Kinana Issa is an educator, researcher, storyteller, and literary and screen writer. She is also a mindfulness coach and facilitator of therapeutic trauma healing arts. Her most notable writings were of the acclaimed performance *Gardens Speak*, the short film *Fluorescent* that premiered at London Film Festival 2019, and most recently the Canadian hit TV show *Transplant*. Issa is an honorary fellow of the International Writing Program at Iowa University.

Lisa Kraus’s career has included performing with the Trisha Brown Dance Company, choreographing and performing for her own company and as an independent, teaching at universities and arts centers, writing reviews, features, and essays on dance for internet and print publication, and presenting the work of other artists as coordinator of the Bryn Mawr College Performing Arts Series. Her restaging of a Brown work for Paris Opera Ballet was captured in the film *In the Steps of Trisha Brown*, which won the Jury Prize at the 2017 International Festival of Films on Art of Montréal. Kraus was an NEA fellow in dance criticism and later cofounded thiNKingDANCE, an online dance journal and dance writers training scheme. During her twelve years at Bryn Mawr she developed grant-funded projects and special programming with artists including the Khmer Arts Ensemble, John Jasperse, John Kelly, Meredith Monk, Rennie Harris Puremovement, Susan Rethorst, and Ralph Lemon. The project *Trisha Brown: In the New Body*, was a yearlong festival of the innovative choreographer’s artistry supported by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, and included a partnership with Pennsylvania Ballet. *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury* was Kraus’s last and most expansive Bryn Mawr project.

Olivia Lamont Bishop is a Ph.D. candidate and visiting lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, researching the representation of place in relation to conflict, migration, and displacement in performance in the U.K. She is the project coordinator for the Migrant Dramaturgies Network. Olivia is a performance maker, creating socially engaged performances, talks, and installations and works with refugees and asylum seekers as a project manager for Borderlands charity in Bristol.

Gideon Lester is the artistic director and chief executive of the Fisher Center at Bard and senior curator at the Open Society University Network’s Center for the Arts and Human Rights. A festival director, creative producer, translator, and dramaturg, he has collaborated with and commissioned a broad range of American and international artists across disciplines, including Romeo Castellucci, Justin Vivian Bond, Brice Marden, Sarah Michelson, Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Claudia Rankine, Kaja Saariaho, Peter Sellars, and Anna Deavere Smith. Recent projects include *Where No Wall Remains*, an international festival on borders (cocurated with Tania El Khoury); Daniel Fish’s *Oklahoma!* (Tony award); Pam Tanowitz’s *Four Quartets*; Ronald K. Brown and Meshell Ndegeocello’s *Grace and Mercy*; and Ashley Tata’s *Mad Forest*. He was previously cocurator of Crossing the Line Festival, and acting artistic director at the American Repertory Theatre. A professor at Bard College, he was director of Bard’s undergraduate theater and performance program from 2012–2020, and has previously held faculty positions at Columbia and Harvard Universities. He received his BA from Oxford University, and completed his graduate training at Harvard, where he was a Fulbright and Frank Knox Scholar.
Laurel V. McLaughlin is a curator, art historian, writer, and educator from Philadelphia, currently based between Clinton, CT and Boston, MA. She is a Curator and Director of the Collective Futures Fund at the Tufts University Art Galleries and completing her Ph.D. in the history of art at Bryn Mawr College. Her dissertation explores formations of identity and theories of embodiment in contemporary performance concerning migration and its documentation. She has presented her scholarly and curatorial research in conferences ranging from Performance Studies International, Calgary; to the Universities Art Association of Canada Conference, Montreal and Toronto; the College Art Association, New York; and the Association of the Study of the Arts of the Present, Hong Kong, and published her work in such as *Art Papers*, *ASAP/J*, *BOMB Magazine*, *C Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Performa Magazine*, *Contact Quarterly*, *Performance Research*, *Women & Performance*, and *te magazine*, among others. Forthcoming writing from McLaughlin will be featured in the edited volumes *Bare Bodies – Thresholding Life*, published by De Gruyter GmbH and *Women’s Innovations in Theatre, Dance, and Performance* published by Bloomsbury’s Methuen Drama. McLaughlin received a 2022 Andy Warhol Curatorial Research Fellowship and has organized exhibitions, symposia, and programs at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with the Arthur Ross Gallery and the ICA Philadelphia; the Center for Contemporary Art and Culture, Portland, OR; Lafayette College Art Galleries; Emerson Contemporary; and Artspace New Haven in collaboration with the Yale University Art Gallery, and forthcoming at MASS MoCA.

Carrie Robbins is curator/academic liaison for art and artifacts in the department of special collections at Bryn Mawr College. She develops and organizes exhibitions, manages publication projects, researches and catalogs art, and partners with faculty and students to integrate collection objects into courses and programs. She advises and supervises students on a regular basis, often teaching curatorial seminars in the department of history of art or through the College’s interdisciplinary 360° program. Carrie holds a Ph.D. in history of art from Bryn Mawr College, where she also earned her MA; she has a BA in art from Grinnell College.

Abir Saksouk graduated as an architect in 2005, and later did her masters in urban development planning. Her primary focus includes urbanism and law, property and shared space, and right to the city of marginalized communities. She is active in exploring how local organizing could be employed in actively shaping the future of cities. Abir is the cofounder of Dictaphone Group (2009) and of Public Works Studio (2014).

Azade Seyhan is Fairbank Professor in the Humanities Emerita and research professor in German and comparative literature at Bryn Mawr College. She is the author of several books, including *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton University Press, 2001), which was one of the first studies to define the scope of transnational literatures in the late twentieth century. She has published and lectured extensively on political and aesthetic Romanticism, critical theory, exile literatures, and modern Turkish literature. Her work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, and American Research Institute in Turkey. She was the Berlin Prize fellow at the American Academy in Berlin in fall 2019, where she researched histories of academic exile.
She was the keynote speaker for the First International Conference of Academics at Risk at the Free University in Berlin.

**Talia Shiroma** graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in the history of art. She is presently curatorial assistant, Arts of the Americas and Europe at the Brooklyn Museum. She previously worked with the decorative arts and design department at the Cincinnati Art Museum and has assisted with research and collection projects at the Cleveland Museum of Art and Bryn Mawr College special collections.
Cover
Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance, song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet), dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

*Camp Pause: Stories from Rashidieh Camp and the Sea*
*Tania El Khoury and Abir Saksouk*
Figure 1. Dictaphone Group, Map of Rashidieh Refugee Camp, 2014.

*Bringing Research to Live Art: Considering Tania El Khoury’s Interactive Installations within Lebanese Research-Based Practices*
*Sascha Crasnow*

Figure 2. Installation view from Under the Radar Festival, New York, Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2017. Installation view. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of the artist.


Figure 4. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, media list
bass, and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production), and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

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**Narrating Syria’s Conflict through Intimate Memories in Gardens Speak**

Samer Abboud

Figure 1. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

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**Generative, Iterative Acts: Working with Archives**

*Sue Breakell*


**The Affective Power of the Everyday: Trauma, Empathy and the Quotidian in the work of Tania El Khoury**

*Beth Derderian*

Figure 1. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College, Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge*, 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

Figure 2. Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge* [Ibrahim video still], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.


[ Multimedia] Figure 4. Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge* [Ibrahim video excerpt], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. 0:00–3:19 minutes. Video courtesy of the collective.

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installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

[Multimedia] Figure 6. Dictaphone Group, *Stories of Refuge* [Sipan video excerpt], 2013. Immersive video installation. Concept and video editing: Tania El Khoury; devised with Petra Serhal. Videos shot by anonymous asylum seekers. 0:00–1:32 minutes. Video courtesy of the collective.


**On Curating Festivals and Collaborating with Tania El Khoury**

*Anna Gallagher-Ross with Ron Berry, Kate Craddock, Lisa Kraus, and Gideon Lester*


Figure 2. Installation view from Fusebox Festival, Prizer Gallery, Austin TX 2018. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass, and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Fusebox Festival. Photo: Tania El Khoury.

Figure 3. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.


**Listening Hands: Sensing Places of Conflict and Transience in Tania El Khoury’s**

*Gardens Speak and As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*

*Olivia Lamont Bishop*

Figure 1. Installation view from *Fierce Festival*, Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

Figure 2. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; Production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

[Multimedia] Figure 3. Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me [Audio excerpt]*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). 0:00–1:49 min.


Figure 5. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production) and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.
Reckoning with Contact within a Performative “Migratory Aesthetics”
Laurel V. McLaughlin


[Video] Figure 2. Dictaphone Group, *Camp Pause* [Hussein al-Zaini video excerpt], 2014. Four-channel video installation. Research and art direction: Abir Saksouk and Tania El Khoury; camera: Karam Ghossein; video editing: Ali Beidoun; sound design: Majd Al Hamwi. Participants: Hussein al-Zaini, Khadijeh al-Masri, Hassan Ajjawi, and Zahraa Faour. 0:00–0:27 min. Video: courtesy of the collective.


Figure 5. Installation view from *ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury*, Bryn Mawr College, Tania El Khoury with performer Basel Zaraa, *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, 2016. One-to-one performance. Song: Basel Zaraa (vocals, bass and keyboard) with Emily Churchill Zaraa (vocals), Peter Churchill (music production), and Katie Stevens (flute and clarinet). Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

Should Life in Refugee Camps Feel “Normal”? The Ethical Stakes of Social Work among Displaced Palestinians
David S. Byers and Anan Fareed


The Ground Speaks: Memorializing and Forgetting the Dead in the Ancient Middle East
Jennie Bradbury

Figure 1. Installation view from ear-whispered: works by Tania El Khoury, Bryn Mawr College. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak, 2014. Interactive sound installation performance. Production manager: Jessica Harrington; production assistant and audience guide: Naya Salamé; research assistant and writer (Arabic): Kinana Issa; calligraphy and tombstones, design: Dia Batal; set design: Abir Saksouk; sound recording and editing: Khairy Eibesh (Stronghold Sound); English translation: Ziad Abu-Rish. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of Bryn Mawr College and © Johanna Austin.

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A Case Study in Immersive Social Art as Knowledge Production
Tania El Khoury at Bryn Mawr College
Figure 1. Tania El Khoury, Gardens Speak promotional video, 2014. Video, 2:05 min.

Sense of Authority: Reflections on Interning with ear-whispered
Talia Shiroma
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