

SEPT 15 — OCT 7  
**WHY  
ARE WE  
HERE  
NOW?**

**3 WEEKENDS WITH  
ADANIA SHIBLI  
MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR  
RABIH MROUÉ**

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Including

Texts by Katrin Klingan, Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, Rabih Mroué



# AFTER THE WILDLY IMPROBABLE

ADANIA SHIBLI

What would a railway say, if it were to speak, about our journey through the century to the here and now? In the late 19th century, the Ottoman Empire, with the aid of the German Empire and its banks, embarked on two large-scale projects that would remain unfinished in the aftermath of the First World War: A railway network meant to connect Berlin with Baghdad, and a second, the Hijaz Railway, linking Damascus with Mecca and running lines to Jerusalem and Alexandria. Visual artists, writers, sociologists, anthropologists, and thinkers are invited to operate as mediators who will assist the railway to speak from its own perspective of no more than twenty-five centimeters above the ground. They will reveal unexplored—as real as improbable—potentialities of the railway, significances to and effects on the historical, political, social, and cultural realities within and beyond the then Ottoman ruled territories.

6–8.30 pm

## Trains in the Past, Tracks in the Present

The memory of the Ottoman Railway Network as an expression of modernity, capitalism, and imperialism in the past has its own workings today. In parts of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, the initial functions of certain sections of the railway have been elapsed by mechanical decay, types of vegetation, and human activity. Other segments have disappeared from the landscape, the collective memory, from documentary evidence; only remaining in films, ditties, wedding songs, or literary texts.

### FILM

#### Train-Trains: A Bypass

Rania Stephan

A journey following the traces of the old railway line linking Lebanon to Palestine. The coastal train used to operate as an extension of the so-called Orient Express and Egypt lines, before being put out of service. *Train-Trains: A Bypass* is based on material Rania Stephan had originally filmed in 1999—as a personal vision of post-Civil War Lebanon, focusing on rural residents living near derelict stations. By embedding Polaroid photographs into moving images, the film is also reminiscent of the mechanisms of memory, thus becoming itself an interrogation into what happened in between the now and then.

*Train-Trains: A Bypass* (1999–2017)

30:35 min, Mini DV/HD, color, sound, Dolby & Stereo

Directed by Rania Stephan

Commissioned by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin  
Co-produced by Ayloul Festival & JounFilms, Beirut

RANIA STEPHAN is an artist and filmmaker. Her films and creative documentaries give a personal perspective on political events. By using archival material as still and moving images, her work investigates memory and its workings. A selection of her films are *Memories for a Private Eye* (2015), *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011), *Lebanon/War* (2006), *train-trains (where's the track?)* (1999) and *Tribe* (1993). Recent exhibitions include *Never let me go*, Alt Art Space, Istanbul (2016), *On Never Being Simply One*, Marfa Gallery, Beirut (2016), *Parle pour toi*, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris (2014), and *The Three Disappearances for Soad Hosni*, MoMA PS1, New York (2011).

### LECTURE

#### The Hijaz Railway: Empire and Modernity

Zeynep Çelik

In accord with the nineteenth-century centralization reforms, which changed the governance patterns of the empire, the Hijaz Railway aimed at connecting the Arab provinces to Istanbul and, along the way, to each other. The railway project was intertwined with the pan-Islamic policies of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who turned to the Eastern Mediterranean territories to rejuvenate the empire around the concept of the caliphate. Serving an ideology based on religion with cutting-edge technology, the Hijaz Railway embodied an idiosyncratic modernity. Çelik examines the rationale and the materialization of the railway project, paying attention to local reactions, which were not always in synchronization with imperial agendas. Furthermore, she situates the Hijaz Railway within the broader scope of turn-of-the-century imperialism and capitalism.

ZEYNEP ÇELİK is a scholar with a research focus on cross-cultural exchanges in architecture and urbanism in the 19th and 20th century. Selected publications include *The Remaking of Istanbul* (1986), *Displaying the Orient* (1992), *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations* (1997), *Empire, Architecture, and the City* (2008), *Camera Ottomana* (2015, co-editor), and *About Antiquities* (2016). Çelik has co-curated the exhibitions *Walls of Algiers*, Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2009), *Scramble for the Past*, SALT, Istanbul (2011), and *Camera Ottomana—Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire 1840–1914*, Anamed Gallery, Istanbul (2015). She is currently Distinguished Professor of Architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology and Adjunct Professor of History at Columbia University.

## LECTURE

Could the Archives Lie?  
The Disappeared Train  
 Salim Tamari

An examination of a particular extension line of the Hijaz Railway that used to run from Jerusalem to Ramallah-al Bireh, a district of Palestine. The line was crucial for the war effort on the Palestinian front, enhancing the transfer of both troops and equipment. This particular part of the railway, however, has completely disappeared from documentary evidence. Its existence can only be traced back through wedding songs celebrating the “Bireh Babor,” which indicates the opposite of the collective denial of its possibility. How can an entire section of the railway disappear without tangible traces that attest to its former existence in the archives? In this presentation diverse materials, such as aerial photographs from the Bavarian State Archives, private letters, and folk narratives, are used to search for the lost section of the railway track.

The sociologist SALIM TAMARI draws upon archival materials and personal diaries, and has produced numerous studies documenting and analyzing Palestinian society. Books by Tamari include *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (2017), *Year of the Locust—A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (2011), and *Mountain against the Sea—Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (2008). Tamari is the editor of the journal *The Jerusalem Quarterly*. He is currently Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Palestine Studies in Ramallah and Visiting Professor at Columbia University, New York.

## LITERARY READING

Steel That Bites the Earth:  
The Logic of the Track  
 Priya Basil & Sinan Antoon

Objects often tell their stories, but humans rarely listen. It is impossible to follow just one track. You are inevitably pulled elsewhere, lured by other trains of thought, other forces. There are multiple tracks, running in all directions: opposite, parallel, crossing, merging, disappearing—and never beginning or ending quite where you imagine. This is an attempt to listen to the tracks as they tell their stories, and trace their itineraries. How they were extracted from the bowels of the Earth to its surface. How they were forced into forms not of their choice. What they saw and heard.

PRIYA BASIL's literary work looks into the problems of cultural identity for immigrants and raises questions of memory, exile, and self-rediscovery. Her debut novel *Ishq and Mushq* (2007) was nominated for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Other titles are *Strangers on the 16:02* (2011) and *The Obscure Logic of the Heart* (2010). In 2010 Priya Basil founded Authors for Peace, a platform to promote peace through literature.

SINAN ANTOON is a poet, novelist, scholar, and translator. He was born in Baghdad and moved to the United States after the 1991 Gulf War. He holds a doctorate in Arabic Literature from Harvard University. He has published two collections of poetry and four novels including *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017), *The Corpse Washer* (2013), and *I'jaam—An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2006). His works have been translated into twelve languages. Sinan Antoon is co-founder and co-editor of *Jadaliyya*, an Associate Professor at New York University, and fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Berlin 2016/2017.

9–11 pm

## Postwar Landscapes

Railway infrastructures have repeatedly played a role in wartime and postwar landscapes acting as a grid for contradictory movements, such as gatherings, connectivity, dispersal, and division. These movements are treated in this session as the unintended evidence of various histories: Indigenous Australian men and women in Australia during the Second World War; forms of life during the Lebanese Civil War in the 1970s and 1980s, East and West Berliners sharing a unified railway network, and recently, in the summer of 2015, of people walking along the railway tracks to escape wars and to seek refuge in Europe.

### FILM

#### Night Time Go

Karrabing Film Collective

On September 19, 1943, a group of Karrabing ancestors escaped from a war internment camp and walked over 300 kilometers back to their coastal homelands in Northern Australia. *Night Time Go* is an exploration of the settler state's attempt to remove Indigenous people from their lands during the Second World War using truck, train, and rifle and the refusal of the Karrabing ancestors to be detained. The film begins by hewing closely to the actual historical details of this ancestral journey but slowly turns to an alternative history in which the group inspires a general Indigenous insurrection driving out settlers from the Top End of Australia. Mixing drama and humor, history and satire, *Night Time Go* pushes subaltern history beyond the bounds of settler propriety.

*Night Time Go* (2017)

30 min, filmed with iPhones, sound, stereo, color

Story by Karrabing Film Collective

Directed by Elizabeth Povinelli

Commissioned by Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin

The KARRABING FILM COLLECTIVE is a grassroots Indigenous arts and film group founded in 2008, and currently based in the Top End of the Northern Territory. Using their aesthetic practices as a means of self-organization and social analysis, Karrabing develop local artistic languages, while allowing audiences to understand new forms of collective Indigenous agency. Some of their recent works are *Wutharr*, *Saltwater Dreams* (2016), *Windjarrameru (The Stealing C\*nt\$)* (2015), and *When the Dogs Talked* (2014). Among other venues, their films have been shown at the Contour Biennale 8, Mechelen (2017), 67th Berlin International Film Festival, Forum Expanded (2017), documenta 14, (2017), and the Sydney Biennale (2016). The collective consists of some 25 members.

### LECTURE

#### Along the Rails with Travelers without Papers

Shahram Khosravi

One paradigmatic image of the world today is of people walking along railway tracks seeking refuge in Europe, escaping death in wars in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, among other places. Using particular tactics to secure their insecure lives, refugees are perceived to disturb the division between the private and the public sphere, turning train stations into bedrooms, platforms into living rooms, and using rail-tracks to mobilize although they are supposed to remain immobile. The juxtaposition of the undesirable mobility of refugees and the mobility that refugees desire, materialized in railways—whether the infrastructure for cross-border links as a project of European integration, or as part of the colonial dream to link Berlin to the oil fields along the Persian Gulf at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—has produced a narrative corresponding to the current global situation that simultaneously stimulates and illegalizes the crossing of borders.

SHAHRAM KHOSRAVI is an anthropologist with a research interest focusing on mobility, border studies, migration, precarity, and waithood. He is the author of *Precarious Lives: Waiting and Hope in Iran* (2017), *The Illegal Traveler: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders* (2010), and *Young and Defiant in Tehran* (2008). He has been a contributor to diverse magazines and journals, such as *Exiled Ink! Magazine* and *Collective Exile*. Shahram Khosravi has participated in talks and conferences at HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin (2017) and CAMP Center for Art on Migration Politics, Copenhagen (2016), among others. He is currently holding a position at Stockholm University.

## LECTURE

Ghost Stations

Samuel Merrill

In his 1982 essay, *Stadtmitte umsteigen* (Change at Stadtmitte), writer and columnist Heinz Knobloch conducts a mnemonic excavation of a closed interchange tunnel between divided Berlin's Stadtmitte underground railway (U-Bahn) stations. Knobloch leads his readers from the busy U-Bahn station on one side, to its lifeless twin on the other: a so-called "ghost station." This talk conducts its own mnemonic excavations of Berlin's past and presents ghost stations — from those that indexed the city's Cold War division and subsequent reunification such as Jannowitzbrücke and Potsdamer Platz to those with interwar histories that continue to haunt the city including the vestiges of the phantom U10 line. These (once) dormant places within wider railway landscapes provide entry points that encourage the exploration of other buried memories that lie latent in the infrastructures beneath Berlin and beyond.

SAMUEL MERRILL is a scholar with a primary interest in questions of memory, landscape, heritage, and infrastructure, particularly within the context of a broadly conceived underground—spatial, political, and cultural. His new book *Networked Remembrance: Excavating Buried Memories in the Railways beneath London and Berlin* will be published by Peter Lang later this year. He has also recently published *Negotiating the memories and myths of World War II in civilian suffering in the railways beneath London and Berlin*, in *Battlefield Events: Landscape, Commemoration and Heritage*, (2016), and *Identities in transit: the (re)connections and (re)brandings of Berlin's municipal railway infrastructure after 1989*, in the *Journal of Historical Geography* (2015). Merrill is currently postdoctoral researcher in digital sociology at Umeå University, Sweden.

## FILM

Train-Trains: Where's the Track?

Rania Stephan

In 1896 the French laid the first tracks for the railway in Lebanon, running between Beirut and Damascus. Today this connection is no longer in use. The film is a personal quest and a record of an expedition along the former stations on the abandoned line, a pretext to connect with the landscape of the country after the end of the Civil War. Memories of the past are based on footage from Lebanese and international films, including *Seferberlik*, *Shanghai Express*, *Duel in the Sun*, and *Some Like it Hot*. The present is a mix of hectic activity around a busy transport artery cutting straight through Lebanon, and the reality of decaying stations and rails. "Everything was better in the past," one interviewee says dreamingly. Rania Stephan and her interviewees contribute to this personal reconstruction of the past, each in their own way, reminiscing about the trains that ran along the route.

*train-trains (where's the track?)* (1999)  
33 min, Mini DV/HD, color, sound, stereo  
Directed by Rania Stephan

ANIA STEPHAN is an artist and filmmaker. Her films and creative documentaries give a personal perspective on political events. By using archival material as still and moving images, her work investigates memory and its workings. A selection of her films are *Memories for a Private Eye* (2015), *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011), *Lebanon/War* (2006), *train-trains (where's the track?)* (1999) and *Tribe* (1993). Recent exhibitions include *Never let me go*, Alt Art Space, Istanbul (2016), *On Never Being Simply One*, Marfa Gallery, Beirut (2016), *Parle pour toi*, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris (2014), and *The Three Disappearances for Soad Hosni*, MoMA PS1, New York (2011).



2–5 pm

## Unsmooth, Broken Flow of Travels

Many clues are left along the railway tracks: they can be found in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* of 1934; Raymond William's *Border Country* of 1960, the British miners' strike of 1926, the German archaeological excavations carried out in the Ottoman Empire, and Chinese investment interests in Pakistan. These clues are crucial for uncovering new details about the accumulation of capital and its intrinsic links to colonialism, nationalism, and global imperialism.

### LECTURE

From Orient to Archaeology:  
A Railway through Time  
Boris Buden

The life and work of a writer can map a vast territory. Such is the case with Agatha Christie, who made the so-called Orient Express famous. Not only as a fictional crime scene, but also as a metaphor for cultural space, it was the subject of an exhibition and a book titled *Agatha Christie und der Orient* (1999). The English title, though, reads differently: *Agatha Christie and Archeology* (2001). This slight shift in meaning has far-reaching consequences. As Johannes Fabian and Edward Said noted, Europe does not like to share time with its "Other." Travelling to the East meant travelling to the past, fully in accordance with the interests of capitalist exploitation. But what do European travel itineraries and cultural production follow today in the "age of commemoration" when Europe prefers to see itself in the past? Does it mean that contemporary capitalism is closer to the past more than ever before?

BORIS BUDEN is a writer, cultural critic, and translator. His essays and articles cover topics related to philosophy, politics, and cultural and art criticism. He has co-edited several books and is the author of i.a. *Findet Europa* (Find Europe) published in 2015, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* released in 2009 (Zone of Transition: On the End of Postcommunism), and *Übersetzung: Das Versprechen eines Begriffs* (with Stefan Nowotny) published in 2008 (Translation: Promises of a Concept). In the 1990s, he founded and became editor of the magazine and publishing house Arkzin in Zagreb. Boris Buden currently teaches cultural theory at the Faculty of Art and Design, Bauhaus Universität Weimar.

### LECTURE

Railways and the Politics of Archaeology  
Zeynep Çelik

Museology and archaeology occupied a privileged place among the wide-ranging Ottoman reforms that took place from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War, intertwining cultural policies with political, ideological, administrative, economic, and technological initiatives. Within this broad framework, the link between antiquities and railway construction in the Eastern Mediterranean provinces of the empire will be examined from several perspectives, among them legal restrictions, specifications in railway concessions given to foreign companies, growing control over European archaeologists by locals (including construction workers), implications for the transportation of antiquities, and facilitation of travel, hence enhancement of tourism.

ZEYNEP ÇELİK is a scholar with a research focus on cross-cultural exchanges in architecture and urbanism in the 19th and 20th century. Selected publications include *The Remaking of Istanbul* (1986), *Displaying the Orient* (1992), *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations* (1997), *Empire, Architecture, and the City* (2008), *Camera Ottomana* (2015, co-editor), and *About Antiquities* (2016). Çelik has co-curated the exhibitions *Walls of Algiers*, Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2009), *Scramble for the Past*, SALT, Istanbul (2011), and *Camera Ottomana—Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire 1840–1914*, Anamed Gallery, Istanbul (2015). She is currently Distinguished Professor of Architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology and Adjunct Professor of History at Columbia University.



## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

an imaginary train ride, 1926

Yazid Anani

An imaginary train journey on the Hijaz Railway across the landscape of Palestine in 1926: the journey unpacks travel narratives that describe the changing landscape seen through the windows, and presents conversations between several passengers who get on and off the train at different stations. These travel narratives reveal intimate stories of precious objects carried by travelers, transcribing testimonies on the social and political landscape. *an imaginary train ride* as a way of looking at the future renders an anachronistic trajectory between multiple histories and mythologies against the current confinement of Palestinian geography.

YAZID ANANI is a scholar, artist, and curator. He has researched on issues of urban transformation, neo-colonialism, public art, and education. Yazid Anani has co-curated four editions of the *Cities Exhibition*, Palestine, has served as a scholar at the Department of Architecture, Birzeit University from 1997 to 2016, and chaired the Academic Council of the International Art Academy Palestine from 2010 to 2012. He is active in a number of collectives and projects, such as Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency (DAAR), RIWAQ Biennale, and Ramallah Syndrome. He is currently the Director of Public Programmes at the A.M. Qattan Foundation, Ramallah.

## LECTURE

Afterlives of Imperial Formations

Shahana Rajani &amp; Zahra Malkani

Because of the emerging China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is reviving the Karachi railways, Pakistan is witnessing the resurgence of the colonial railway infrastructure in the present time. This presentation offers two forms of engagement with the topic: one is an attempt to read and understand these imperial formations; the other is the resistance and refusal of it. The first is the symbolic attacks on the railway carried out by separatists in Sindh and Balochistan, following a long tradition of nationalist resistance against the colonial infrastructure. The second is the repurposing of the ruins of the railway into public spaces by the communities living around them. The relationship of these two observations will be explored within the context of both a history of colonial-era violence on the railway as well as the contemporary moment of resurgence in the infrastructure—creating a new wave of displacements, occupation, and environmental degradation.

The research based practice of the artist duo SHAHANA RAJANI and ZAHRA MALKANI explores the politics of infrastructure and development in the rapidly transforming city of Karachi. Publication projects include *Vision/Texture* (2017) and *Exhausted Geographies* (2015). Group exhibitions include *How We Mark The Land*, Gandhara Art Space, Karachi, (2016), *Urbanities*, Al-Hamra Arts Council, Lahore (2016), and *Taqseem*, Koel Gallery, Karachi (2017). Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani are co-founders of Karachi LaJamia, an anti-institution seeking to politicize art education and explore new radical pedagogies and art practices.

## CONVERSATION

with Yazid Anani, Boris Buden, Zeynep Çelik, Zahra Malkani, Shahana Rajani  
moderated by Morad Montazami

5–7 pm

## Between the Lines

The movement and circulation of ideas, artworks, and books about the Ottoman Railway Network have constituted paradigm shifts in the literary imagination and shaped artistic practices over the past century. Railway stations, fragments of artistic experience, and human encounters—from Damascus, Baghdad, Berlin, Gilas, Mecca, Moscow, and Paris—all point to the ensuing shifts as such, as an effect of interconnectedness and aesthetic ecosystems.

### LECTURE PERFORMANCE

#### Waiting Trajectory

Fehras Publishing Practices

The movement and circulation of publications along parts of the Hijaz Railway can still be perceived from the train station in Damascus, which was built in 1907. Even after construction of the railway stopped following the First World War, the station was still operating, until it was transformed into a library and book museum in recent years. The act of transformation and the shift of meaning turned the station into a mobile space for knowledge. This transformation also encompasses the station's surroundings, where streets of book- and paper traders, publishers, and printers are intersecting. Today the area reflects the history of modern publishing in the region, and the mechanisms of the circulation, appearances, and disappearances of books.

FEHRAS PUBLISHING PRACTICES (Kenan Darwich, Omar Nicolas, Sami Rustom) is an artist collective and publishing house established in Berlin in 2015. It was founded as a response to mounting questions concerning the history and presence of art and publishing in the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Arabic diaspora. The research of Fehras focuses on the interrelation between cultures and publishing, which includes different fields of languages, archives, and arts. Their work was exhibited at the Sharjah Biennial 13 and in *Apricots from Damascus* at SALT Galata, Istanbul (2016). They have recently curated the symposium *Disappearance. Appearance. Publishing* at Villa Romana, Florence.

### LECTURE

#### Railway Stories of the Betrayed Avant-Garde

Morad Montazami

How can the Berlin–Baghdad and Hijaz railways be elucidated as a labyrinth of subjectivities which draw from photography, literature, and painting, based on experiences and encounters, happening between Baghdad, Berlin, Damascus, Paris, Mecca, beyond the objective territory or the existing railway? The railway leaves space for inquiry into the physical traces left by Iraqi photographers, like Latif Al Ani, as well as artists and architects, such as Mohammed Makiya and Jewad Selim, who met German and American architects Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright. Photography and architecture, as a way of recapturing the railway's fictional spaces, are addressed here as a key paradigm for artistic travelogues, cultural transfers, and urban dreams.

MORAD MONTAZAMI is an art historian and curator. His research interests are cosmopolitan modernisms and histories of the avant-garde in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. He has published essays on Farid Belkahlia, Bahman Mohassess, Behjat Sadr, Hamed Abdalla, Jordi Colomer, Latif Al Ani, among others. He curated the exhibitions *Fugitive Volumes* and *Faouzi Laatiris: Catalogue déraisonné* at the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rabat (2016) and co-curated the exhibition *Unedited History: Iran 1960-2014* at Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris and MAXXI, Rome (2014). He is the director of Zaman Books Publishing and its related journal *Zamân*. Morad Montazami is currently working as a research curator at Tate Modern, London.

## LECTURE

From the Railway to the www.

Hamid Ismailov

Literature has endured paradigm shifts that run parallel to the shifts in actual and virtual networks. The age of iron and engine is changing to an age of software and gadgets, and literary structures reflect that tectonic shift in human history. Linear thinking is being replaced by a matrix. These networks can coincide, for instance, when people seeking asylum use the Balkan route to reach Western Europe, walking along the railway tracks, following mapping services on their mobile phones. The same seems to be happening with people crossing from Central Asian countries to Russia. Literary examples from regions that were under the rule of Russia as well as the Ottoman Empire demonstrate these shifts in networks.

HAMID ISMAILOV is a writer and journalist. Informed by his forced relocation from Uzbekistan to the UK, his novels often look into modes of interculturality and transformation through fictional story. A selection of his novels are *The Underground* (2015), *The Dead Lake* (2014), *A Poet and Bin-Laden* (2012), and *The Railway* (2006), originally published under the pseudonym Altaer Magdi in Russia (1997). He has translated Russian and Western classics into Uzbek and Persian classics into Russian and Western languages. From 2010 to 2014 Hamid Ismailov was the first Writer in Residence for BBC World Service.

## CONVERSATION

with Hamid Ismailov, Morad Montazami,  
Fehras Publishing Practices  
moderated by Adania Shibli

7.30–10 pm

## Animate Tracks

The railway now speaks from its own perspective—divulging secrets from below and above the ground along its tracks. Prevalent plant species have long disappeared from the immediate environment; sacks of gold coins had been hidden beneath the tracks, while faith continues to spring from the planned final destination that the railway never managed to reach. At times, the silhouettes of women are seen at one of its platforms, while men turned into machines.

### PRESENTATION

The Effects of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway on the Vegetation in Anatolia  
Gülnur Ekşi

The Berlin–Baghdad Railway left significant economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental traces in the regions it was meant to pass through. The railway construction, however, also caused the disappearance of prevalent plant species and turned them into cross-breeds in these areas. Some determinants for the change in the vegetation are the herbicides used during construction of the railway, mining and tree cutting, and plant seeds that got scattered along the route. The traces are made visible in detailed botanic observations of a five-kilometer segment of the Berlin–Baghdad Railway, running between Istanbul and Ankara.

GÜLNUR EKŞİ is a plant taxonomist and botanical artist. Since 2007, she has been a visiting artist to the Royal Botanical Gardens Edinburgh, where she teaches botanical art and works on projects such as *Plants from the Woods and Forests of Chile*. Gülnur Ekşi has exhibited at BISCOT (Botanical Images Scotia), Edinburgh (2009, 2010) and at the RHS Botanical Art Show in London (2010, 2012/13, 2015) and has received awards from BISCOT and RHS. She is currently working on her PhD on *Investigations in Terms of Pharmaceutical Botany on Taxa Belonging to Brevispatha Section of Allium L. Genus Growing in Turkey* at the University of Ankara.

### LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Parallel Reality  
Adel Abidin

Many Jordanians believe in the legend that Ottoman soldiers, fleeing the aftermath of the Arab Revolt in 1916, hid gold coins along the tracks of the Hijaz Railway. Supposedly they marked their hiding spots in order to collect the gold upon their return. This legend and the hopes that are associated with finding the gold, was passed on from generation to generation. Searching for the gold has swept across Jordan with great intensity over the last few decades. In some parts this has even resulted in the destruction of archeological relics by treasure hunters. *Parallel Reality* discusses the myth and unveils what lies under the many layers that this legend accumulated over the years.

ADEL ABIDIN is an artist creating a distinct visual language through a multimedia approach that he links to his cross-cultural background. Focusing on topics, such as the interconnections between visual art and identity politics, he aims to prolong discussions around elusive experiences and cultural alienation. Adel Abidin's works have been presented in various international exhibitions, including *Muscle Memory*, Kunstraum Kreuzberg / Bethanien, Berlin (2017), *Between Terror, Pop Music, and Seduction*, Fotogalleriet, Oslo (2016), 5th Guangzhou Triennial (2015), *Cover-up!* Al Sultan Gallery, Kuwait (2014), *Trade Routes*, Hauser & Wirth, London (2013), and 54th Venice Biennale (2011).

## ANIMATED FILM

Zomë Zomë

Muhannad Shono

An animated film that revisits the point from which a religious faith sprung, the Zamzam spring in Hijaz, using modern myths and new motifs, and the issue of modernity—namely the encounter of the human and the machine. It looks at the widespread belief that water is a symbol of spirituality, and its metamorphosis from liquid to solid, transforming the intangible into the material, and from the hidden to the exposed. The name of the well comes from the phrase *Zomë Zomë*, meaning “stop flowing,” a command repeated by Hagar, second wife to Abraham, during her attempt to contain the spring waters of Zamzam: that which once flowed from a spring and could not be contained, becomes a precious focal point for millions. It attracts rituals and slates, human movement, pilgrimage, the rise of systems, as well as the flow of beliefs. Now it is a hole pulling us back in.

*Zomë Zomë*

15 min, animation, ink, sound

Music by Mary Rapp

Through his largely self-directed art education in illustration and multimedia formats, artist MUHANNAD SHONO began working with visual narratives by focusing on themes such as displacement, migration, and identity. Solo exhibitions include *Children of Yam*, ATHR, Jeddah (2016), and *The Once Upon A Box*, *The Hunted Ever After & The End*, CRAC Gallery, London (2014). His work was also part of the group presentations *LAND*, Own The Walls, Toronto (2017) and Sharjah Biennale 4 (2016).

## LITERARY READING

Two Women

Violet Grigoryan

How can art speak about catastrophes, and what would it sound like through a woman's voice? Armenian writers, survivors of the genocide or descendants of those who survived, faced a similar impasse: While some of them made attempts to depict the horrifying picture of violence, others remained silent. The silent ones belong to the first generation of the genocide survivors. They wanted to forget everything, even by denying their identity and adapting their names. Those who talked would invoke the demons of memory. A haunting image thus unfolds: two women standing at the banks of the rivers Lethe and Mnemosyne: one starts floating in the river of oblivion towards the point of no return, the other continuously reincarnating. Two women at the railway station: one escaping herself by train, the other waiting at the platform eternally. For both, the train is a time machine running toward the future or toward the past.

Reading in English: Dulcie Smart

Translation of poems from Armenian to English:

Tamar Boyadjian

VIOLET GRIGORYAN is a poet and essayist whose feminist themes and experimental language interrogate entrenched social structures. She is one of the founders and the editor of the literary journal *Inqnaqir*. Her poems are part of the anthologies *Makukachu: Anthology of Contemporary Armenian Literature* (2017), *The Other Voice: Deviation: Anthology of Contemporary Armenian Literature* (2008), and *Armenian Women's Poetry Through Ages* (2006). Grigoryan has won the Golden Cane Prize for her book *The City* (1998), and the Writers' Union of Armenia Award for her book *True, I'm Telling the Truth* (1991).

DULCIE SMART is an actor and producer. She has read at award ceremonies for the Internationaler Literaturpreis at the HKW, the Lettre International Ulysees Award, and the Laureus World Sports Award. Other literary readings include *A British Princess in Potsdam* for the Potsdamer Festspiele, *Virginia Woolf* for the Rowohlt Verlag, and Molly Bloom's soliloquy from *Ulysses* for the Irish Embassy in Berlin. Documentary film narration includes *Brezmejno - Beyond Boundaries*, *Aid But No State - The EU's Role in the Middle East Conflict* and the TV/DVD series *Masterpieces of Classical Music*.

## FILMS AND LECTURE

The Intimate Knowledge of Things

Musa paradisiaca

A line-up of audiovisual works devoted to velocity, transmutation, and man-machine technology. The works are gathered in a joint venture based on peculiar views on the impersonality of thought: *Ecstasy and Eden* is a filmic analogy whereby the ecstasy of a mechanic body drifts into a dreamy state, where plants turn into machines. Between beauty and genitalia, one is brought back to reality, to the flow of steam, traction, and motion, gradually slowing down. *Masters of Velocity* looks into the relationship between object and environment, the notion of fluid bodies and the technology of transformation and velocity. Inside a pilot's head one wonders about how different things desire each other mutually: "The pilot wishes to become plane, the plane wishes to become ground..."

*Masters of Velocity* (2017)6:51 min, 16 mm film transferred to HD, color, sound  
Original music score by Clotilde Rosa*Ecstasy and Eden* (2014)8:10 min, 16 mm film transferred to HD, color, sound  
Soundtrack by António Poppe

MUSA PARADISIACA is a dialogue-based artistic project by Eduardo Guerra and Miguel Ferrão. Founded in 2010 on temporary partnerships with individual and collective entities of varying competence, Musa paradisiaca assumes different formats, while always maintaining a discursive and participatory reference. Their work has been presented at various national and international exhibitions, such as *Man with really soft hands* at Galeria Múrias Centeno, Lisbon (2017), *Masters of Velocity* at Dan Gunn Gallery, Berlin (2016), and *Alma-Bluco* at CRAC Alsace, Altkirch (2015). Their performances were part of *Canteen—Machine*, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto (2015) and *Impossible tasks [The Servant of the Cenacle]*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013).

# Why Are We Here Now?

## Con-temporary Worlds

by Katrin Klingan

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## Aspiring to Travel

by Adania Shibli

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## Why Aleppo?

by Mohammad Al Attar

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## Predicting the Past

by Rabih Mroué

## Excerpts from Conversations between the Authors



# Con-temporary Worlds

Katrin Klingan

Around two years ago, when we, the curatorial team at HKW, mapped out the current program *100 Years of Now*, we wanted to get a deeper understanding of the increasingly porous systems of classification and knowledge at a time when the great divisions between human, animal, and machine, born out of modernity and humanism, seem to have lost their stamina. We were interested in undertaking an analysis of the present by linking it back to wherefrom it emerged and scrutinizing which transformations had taken place and what got lost or simply disappeared along the way. Obviously, an understanding of time and space plays an important role here.

The contemporary world is often described as a kind of hypernetworked and interwoven space characterized by the collapse of distinctions between previously autonomous spaces, the withering away of a self-sustained “nature,” or the collapse of distinct national economies and temporal rhythms under the stress of neoliberalism. Yet all of these transformations—rather than creating a post-ideological or post-historical space of global unity—are chiefly characterized by the tendency to create a multitude of times, spaces, and modes of existence. We may describe this as the shift from the modern world—that is, a world characterized by a unilinear and unitemporal process of progress and expansion—to a world that is *allgegenwärtig*: contemporary and ubiquitous. However, this emerging situation is characterized by a multiplicity of co-existing times—literally, *con-temporary*. Such multiplications of time(s) suggests that we are not quite done with modernity after all. We are, instead, *con-temp-oraneous* with it, folding its historical and cultural specificities into the manifold modes of existence that oppose and partly contradict each other as part of our common but irreducibly diverse presentness. This contemporaneity is defined by a pluritemporality without illusion of resolution, progress, or salvation. Dreams of consolidating

# Excerpts from Conversations between the Authors

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## **Expanding the here and now (Adania Shibli):**

“Throughout *After the Wildly Improbable*, there is a strong tendency to expand the ‘here’ and ‘now,’ not only in terms of place and time, but also in terms of language, performance, and lucidity. This is all made in an effort to look around well-ordered regimes of thought and truth in their relation to history.”

the many times and places into unified forms of a globalized time seem anachronistic and quaint today, and more than a little violent. Even the prospect of a time known simply as “the present” eludes experience. We are, instead, contemporary, dwelling on various modes of belonging and co-existing, resulting in an amalgamation and condensation of objects, events, durations, collectives, material flows, histories, and consequences.

Our modes of thought and action are marked so deeply by these inherited classifications that, as we watch the disintegration of the modern world order, we still use these categories and strategies to invent the future. On the basis of these inherited predicaments from the modern world order, I invited Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, and Rabih Mroué to explore—each in their own way—how this pluritemporality can be framed in an experimental and experiential form. In other words, how can the past be reinscribed into our manifold present, not as a kind of relict, but as lived experience? And further, how does this method, this work of inscription, help to investigate the discourses that have underlined political, social, and cultural transformations over the past century in a distinct place, namely the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean? 1

During a meeting in November of last year between the three artists and me, we discussed how to approach the past hundred years with different modes of thinking in order to invoke new perspectives, connections, and narratives without subjecting them to a logic replete with taken-for-granted answers. During this conversation, Mohammad Al Attar cast the all-encompassing query: Why are we here *now*? He proposed taking a straightforward approach to the past, reflecting upon his work about Syria and how the last century paved the way for what is happening at the present moment. He sensed an urgent need to go back to understand the recent wars and political dependencies, so as not to fall upon the easy answers common during totalitarian times.

So, the seemingly simple and yet highly ontological question “Why are we here now?” can be read as a kind of hypermotif of the project opening up a set of dilemmas. If we want to gain an understanding of the *now* we need to go back to certain moments in history to unpack deadlocked historical

narratives. Yet this project is not an exercise in archaeology; it is not about excavating the unknown, but rather a practice against the well-ordered regimes of modern thought and historical writing poised to propose new frames of reference. In this framework, the question becomes fundamentally complex: What does this mode of investigation do to the contemporary moment and how do “we” relate to it?

One way of tackling this question is through narrative, because through stories we relate to the world around us. It’s no coincidence that the Spanish term for story is “*relato*.” Wherever something socially important is happening or being negotiated, stories and their narratives are involved, are being told. Those stories are affected by the changes within a place and those who take control of it. Exactly in this interplay, I believe, narratives start doing their “job.” Obviously, they are not innocent, they have their function within their social entities (on whatever scale, from families to societies and cultures) and they are the privileged media for collective memory formation. Furthermore, societies restrain their inner conflicts through keeping the distance between the real and its social encryption flexible. The more social energy one narrative contains, the more it disconnects from the criteria of proven references, as literary scholar Albrecht Koschorke argues in his theory of narration. This means it shapes the knowledge and non-knowledge of a society in similar ways.

On the other hand, the projects presented at the three week-ends of *Why Are We Here Now?* share a kind of skepticism toward grand narratives such as progress, civilization, and orientalism. The linearity that comes with these narratives brings about a process of ordering that not only leaves out but eliminates that which it cannot use. Instead, Adania Shibli, Rabih Mroué and Mohammad Al Attar investigate tiny details and seemingly marginal or even irrelevant subjects; they search for what is left out and gaze at the traces of the non-causal, the non-linear, and the non-comprehensible in an attempt to revive other forms of finding truth. They approach their subjects through embracing a tacit form of knowledge, transcending the rigid disciplinarity of academia, following undetected connections, and making use of intuition and serendipity.

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### **Stressing the Why (Rabih Mroué):**

“One can think about the title of the overarching project in two directions. The first would be stressing the “why”: Why have we reached—after a period of a hundred years—this point of violence in our region? The other direction would be, “Why are we all here now at HKW, gathering and doing these events?” And, directly related to this, “Why are we—Adania, Mohammad, and me—here in Germany?” She is Palestinian, he is Syrian, I am Lebanese, and we are outside of our countries. So, why are we here now? In my case it’s willingly, but it can be unwillingly, too, as in the cases of Mohammad and probably Adania. So the question is an uneasy one, and of course tied to our histories, to what has happened, and at the same time to our personal experiences: what we have left behind and what we went through in all these years.

If we take the second meaning of the title and ask why we are at HKW today, then we

can say, “Maybe in order to understand why we have reached this situation in our region today.” Why we are meeting in Berlin and not in Beirut or in Ramallah or in Damascus or wherever. Or why the violence has become more and more overwhelming in our region. Maybe, as Jalal Toufic writes, it is about how to *not* understand in a subtle way: to make things more complex and incomprehensible, but in a subtle way—not in a way that blocks us from thinking, but rather opens different paths and different dimensions to understand even more.

Of course, it is not about representing Beirut, Aleppo, or Palestine, or whatever. We are here as individuals and we are presenting ourselves. We are not here to explain to a foreign audience what is going on in our region. The mode of investigation is the process itself: the practice of thinking and reflecting and asking alternative questions, doubts, and thoughts.”

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Furthermore, if the grand narratives like progress or civilization are no longer appropriate frames of reference, and if generating knowledge about an irrevocable truth is no longer an option, we inevitably come to question the notion of truth as such. Data, evidence, truth—these grades of the factual form an intricate reference system in which current social and juridical knowledge is established and maintained. What measures exist for finding, constructing, and proving these truth data?

The multilayered answers to the questions guiding this project are assembled on the following pages, which represent a kind of workbook delving into the cosmos enveloping the projects by Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, and Rabih Mroué. The artists allow us insights into their developmental processes, as well as their artistic processes and methods. The contributions are organized in two threads: the texts form the main narrative frame of the individual concepts, while excerpts from conversations I conducted this summer highlight key ideas and evolutions of *Why Are We Here Now?*. The reader is invited to start at whichever point of entry they deem worth their while.

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### **The Past and the Present (Mohammad Al Attar):**

“This project began with a reflection about the anniversary of the First World War, and how we as artists and theater makers reflect on our situation within the current moment that we live in. I still think it’s very important to use historical events as a lens to view the present, to help us understand *why we are here now*. There are always roots beneath the current complex moment, and sometimes you can’t fully deconstruct this moment without digging deep to find those roots.

But later on—and maybe there is no rational explanation—I found myself unable to translate that without first tackling the current moment. Rather than work from the past to look at the present, I wanted to focus on the present. And that, in general terms, has been the drive behind my work since the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Since then, I have had only one focus, which is trying to use theater as my tool to reflect upon the ongoing condition in Syria—and this is also why the definition of ‘now’ is very complicated. Looking at the concrete events, the battlegrounds, the change of domination on the ground, and all the consequences behind that—they are changing rapidly and

that’s why trying to reflect on the current moment is very complicated. My answer to that was to obtain a question from each phase of this ongoing tragedy.

I am part of it, I am not an outsider, so in each phase since 2011 there has been a more annoying or urgent question for me—it might not have been for the other Syrians or for other people—but for me and usually also for the people I collaborate with. And for me, this is the ‘now.’ Most of the time I can’t answer these questions, I can’t even respond to them in any satisfactory way, and then I transformed them into theater because I feel that this is what I can do to circulate them.

What is unique about theater is that each event is new; there is no exact repetition. In film or photography, the notion of time is entirely different, whereas in performance and theater, this is unique, which, to me, is what is so beautiful and powerful about it. I was a bit reluctant at the beginning of the war as to whether or not theater could be a medium to engage with the events in Syria, because I was also attracted to political work. But after a couple of months, I realized that theater is my tool, my only tool.”

# Aspiring to Travel

Adania Shibli

Growing up in Palestine in the 1980s, the first time I, and kids like me, would ever have come across a railway track or train would have been at primary school, in one of the Arabic literature classes. The curriculum then was, and still is, subject to the approval of the Israeli Censorship Bureau, which permits the teaching of texts from various Arab countries, bar Palestinian texts, fearing that they may contain references or information that could raise pupils' awareness of the Palestinian question. Hence, Palestinian literature was considered unlawful, if not taboo, similar to pornography; that is, except for one text, "The Clock and the Man" (1963), a short story by Samira Azzam (1927–67), which the Censorship Bureau considered as "safe."

Azzam's short story is about a young man who is getting ready to go to bed on the night before his first day at a new job. He sets his alarm for four o'clock the next morning in order to catch the train in time to arrive at work. No sooner had the alarm gone off that morning when there came a knock at the young man's front door. When he opened the door, he found an old man standing in front of him. He had not a clue who this man was and he did not get a chance to ask him, since the man immediately turned and walked away, disappearing into the darkness. As this was repeated day after day, the young man no longer set an alarm. It was only after several months that he discovered who the old man was, after a colleague told him the same man went knocking on the front doors of all the employees in their company. He would wake them up so that they would not be late for their train as he did not want anyone else to meet the same fate as his own son, who had arrived a little late at the station one morning, just as the train was leaving. He had grabbed onto one of the doors, but his hand had betrayed him and he slipped, falling onto the tracks, and under the wheels of the train. Although this story might seem both simple and "safe" at first glance to the censor's eyes, it contributed to shaping the consciousness

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## Notions of Time:

"To depart from the movement of progression from the past via the present to the future, *After the Wildly Improbable* attempts to treat all three as possibilities. Treating them as possibilities hopefully opens up new discourses underlining political, social, and cultural transformations away from a historical understanding, and opens up other forms of understanding. We even tried to leave this logic altogether by inscribing the world of spirits, where time has different meanings with which the human mind toys."

of many of us kids back then, regarding the existence of a previous “normality” in Palestine, as no other text we had read, or ever would read, had done. The sheer possibility of a train having noisily traversed the Palestinian landscape in the past, engraved in us a deep desire for all that was normal and banal: had Palestinian employees once commuted to work by train; had there been an everyday “normality” for Palestinians at one time, where oppression and destruction was not the norm? In the past, were it trains whistling past and between the houses rather than the sirens of military jeeps and ambulance vehicles?

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The story of how Azzam’s protagonist meets his fate by falling from the train onto the railway tracks could well have taken place on a section of the Ottoman railway network. In the late 19th century, together with the German Empire, the Wuerttembergische Vereinsbank and the Deutsche Bank, and the then-leading German construction company Philipp Holtzmann AG, the Sublime Porte embarked on the construction of the Berlin–Baghdad Railway and then the Hijaz Railway. The design of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was intended to connect Berlin with the Orient Express route, passing through the Balkans; then an extension was planned that would run between Istanbul and Baghdad. The plan for the Hijaz Railway, on the other hand, was to run it between Damascus and Mecca, stopping at many different cities along the way, whereby other railway extensions would then connect with other cities not on the Hijaz rail route (e.g. Akka, Alexandria, Beirut, Cairo, Daraa, Jerusalem, Jaffa, etc.).

The main strategic aim behind the planned construction of both railways was to shift the then-power balances, between the Ottoman Empire and Russia, and between the German Empire, the British Empire, and France. The Ottoman Empire sought to facilitate the transportation of troops to and from the vast territories under its rule, in order to consolidate its control over them. The German Empire, for its part, desired access to the oil fields in the Gulf and direct access to German colonies in East and West Africa without having to negotiate the Suez Canal, which was under British control at the time. Some, however, found the idea of the two railway projects and their potential construction “wildly improbably, not to say fantastic,” as the British Consul in Damascus, Mr. W. Richards claimed in 1900.<sup>1</sup>

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#### **(Im)probabilities:**

“The term itself appeared as a colonial reaction to a specific event: the plans for constructing the Ottoman railway networks. However, since their construction went ahead, the search is for what remains as ‘wildly improbable,’ also as manifest in the transformation the plans went through in the past.”



The defeat and subsequent breakup of both the Ottoman and German empire after the First World War halted work on both railways. Now ownership of them both passed from the Ottoman and the German empires to Britain, as indicated in the Treaty of Versailles. Numerous historians, in fact, cite the plans for constructing the two railways, especially the Berlin–Baghdad route, as a leading cause for the outbreak of WWI; and from the beginning, both projects faced fierce opposition from Britain and France.<sup>2</sup> Construction of the two railway projects has continued, albeit intermittently to this day, seeing some newly constructed parts, other sections functioning only irregularly, while others are still at planning stage. The railway network, including its planning and partial construction, and eventually its breakdown and appropriation by external political players, is like a mechanical manifestation of the final days of the Ottoman Empire and the aftermath of its breakup. The potentialities and effects of the railway provide evidence of the major shifts that took place within the political, economic, social, and cultural realms at the time, and point to the significant transformations that were vital in forming, deforming, and reforming the regions in question. For instance, due to the cheaper prices of commuting, the railway network expanded internal Ottoman emigration, first to port cities, then from there abroad.<sup>3</sup> This saw two of the biggest waves of external emigration from Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria to North and South America in the late 19th and early 20th century. The internal and external emigration, to great extent, led to the emergence of *an-Nahda*—the Arab renaissance of the early 20th century. *An-Nahda* was responsible for the circulation of people and ideas between the major cities of the Arab region as well as to other parts of the world (Beirut, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Haifa, Istanbul, New York, Paris, and so forth). It brought about new types of knowledge and systems of thought (e.g. a greater understanding and reform of Islam, feminism, secularism, and nationalism), artistic production (music, painting, photography, film, and literature), the introduction of new approaches to the Turkish and Arabic languages (resulting in an Arabic translation of the Bible, which served as the basis for modern classical Arabic), and so on.



The influence of the connections forged by the railway network is detectable in literary forms and narrative structures from the early 20th century. Over two pages in his diary from 1917, Khalil al-Sakakini, an educator and writer who was a major figure during *an-Nahda*, recalls a journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, the major part of which he undertook by train. Such a narrative, nowadays, is unimaginable; in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, travel within one's own country itself is hardly possible. The protagonist's journey in contemporary Arabic texts is confined, largely, to small places, and rarely ever do they embark on long journeys, or even move. This new literary type with a restricted spatial experience stands in extreme contrast to the travel literature that had previously dominated Arabic prose writing for centuries.

With this as background, the Ottoman railway network, therefore, calls for treatment as a mechanical venture that has actively opened up a new set of potentialities which no one otherwise would ever have envisioned. In the course of the past 100 years, it has carried, including its subsequent destruction and abandonment, evidence and detail about the types of lives that have unfolded, or have failed to unfold, in the region.

Nowadays part of the Ottoman railway network still functions in a few countries in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, while it merely exists as a fragile memory of the landscape in other areas. Train carriages and sections of the track are sometimes visible outside urban spaces as well as in the midst of them, but as they are mostly not in use, they enjoy scarce human access. Now, frequently, the railway tracks have been invaded by plants, trees partially cover them, or sheep graze on the grass growing between the sleepers as if they formed part of a wild forest.

How, then, does one disclose the potentialities, effects, and shifts that the Ottoman railway network garnered, in a manner that will help us unravel and understand it, distancing it from current dominant discourses and perspectives? How does one uncover the constituent elements of the histories, and the present lives emanating in the regions in question, and move beyond them?

How can all of this help us to imagine connections that no longer exist; or help us to see the newly formed

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**Truth data:**

“Notions of progress and civilization underlie many processes for understanding, and not only finding the truth; this is very visible in the obsession with archives over the past two decades in regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. The archive—apart from being constructed by those who have got the means, usually the dominant—establishes temporal points of reference (e.g., past and present), so that linearity is inescapable. Linearity lies at the heart of the idea of progress and civilization. And linearity also brings about a logic of causality and order. The process of ordering is very much associated with the comprehensible and those who define it. These processes eliminate, and not

only leave out, what they cannot use. *After the Wildly Improbable* tries to search for what is left out and gaze at the traces of what has been eliminated from these processes and notions: the non-linear, non-causal, and non-comprehensible, in an attempt to revive other forms of finding the truth. As a writer myself, I've always trusted more in stuttering and silence. Stuttering and silence are normally neglected, as they are regarded as failing to offer a truth, instead of being seen as a reflection of other truths. But the most challenging question in this endeavor is how to revive such truths without subjecting them to the logic within which our understanding is already situated.”

connections that they created, or, then again, help us to see those that have ceased to exist? Where are the traces of such connections found today?

The investigations of *After the Wildly Improbable* distinguish themselves from previous projects by neglecting the human perspective in favor of taking the perspective of the Berlin-Baghdad and Hijaz railway routes themselves at a low level of no more than 25 centimeters above the ground. This very perspective seeks to disclose political, cultural, social, mechanical, and economic aspects in a range of diverse landscapes, all those through which the railway network traveled during the last century, witnessing or actively engaging in the events that have left deep marks in the region. It aims to reveal aspects of these events and their consequences beyond the common selective historical narratives and discourses (e.g. civilization, progress, Orientalism) usually encountered when addressing regions in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

The approach of this project could be defined as micro-historical, as it extends its method of exploration to shamanic modes. Shamanism embraces disclosures from unwonted perspectives that are associated with nonhuman agencies, recalling something that does not exist, or only partly exists.<sup>4</sup>

With the Ottoman railway network, its abandoned railway tracks lingering in many places in a state of part completion, having never reached its final planned state, shamanism emerges as an optimal methodology from which to start on this project's journey.

The shamanic as a methodology allows going beyond the scope of knowledge dominated by historical narratives based on archival research or archaeological excavation. This is especially pertinent, since, here, there is no attempt to assert coherent systems of knowledge from a human perspective, but rather to seek fragmentary ones from the perspective of the railway tracks, whereby a wild realm of unknown potentialities, effects, and perspectives are attainable, disclosing elements thus far never thoroughly investigated. The knowledge produced in this context, nevertheless, will not be about "truth" according to some fixed historical order; it will

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### **Perspectives:**

"The project is an attempt to follow lines and accounts that are not limited to the human gaze, which is a constructed one, historically, politically, socially, and even economically. One just needs to lie on the ground to uncover not just a different perspective, but also different perceptions. The human gaze has been inhabited since the advent of modernity with certain meanings and functions. If a human perspective has since then introduced objective knowledge, and a from-above discipline, this project investigates what a perspective from the ground can introduce."

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be about effective invocation, again, of potentialities, effects, and shifts, over different periods, in various places, yet all derived from a mechanical world in flux, which throughout this project will be “stabilized” through various forms of engagement.

#### Notes

1. Cited in James Nicholson, *The Hejaz Railway*. London: Stacey International, 2005.
2. For more on this, see: Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin–Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power*. London: Penguin, 2010.
3. Donald Quataert, “The Age of Reforms 1812–1914,” in Halil Inalcik and Donald Quataert (eds), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire 1300–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 759–945.
4. Mihály Hoppál, “Cosmic Symbolism in Siberian Shamanhood,” in Andrei A. Znamenski (ed.), *Shamansim: Critical Concepts in Sociology*. London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 177–92.

# Why Aleppo?

Mohammad Al Attar

Over the past six years, the city of Aleppo has told the story of all of Syria. It is a story of anticipation, of overcoming fear, of an uprising, and then of a civil armed conflict, which became internationalized, devolving into a violent proxy war. Finally, it is a story of collapse and suffering.

The story of Aleppo is an abridged version of the story of the crushed Syrian revolution, not only because Aleppo is the biggest and most populous of Syrian cities, and not because the fall of its eastern part marked a major turning point in the course of events in both Syria and the entire region, but because every turn in the revolution was bound to play out in its most dramatic form in Aleppo.

In the beginning, Aleppo was the last of the big cities to join the uprising, a development that led Syrians involved in the uprising across the country to publicly censure Aleppines. However, the city's university would eventually provide the ignition for Aleppo's citizens, freeing the people of their fears. This was unique to Aleppo, as in the majority of Syria's other cities, it was instead the mosques that were the pulsing centers at the heart of the initial demonstrations, even though the many people who participated were not there to pray. Thus, when Aleppo finally joined the ranks of the cities rising up against the Assad regime, it was a remarkable and resonant event.

For many Syrians who believed in the revolution, the fall of Aleppo signified the end of that revolution, one that they felt represented them. The beauty in the rise of Aleppo and its civil movement, the terrible ferocity of its war, and the deep-seated division of its two parts, were matched by its resounding fall, signaling the end of a phase. While the future in the wake of this watershed moment remains unknown, it will not resemble anything we have known since Aleppo's uprising.

Many Syrians today, far away from their home cities, harbor doubts they will ever be able to return to them, whether

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## Truth Data:

“To a certain extent, what I said about time could be said, more or less, about truth—bearing in mind that I am speaking about truth in the Syrian context. It is one of the most complicated questions: What is the truth, or how can you claim to have the truth? And naturally, it is part of any struggle, but mainly in wars, each side has narratives, has the claim that it possesses the truth or the right to tell the truth. On a more personal level, it all started with clear positions in 2011: There were two sides: there were people who wanted to change things in Syria and people who resisted change—the protesters versus the regime. Back then, we thought that we held the truth—we know who we are, we know what we want, and we know what the others, meaning the Assad regime, don't want us to achieve.

But things changed with time, with the struggle in Syria getting more complicated and the regional, as well as international,

intervention becoming stronger. With these changes that happened to the larger narratives, everything changed also on the level of more intimate narratives. When the clear vision becomes complicated, distorted, and violently shaken, even your inner questions will change. More questions emerged inside each one of us about everything from the political to the very personal. Questions about belonging, identity, religion, social doctrines, family ... And that's why it is very painful, but that's also why it is life-changing.

Revolutions are very provocative—they change realities, and they change your convictions about truth and reality. And that's why today I am more interested in exploring the struggle about narratives and truth, but through focusing on intimate stories.”

in the near or distant future. The people of Aleppo in particular suffer from an even more uncertain future. Those who might return someday will go back to neighborhoods that likely do not resemble the ones they left behind. We still do not know how the reconstruction will take place or when. Nothing, however, suggests the streets, quarters, and shops will be the same. Everything has changed. The city's walls and stones were once a sanctuary for untold memories, now turned into the graves of loved ones buried in haste. How do we take back all that has been lost when we cannot even reach our city? We have lost everything there, and even if we do return to it one day, we do not know what awaits us. What feelings will we experience as we walk again in places where our footprints carved out well-trodden paths, places that have imprinted images and memories on our hearts, when we can no longer find any familiar traces? When there is nothing left of them except perhaps surface features and names, if even these remain. Will they continue to be ours? Or do they cease to be ours when our traces have been erased from them?

The people of Aleppo face another challenge beyond the tragedy they have endured while half their city was destroyed. Will those who remained there and those who are able to return someday be able to overcome the sharp divide that exists between them? It is a divide that took on a geographical dimension, and it is not limited to symbolic or political expressions between pro-regime and revolution supporters, between those who took a neutral stance and the rebels, between Assad's thugs and fighters of the Free Syrian Army, and so on. The boundaries in Aleppo were delineated between east and west, dividing the city over three long, bloody years. This division engendered new social networks among its residents.

### Why Talk about Places We Hold Dear?

Palestinian refugees still keep the keys to their homes and pass them on from generation to generation. Syrians have started to follow their example. But what do these Syrians who left or who were forcibly displaced from their cities and towns and homes really own, when their old keys no longer have any

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### Intimate Narratives:

"I wanted to shed light on the situation through questions that people ask themselves on a daily basis now, about one's relation to a place. For example, what does the place mean to us? And this is how we came up with this current project for HKW—this urgent desire to speak about a city, Aleppo, as the symbol of the Syrian odyssey.

We are speaking about places in Aleppo that are known to hardly anyone outside the city, and not even to many people in Aleppo. It is a way to encourage the audience to draw a map of the city in a different way and to keep the city alive the same way it is vividly alive in the mind of its people. It is also a way not to just challenge the dominant narrative about Aleppo as a war zone

and source of refugee waves, but also to encourage audiences to address questions that are very urgent for us today as Syrians, regardless of where we are now. Questions related to the notion of absence, disappearing, loss, and also the absolute lack of controlling your destiny, or affecting the events that are happening on the ground. Usually we think first about missing or disappeared or dead people, which is of course a huge loss. But I thought missing places could be the introduction to understand the loss. And through an intimate narrative about these marginalized places in the city, you can unfold a lot of layers in the modern history of the city."

use? How do they retain ownership of their spaces? How do they hold on to their memories of these places, to which they might never return, except maybe as guests or visitors? They do so through stories—stories about their neighborhoods, stories that will later become their heritage to be passed on to the next generation, along with old keys and land titles. It is only stories that are unaffected by changes to a place and those who took control of it. This is because stories, when told, cannot be erased. Others might own new keys and land titles, might be new residents, but no one can own stories about a time they did not experience, about a place that was not theirs.

Our stories and memories of these places often blend the real with the imagined or desired. We tend to fill the gaps in our memory. This intimate and perhaps selective self-narration does not contradict the objective facts involved in the narrative. Our memory of a certain city and place is indeed nothing but our own conception of it, and it cannot be reduced to mere topographical images of these spaces.

Our cities are constructed and their characteristics are shaped by the stories and memories we have of them. In fact, they remain with us only as a melding of the lived, the imagined, the forgotten, and the desired.

This project seeks to examine the terminology that articulates the relationship of Syrians with their country today, which includes “loss,” “absence,” and “exile”. These terms not only figure strongly in the daily accounts of Syrians everywhere, but also impede attempts by Syrians to narrate or construct their stories. The project also examines the absurdity of our situation as it stands today, the possible within the impossible, and the way to overcome loss, exile, and absence.

Identifying the question of space as a key to this puzzle is symbolic, not incidental. It signifies our almost complete exclusion from influencing the course of events in our home Syria. This question reveals a great deal about our dispersion and bitter losses. But our efforts to investigate it also show our persistence in continuing to hope. Our little tales about the places we hold dear are among the few things that could survive in the face of psychological trauma, the masked or

### **Avoiding a Language of Loss:**

“Every time we try to speak about our homeland, Syria, we find it extremely difficult not to fall into this trap of gliding into a language of gloominess, sadness, or nostalgia. It is natural, I guess! These are our circumstances, these are our conditions. But the problem with giving in to this narrative is that, unfortunately, it is powerful only in the first encounter with the audience, but then will lead the response to a flat dimension of thinking: to be emotionally engaged but nothing beyond. So you have to be careful about that. Sometimes this is difficult, though, especially if you are dealing with real testimonies. Actually a part of the work is to maintain the spontaneity, the different nature of each of the voices. Each person has his or her own way of speaking. And so, if these testimonies carry these aspects of nostalgia or darkness, how to deal with that?”

We tried to at least conduct things in a way that the final research we do will try to avoid falling into the trap of delivering only emotional statements. We think it is a shame if you do not provoke a more critical response. Sometimes, it was the way how we conducted the conversations with the people. Through that we tried to engage with people in a way that they became aware that it's more like, ‘Let's speak about what we want to speak about, but also to try to overcome this huge burden on our shoulders.’ That will help us before even helping the audience. It will help us to think more critically about our story. We look at things beyond the reaction of anger or sadness. According to some of the people we interviewed, it led them to places that they never tackled before. That's brilliant in itself.”



explicit violence that ravages us, and the feelings of rage and hatred. Our memories and stories help us keep the places we have left behind, or that have become estranged from us, fresh and alive. They also help us safeguard our relationship with our home against huge distortions. Perhaps we can say our stories preserve beauty in the face of spreading ugliness.

### The Power of Narrative and the Destiny of Story

Syrians have struggled to narrate their stories in the past few years. Syria, which was an unknown, mysterious place to many people in the world, witnessed a crucial turning point in March 2011. A revolution took place, and the country all of a sudden was at the center of international attention. Despite this attention, Syrians found it difficult to convey their voices to the outside world. They discovered that it was almost impossible to overcome the international media's dominant narratives about their own homes and destinies. Syrians despaired because all their cries, slogans, writings, leaked images, and footages failed to give rise to serious attention and concrete action to support them in their struggle for freedom.

Silence seems like a shelter for many of them now, as they have serious doubts about how useful it is to continue to speak out or to document events. *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence* is also about this dilemma. It examines the capacity of narrative today to provoke audiences to draw a map of a broken city far from the dominant images of war and destruction. The audience is confronted with intimate testimonies about beloved places that are spread across Aleppo. These testimonies are the unfolding memories of their owners, and the unravelling layers in the life of a city. The one-on-one performance is a structure where words are the only bond between the life and memories of certain people and places from Aleppo on the one side, and the audience on the other. It is certain that these words will remain alive, but it is up to the audience to decide what to do with them and how to preserve them.

—11

### One on One:

“We are working with professional German actors; none of the actors are from the Middle East. We wanted to explore this. We wanted to translate this as part of the form we chose. Why didn't others know much, and still do not know much, about us, compared to how huge the catastrophe in Syria is? We are tackling how difficult it was and still is for the Syrians to tell their stories from their own perspectives and directly to others. Because, unfortunately, and in general, the story of Syria has been told on behalf of Syrians but rarely has it been told directly by Syrians.

This is the first time we worked with non-Syrian actors. I want the audience, me and all of us, to explore the idea of how much in common we have when we speak about such themes: loss, absence, nostalgia, places we hold dear, and the layers behind that.

I am imagining an audience at HKW hearing intimate stories of inhabitants of Aleppo that mix reality with fiction. Because when

you are narrating your memories, you always do that from a subjective perspective. That is what is unique and beautiful about your own testimony. Because you are not a neutral archive—your testimony is the result of your thoughts, your mood, your physicality, your beliefs, your ideologies. And the fact that an audience at HKW is listening to these testimonies from inhabitants of Aleppo narrated by professional actors from Germany will make all of us think: To what extent do we have things in common, despite the differences of context? And that, hopefully, will remind us how we let each other down, and how we were not curious enough to know more about each other. And here I don't mean sympathy; it is about being curious in an active way. To be curious about others, because what is happening to them will also affect you.”

<sup>10</sup>

<sup>11</sup>



# Predicting the Past

Rabih Mroué

Nearly a hundred years have passed since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the Lebanese still have not succeeded in reaching a consensus on a concept of identity for their country. They haven't even developed a shared view of their country's past that might help them live together in peace as citizens of a state that has obtained its political sovereignty out of former sectarian subordination.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent birth of Lebanon as a nation state with its current recognized borders, this country has continued to be tormented by wars and sociopolitical upheavals that threaten to break its social contract. In Lebanon, everything shakes and shifts, except for one beacon of continuity: the sectarian regime, represented by the permanent interpenetrability of politics and religion, the absence of the state, and the division of its institutions among the country's different religious factions.

Though this might seem stereotypical for a country that has gone through what Lebanon has gone through, it is a reality no one can deny. This fact applies particularly to the escalation of violence in the region and the strict separation between the different confessions, in addition to the direct military and political interference of the most powerful countries in the world.

But what is specific to Lebanon is the blatant involvement of a political party (Hezbollah)—an official part of the Lebanese government, represented by their ministers and deputies—in a war taking place outside of the country. In fact, this is the first time such an involvement has occurred since the existence of Lebanon as a nation.

With the complexity of the wars in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and with the international military interventions of countries such as Russia, the US, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, radical changes are certain to take place. This might lead to a redrawing of the map, undoing what the diplomats Mark Sykes and François

—12

## Notions of Time:

"The past is not dead. It appears in our daily life. But it is not as if we live in the past. One method might be to think of the past in order to understand the present, predict what the future would be—but this is not the way I work. I try to not work as a scientist, who dissects the case and makes a study out of it. I try to act as if I am the one who is dissecting his own body and studying it. However, in order to understand, I have to

—13

## Truth Data:

"What I'm trying to suggest is to find the particles of the so-called truth in the rubble of history. This relates to Walter Benjamin's idea about the angel looking at history as a heap of rubble. But instead of looking and being pushed away—as in Benjamin's image—we are actually in the midst of all this rubble. And—especially in the region we are talking about—I see ourselves as part of the

—14

## Representations:

"After the civil war, there was this big question about representation, especially with regard to theater. One of the main questions was: 'How do we represent our bodies that were imprinted by the civil war?' We started to ask questions like, 'Why should we perform *Romeo and Juliet* to talk about the war in Lebanon? Why should I pretend that I am Hamlet?' If I have something to say that comes out of *Hamlet*, an idea about today, let me say it as if I were writing an essay or an article. Let me represent myself thinking about Hamlet, and bring it on stage. It makes the relationship to the audience closer, in the sense that you are sharing your own thoughts with them. From my experience, I can see that

look in an oblique way, because it is impossible to see with a direct gaze. Maybe with the help of a mirror, or other mediators and means such as smart phones, the internet, videos, and photos, we can see ourselves differently from unexpected angles. In this way, we might look at things not as phenomena, where we are spectators or researchers on the outside looking at them in a clinical way."

rubble, watching all the angels looking at us and moving further and further away.

For example, at first I refused to watch the videos of ISIS, as a kind of resistance. Now I am rethinking it. Maybe I have to watch them, on the one hand, so we don't make a myth out of them, and on the other hand, to deal with them in one way or another, and take responsibility for what has happened."

the audience relates to it in a much stronger way than they would do if it was a traditional play or fictional movie.

Let's take this border, which separates the audience and the artwork, or the artist and performer, and let's say that I am here now. I am sitting here, you are sitting there, and I am talking to you as Rabih and I know you personally. If not personally, I at least recognize you as individuals sitting there and listening to me. And, if you like, you can even interrupt me. I can stop and drink a glass of water. It is not part of a role. You also can, according to the conversation, change the text, rewrite it, and correct some ideas. It is not something rigid and indisputable. It's all about sharing."

Georges-Picot set up just over a hundred years ago. Indeed, with the direct and explicit involvement of the Lebanese in these conflicts and wars, the question is whether Lebanon will retain its current borders or will eventually be torn apart by new divisions that might ultimately cause its disappearance from the map.

With the project *How Close Can We Get to the Light and Survive?*, I'm not aiming to provide answers to the questions and issues mentioned above, but rather wish to reflect upon these matters in an indirect way and from different angles. It starts with the history of Lebanon and the surrounding region, taking into account the events of today as well as the legacy of the past hundred years. The series' main concern is opening up a dialog and debate both between the participating artists and writers as well as the audience. Each participant in the event will suggest their different point of view of what I call "a little truth with a small t," which will not contradict the others' supposed truths but rather add a point of view to open up a conversation, a dialog or a debate, between the participants, and ultimately highlight the impossibility of finding the one "Truth with a big T." When we talk about truth, we are not talking about finding a definitive answer.

As for the title, *How Close Can We Get to the Light and Survive?*, the light could here be a metaphor for the truth: How can you reach the truth and survive? Individuals are always subject to accusations of being traitors whenever they find themselves in a closed group or society—whether it is a political party, a religious group, a community, or a dictatorial, fascist, theocratic, or totalitarian country. In such groups, communities, and countries, there are always clear ideologies and histories. And if any member of that group or those who live under such a regime starts to ask questions and pushes for change, people become suspicious of them, and they are even subjected to interrogation and imprisonment, and sometimes to death. In such regimes, one always asks oneself, "How close can I get to the light without being eliminated?" No one wants to be killed or spend years in prison, no one wants to become a martyr.

In using the term "non-academic lecture" for a format widely known as "lecture performance," I want to highlight

### **An Academic Question:**

"When it comes to this format, I would challenge the term 'performance,' since we are only lecturing, and not performing. Although we use our bodies and voices, we are sitting most of the time behind a table and on a chair, as any academic lecturer would do. There is no real difference except for our attitude. Using the so-called lecture-performance form, we, as artists, are not asking questions about performing arts or even the lecture form itself. However, instead of calling it merely a lecture, I suggest the term 'non-academic lecture,' to allow us to do whatever we want, whilst keeping in mind that, at the end, it is a lecture.

We are not playing a role; we are even reading from a script. There is a microphone, a table, and an audience. There is no real question about this given relation between the lecturer and the audience. The only thing that we ask about is the term and the form of the lecture. What is an academic lecture and what is a non-academic lecture? Maybe the term 'lecture' makes us aware of

these issues. Is it because the talk becomes serious, academic, scientific, loaded with a lot of references and footnotes? A non-academic lecture is an academic lecture, and this 'non-' is only there to accentuate it. It puts doubts on it, in a subtle way.

In both forms, there is a certain logic of how a lecturer builds her or his presentation. There is an idea to raise, problematics to discuss, a narrative; there is a bibliography behind it; and there are footnotes, references, codes, and terminologies, among other things. But at the same time, the term 'non-academic' will offer the lecturer a wide range to play with all of these issues. For instance, one can appropriate the format, hide references, invent quotes, blur the borders between what is real and what is fiction. There's total freedom to put up alternative ideas, unfinished thoughts, doubts and questions ... and all this in an open frame and transparent mechanism. Nothing is hidden to the audience, no cheating and no deceptions."

the latter's academic origins and at the same time question the established setup where someone gives a lecture while the audience remains silently listening until the very end—which is usually followed by a Q&A session. In this regard, “non-academic” becomes a tool to question the authority of institutional and methodologically rigid structures.

In Beirut at the end of the 1990s, this genre of presentation emerged due to many local factors. Among them was the need to start a dialog among artists in a period when the political scene was controlled and orchestrated by the Syrian regime. This need also evolved from the lack of serious discussion between the Lebanese factions to overcome sectarian hostility, the lack of any review of the reasons behind the Lebanese Civil War, and the lack of any self-criticism regarding the responsibility for this war. The format of a non-academic lecture, which uses words as the main element, usually supported by pictures, videos, and projected text, provides a strategy for independent artistic research that allows for tracing and investigating the fabrication of certainties and for opening up spaces of discussion.

For the two-day event, I have invited nine Lebanese artists and writers from different generations to present non-academic lectures, each representing their own reading of and reflection on the history of Lebanon and the region, far from the discourses generated through the media or political propaganda. None of these artists is involved in any institutional context, and thus, in only representing themselves as individuals, they will produce alternative positions and voices in a world that constantly demands us to declare our belonging in a binary manner, and relentlessly pressures us to radically align ourselves with one side against the other.

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### **Reconstructing Reality:**

“The Lebanese did not invent the performance lecture. However, after the end of the war in 1990, we can see that Beirut was a rich soil to bring up such a format for many reasons. The openness of the city after fifteen years of civil war had vanished. During the wars, from 1957 to 1990, the country was divided into east and west; there was no real contact with the outside. Indeed, the war ended like magic, there was no reason to stop it then, exactly as there had been no reason to continue it. We can understand how it started, but we don't know why it shifted and why it stopped at a certain moment. When the war ended, questions started to haunt us, doubts entered into everything we listened to or saw. It was a struggle between oneself, a tension with the future and what was coming, the shock of discovering the world again, discovering yourself again, and asking basic questions without finding convincing answers.

Besides, it was the time of reconstructing the country, and all the money was spent for

rebuilding the infrastructure. Culture had no priority; it was not even on the list. For artists and theater makers, there was no financial support from any institutions. The city had not really opened to the world yet. To do films or big theater pieces was not an easy thing. So lecture performances—or non-academic lectures—presented a perfect format to produce something without a real budget.

Secondly, there are political, economic, even social reasons for the rise of this format in Lebanon. How to be independent from the institutions and the market but still being able to create and present your work and your ideas? It started little by little. These lectures and presentations took place everywhere, in small and big theaters, in a garden of a house, or even in our private apartments. There are no specific technological requirements. I remember when friends could not attend a performance, I invited them to my apartment and I performed it for them.”

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### **Reflecting History:**

“The project deals with truths and certainties, without refusing any of them and without accusations. Whether a narrative is reliable or unreliable does not matter. What matters is to understand what lies behind this narrative, and why this narrative says this or that and does so now. It is an attempt to listen to the “others,” even if they are on the other side of our beliefs, and to analyze what discourse is hidden behind their speeches and how we can place these versions of “truths” next to our own versions, without any hierarchy, and see the sociopolitical and economic problems, conflicts, and tensions. In fact, that’s exactly the method that Ahmad Beydoun applies in his book *Identité confessionnelle et temps sociales chez les historiens libanais contemporains*.

He puts the different points of view of different historians who read the same event and the same period next to each other without saying that one interpretation is more reliable than the other, or that this one is true and that one is not. In this way, the reader can detect the tensions between the different versions, and this would be the starting point to analyze the discourses behind each version, trying to see what the social, economic, religious, and/or political discourses behind each one of them are, and why and when these historians agree on a certain point, and why and when they disagree on it.”

ADANIA SHIBLI is a writer and cultural researcher focusing on the history of vision in Arabic culture, as well as political and social realities. Her novels, plays, short stories, and narrative essays have been published in various anthologies, art books, literary and cultural magazines. A selection of her books include *Minor Detail* (2016), *A Journey of Ideas Across: In Dialog with Edward Said* (2014), *Keep Your Eye on the Wall: Palestinian Landscapes* (2013), *Dispositions* (2012), and *Touch* (2010). Shibli was awarded the Young Writer's Award by the A.M. Qattan Foundation in 2002 and 2004. She is a regular contributor to various journals, newspapers, and magazines, and intermittently since 2013 has been Visiting Professor at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at Birzeit University, Palestine.

MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR is a playwright and dramaturge. The political and social implications of the war in Syria and the political developments after the Syrian uprising are the main themes of his pieces. Since 2007, he has worked together with theater director Omar Abusaada, experimenting on the intersection of fiction and documentary. Interested in the political and social role of theater, many of their works engage theater in projects with marginalized groups. Al Attar's theatrical works include i.a. *While I Was Waiting* (2016), *Antigone of Shatila* (2014), *Intimacy* (2013), *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* (2013), *Look at the street...this is what hope looks like* (2012), as well as *Withdrawal* (2008) and have been shown at various international stages and festivals. He has written numerous critical contributions published in several newspapers and magazines, focusing on the Syrian uprising.

RABIH MROUÉ is a theater director, actor, visual artist, and playwright. Taking the form of theater pieces as well as video and installation art, his work employs both fiction and in-depth analysis as a tool for engaging with the interpretation of histories, the politics of truth, and the role visual and media cultures play therein. He is a contributing editor for *The Drama Review /TDR* (New York) and co-founder of the Beirut Art Center (BAC). From 2012 to 2015, Mroué was a fellow at the International Research Center Interweaving Performance Cultures at Freie Universität Berlin. He is theater director at Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich and has created numerous works, i.a. *Rima Kamel* (2017), *Ode to Joy* (2015), and *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012). His works have been performed and exhibited internationally including at CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid (2013/14), The ICP Triennial, MoMa, New York (2013), and documenta 13, Kassel (2012).

KATRIN KLINGAN is a literary scholar, curator, and producer of art and cultural projects. From 2003 to 2010 she was the artistic director of relations, an international art and cultural program initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, where she curated and produced projects in the fields of the visual arts, theater, documentary film, television, contemporary thought, architecture, and radio. She was previously programming dramaturge at Wiener Festwochen and co-curator of, among others, *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1999) and *du bist die Welt. 24 Episoden über das Leben von heute* (2001). She has been the head of the Department of Literature and Humanities at Haus der Kulturen der Welt since 2011. There she was curator of, among others, *The Anthropocene Project* (2013-2014), *Now is the Time of Monsters. What Comes After Nations?* (2017), and co-curated the Research Project *Global Prayers* (2011-2013). Currently she is curator of the program *100 Years of Now* (2015-2018).



10–11 pm

## Sonic Interpretations

The human and the machine participate equally in creating ever-shifting railway soundscapes. These soundscapes can disclose sonic interpretations of motion, histories, and landscapes. As they dissolve into a musical composition, listeners are invited to create their own intimate imagery, visual forms, and narratives.

ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Poles Re-Mediated

Sair Sinan Kestelli

The civil population in Turkey, which has been exposed to intense polarization for many years, has spoken out loudly since the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016 deepened the situation under state-of-emergency conditions. *Poles Re-Mediated* takes the dynamics of polarization and the hierarchical structures beneath it as its starting point. While the tracks of the Berlin–Baghdad and Hijaz railways are explored from their historical, sociological, as well as political perspectives, components of a musical performance are also incorporated into the work as “poles.” Challenging the typical audience/performer setting and space, the event will act as a mediator between a sonic interpretation of the Berlin–Baghdad and Hijaz railways and its signification by the participants.

The sound artist SAIR SINAN KESTELLI combines his engineering background with sound design and sonic arts studies. His practice focuses on electronic music composition, performance, and new digital musical instrument design. His work was part of the record *Anthology of Turkish Experimental Music: 1961–2014* (2016) released by Sub Rosa Records. He performed at various international music events, like Musica Viva Festival, Desonanz Festival, and Steim Instrument Lab. He collaborated with different choreographers, such as Taldans, Ayşe Orhon, Gizem Bilgen, and Sezen Tonguz. Sair Sinan Kestelli is currently a PhD candidate at Istanbul Technical University, Centre for Advanced Studies in Music (MIAM) and part of the electronic music duo, Mondual.





# ALEPPO. A PORTRAIT OF ABSENCE

MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR

Cities are shaped by the stories and memories people have of them. They stick in the mind only as a melding of the lived, the imagined, the forgotten, and the desired. The only thing that remains are the stories. Starting from that notion, Mohammad Al Attar has interviewed inhabitants of the city of Aleppo, asking them about a place dear to them. The result of this undertaking, infused by the desire not to yield to a language of loss, is a set of intimate one-on-one performances comprised of tales and testimonies from Aleppo, in order to safeguard the connections to these places. It is also a reflection upon language itself, the need to speak and to listen. Stories can preserve the beautiful, encourage the listeners to piece together images on their own, and give them the freedom to reconstruct a place which perhaps no longer exists.

In cooperation with theater director Omar Abusaada and scenographer Bissane Al Charif

Thursday, September 21, 2017  
6 pm, 7 pm, 8 pm, 9 pm

Friday & Saturday, September 22–23, 2017  
2 pm, 3 pm, 4 pm, 6 pm, 7 pm, 8 pm, 9 pm

## PERFORMANCE

### Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence

Mohammad Al Attar

MOHAMMAD AL ATTAR is a playwright and dramaturge. The political and social implications of the war in Syria and the political developments after the Syrian uprising are the main themes of his pieces. Since 2007, he has worked together with theater director Omar Abusaada, experimenting on the intersection of fiction and documentary. Interested in the political and social role of theater, many of their works engage theater in projects with marginalized groups. Al Attar's theatrical works include i.a. *While I Was Waiting* (2016), *Antigone of Shatila* (2014), *Intimacy* (2013), *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* (2013), *Look at the street...this is what hope looks like* (2012), as well as *Withdrawal* (2008) and have been shown at various international stages and festivals. He has written numerous critical contributions published in several newspapers and magazines, focusing on the Syrian uprising.

OMAR ABUSAADA is a theater director. Working as a playwright and director, he co-founded the group Studio Theatre in 2002 whose first show, *Insomnia*, premiered in 2004. Since 2007, Abusaada has been collaborating with Mohammad Al Attar. Interested in building a politically and socially conscious theater, his work brings together the Syrian dramatic tradition and new practices such as contemporary writing and documentary theater. He directed numerous performances, i.a. *While I Was Waiting* (2016), *Antigone of Shatila* (2014), *Syria Trojan Women* (2013), *Intimacy* (2013), *Could You Please Look into the Camera?* (2012), *Look at the streets ... this is what hope looks like* (2011), and *El affich* (2006). His works have been presented at various international festivals.

BISSANE AL CHARIF is a scenographer and artist. She studied Architecture at the University of Damascus, Archaeology at the University of Lyon II, and Set Design (Scenography) at the Nantes School of Architecture. She has worked as a scenographer at the Damascus Opera House and as a set designer within the field of film and theater. Her multimedia installation *Mémoire(s) des Femmes*, documenting the individual stories of eight women who have fled Syria with their children, was awarded the French Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2015. Her installation project *Sham*, observing the city of Damascus from the view of its children, will be presented at Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris, in November 2017.

### Research and Interviews:

SADIK ABDUL RAHMAN is a writer, journalist, and expert in constitutional and political thought. He holds a MA in Law from Damascus University and works as the Arabic editor-in-chief for the Syrian culture website Al-Jumhuriya, for which he has also published numerous articles on the Syrian revolution and the civil war.

MARCELL SHEHWARD is an activist and blogger from Aleppo who has advocated wildly about human rights in Syria. She has participated in many national and international conferences and discussion panels about education, women's rights, and the role of civil society in Syria. As executive manager of the organization Kesh Malek, she has worked on promoting children's rights in the seven schools that the organization ran in Aleppo. She has degrees in Dentistry and International Relations, and holds an MA in Human Rights and Cultural Diversity from the University of Essex, UK. In 2015, her online series *Dispatches from Syria*, describing her life in Aleppo, won a 2015 Online Journalism Award in the category of Online Commentary.

ODAI AL ZOUBI is a writer, journalist, and translator. He studied Philosophy at the Lebanese University, Beirut, and at University of East Anglia, Norwich, where he received his PhD. His philosophical research focuses on semantics and speech act theory. In 2016, he published a collection of short stories, *Al-Samat* (Silence), and a collection of literary essays on exile and war, *Om-Hashim's Lamp*. He is a writer and part-time editor for the Syrian culture website Al-Jumhuriya.

### Translation from Arabic to English:

Katharine Halls, Reem Harb, Lina Mounzer

### Actors:

JAN ANDREESEN studied acting at the University of Music and Theatre Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Leipzig. While still studying, he could already be seen on stage at Dresdner Staatsschauspiel. Following graduation, he became a member of the ensemble at Theater Bielefeld, before moving to Theater Heidelberg, and then to Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe. Important roles include Jean in *Miss Julie*, Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, and Philotas in *Philotas*.

ERIC BOWER is widely known for his roles in the TV series *Der Kriminalist*, *Leipzig Homicide*, *Tatort Münster*, and *Letzte Spur Berlin*. After training as an actor, he began shooting films including *The Silence* (directed by Baran bo Odar, 2013) and *Prisoners of Auschwitz* (directed by Milan Cieslar, 2013). Bower made his stage debut in 2010 at Komödie am Kurfürstendamm.

HANSA CZYPIONKA works as an actor in theater, film, and television and has appeared in more than a hundred films. Highlights of his career include *Rote Erde II* (directed by Klaus Emmerich, 1989), an epic drama about a German miner's family, *Happy Birthday, Türke!* (directed by Doris Dörrie, 1992), for which he received the Bavarian Film Award, and the Oscar-nominated film *Beyond Silence* (directed by Caroline Link, 1996). Dear to his heart are the musical-literary programs he performs together with the guitarist Claus Boesser-Ferrari.

SALADIN DELLERS studied acting at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz. In 2012, he was nominated for Best Actor Swiss Film Award for his role in *Silberwald* (directed by Christine Repond, 2011). He has also appeared in the feature length films *Stöffitown* (directed by Christoph Schaub, 2015) and *Der Läufer* (directed by Hannes Baumgartner, 2018). In addition to his acting engagements at Schauspielhaus Graz and Kampnagel Hamburg, he is co-founder of Berlin's onlinetheater.live.

FLORIAN DENK graduated with a degree in acting from Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf in 2013 and works as a dancer, author, and director. In 2005 and 2006, he played roles in *Jedermann* (directed by Martin Kušej) at Salzburg Festival, and since 2011 he has appeared on stage at Hans Otto Theater Potsdam, Theater der Jungen Welt Leipzig, and at Theater Aachen. From 2015 to 2017, he played in *Judith* (directed by Frank Castorf) and *Service/No Service* (directed by René Pollesch) at Volksbühne, Berlin.

MAXIMILIAN KLAS studied acting at Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf and can be seen in numerous film and television productions. Since 2000, he has appeared in, among others, the TV series *Leipzig Homicide* (2001 – ongoing), the TV drama *Die Stadt und die Macht* (2015), and most recently the two-part TV film *Brecht – Eine Vorstellung* (forthcoming 2018). From 2012 to 2015, he was a guest actor at Hans Otto

Theater Potsdam.

IRMA MANDLER graduated from the University of Derby with an honours degree in theater arts and was trained as an actress at the Drama Studio London until 2009. She spent several years in Latin America and Africa working with theater companies and NGOs and is currently a member of the international theater collective Archive of Ephemeral Things. In October 2017, she will play the role of Isabella in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* at Rollmops Theater, Villingen-Schwenningen.

NAVID NAVID can be seen in numerous films, among them *For a Moment*, *Freedom* (directed by Arash T. Riahi, 2007) and *Septembers of Shiraz* (directed by Wayne Blair, 2016). In 2003, he was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role for the Förderpreis Deutscher Film at the Munich International Film Festival for his performance in *The Friend* (directed by Elmar Fischer, 2003), and in 2012, he was nominated for the 48th Grimme-Preis for his role in *Salami Aleikum* (directed by Ali Samadi Ahadi, 2008).

ANKE RETZLAFF studied music at Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media and acting at Rostock University of Music and Drama. She was nominated for the 2013 New Faces Award for her lead in the film *Puppet* (directed by Sebastian Kutzli, 2013). In 2013, she played in Corinna Harfouch's and Frank Raddatz's stage production *Dreizehn Drei Dreizehn* at HAU, Berlin. Most recently, she was seen onstage in *Ein Fest bei Baba Dengiz* at GRIPS Theater, Berlin (2017), and from December 2017 will play a lead role in the TV detective series *Über die Grenze*.

JENS SCHÄFER studied acting in Frankfurt am Main. In 1990, he made his stage debut as Oswald in Robert Wilson's staging of *Lear* at Schauspiel Frankfurt. He has played roles in numerous productions at Staatstheater Darmstadt, Schauspiel Frankfurt, Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg, and Deutsches Theater Berlin. In addition to working as a theater director since 1999, he has appeared as an actor in several film and TV productions.

Casting: Lydia Ziemke



# HOW CLOSE COULD WE GET TO THE LIGHT AND SURVIVE?

RABIH MROUÉ

In Lebanon, a country subject to upheaval since its inception, only one thing has remained stable: the continuous inter-penetrability of politics and religion, Rabih Mroué asserts. After the end of the Civil War in 1990, a new generation of artists felt the need to unpack history beyond its emptied propagandistic and political takeover. This allowed the rise of a format today widely known as “lecture performance.” With a series of “non-academic lectures,” Rabih Mroué invites Lebanese artists and writers to reflect upon today’s ongoing eruptions of violence in the region in light of a heavy historical legacy. By using this term, the program highlights its origin from an academic context, yet deploys the format as a strategy of artistic research to question the very authority of institutional restrictions and to investigate the fabrication of truth.

5–8 pm

## KEYNOTE

Discursive Management of a Paralyzed System: Communitarianism in Lebanon  
Ahmad Beydoun

In Lebanon, for a long time, the division of society along communitarian and confessional lines has played the major role in its sociopolitical system. Ahmad Beydoun examines the recent changes in the political economy of communitarian discourse in Lebanon: since just before the Civil War from 1975 to 1990, in a climate of deep distrust, the persistent institutionalization of each one of the religious communities in Lebanon has been compounded by the suppression of political competition. This phenomenon has considerably strengthened the community representatives while weakening and often paralyzing state power, yet not mitigating intercommunity rivalries. What can be concluded from such developments for the unity of a society that is based on multi-belonging?

AHMAD BEYDOUN is a historian and sociologist. Until 2007, he was Professor of Sociology at the Lebanese University, Beirut, as well as a visiting lecturer in various universities throughout France. He has led and participated in cultural and scientific projects, organizations, and encounters in Lebanon as well as in over twenty other countries. He has published over fifteen books on subjects ranging from Lebanon's society and political system to Arabic cultural and linguistic issues, in addition to literary works and translations. His works include *Al-Rabi' al-fa'et* (Le printemps manqué: la détresse des nations arabes, 2016) and *Le Liban: Itinéraires dans une guerre incivile* (1993).

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Do I Know You?  
Lina Majdalanie

Lina Majdalanie explores the origins and political, social, and ethical implications of prosopagnosia, which describes the inability to memorize and recognize faces. Based on her own experience of having difficulties with remembering faces, she questions the implications of prosopagnosia within a society, the political and historical legacies of which are entwined with the metaphorical narratives of the face itself: with Lebanon's declaration of independence in 1943, the country was proclaimed as having an "Arab face." Only later, in the post-war period, this narrative was altered into Lebanon being understood as a full-fledged "Arab country." Intertwining the personal with the political, Majdalanie explores on what grounds strategies of identification, categorization, and recognition are being deployed or can happen.

LINA MAJDALANIE is a performer, theater director, and author. She has created numerous works, i.a. *Photo-Romance* (2009), *Biokhraphia* (2002), and the film *I had a dream, mom* (2006) as well as the digital project *Lina Saneh Body-P-Arts Project* (2007). She was a member of the curriculum committee for the Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut and has taught at the HEAD – Haute école d'art et de design in Geneva, at DasArts in Amsterdam, and at Goethe University Frankfurt. In 2009/2010, Majdalanie was a fellow at the International Research Center Interweaving Performance Cultures at Freie Universität Berlin.



## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Dance and the Vernacular

Akram Zaatari

The development of online diffusion platforms and the advent of accessible technologies allowed people to make their own images without the need of a photographer. Nowadays, the vernacular theater that used to unfold in a photographic studio and was registered on silver sensitized gelatin takes place on YouTube. If in the past people's attitudes in the studio left us with photographic records including fashionable, popular and even iconic desired poses, they present us today with more than just single snapshots. If the first capitalized on the stillness of a single moment, the second capitalizes on body choreography and a time-based narrative. Akram Zaatari reflects on the concomitant recurring narratives that are found in YouTube videos of people recording themselves as "scripts" or simply a form of dance: such scripts are at once, ways of imagining oneself, of communicating to others, and of reacting to dominant images, social codes, and politics.

AKRAM ZAATARI is an artist and co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation. His work, comprised of numerous films and videos, books, and installations of photographic material, pursues a range of interconnected themes, subjects, and practices related to excavation, political resistance, the lives of former militants, the legacy of an exhausted left, intimacies among men, the circulation of images in times of war, and the play of tenses inherent to various letters that have been lost, found, buried, discovered, or otherwise delayed in reaching their destinations. Zaatari's work has been exhibited i.a. at the 55th Venice Biennial (2013), documenta 13, Kassel (2012), and 13th Istanbul Biennial (2011) as well as at The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2013), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2008), and Tate Modern, London (2003).

8.30–11 pm

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Short Cuts

Hoda Barakat

We cannot leave from nowhere, asserts Hoda Barakat. Starting from Lebanon's recent history, Barakat turns to her own experience of leaving her country—as so many have—during the time of the Civil War: while the country's survival up to the present day has remained a tightrope walk due to its religious and sectarian constitution, the everyday experience of its people is characterized by an uncertainty mirroring this predicament. One may have left for distant shores, but still there is a need for a point of departure to cling to. By revisiting places, famous or not, by recomposing proper names, well-known or not, Barakat attempts a patchwork approach to this condition: near yet so far away, strong yet so powerless, well-fed yet so enfeebled, proud and yet so sick of being attached to this country.

HODA BARAKAT is a novelist and journalist whose literary work engages with the everyday life in Civil War Lebanon. She is one of the most original voices in modern Arabic literature and the author of five novels, i.a. *Disciples of Passion* (2005), *The Tiller of Waters* (2004), and *The Stone of Laughter* (1990). Barakat holds a degree in French literature from the Lebanese University, Beirut, and was, from 2011 to 2012, fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. She has received numerous awards for her literary work, i.a. the Al-Naqid Literature Prize (1990) and the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature (2000). In 2015, she was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize. Her new novel *Letters of the Last Nights* will be published in fall 2017.

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

An Additional Continent?

Joana Hadjithomas &amp; Khalil Joreige

A forgotten Lebanese space program of the 1960s, the complex geopolitical world of internet spams and scams in a post-digital age, and the potentials of poetry facing chaos are among the main topics of recent works by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. In this contribution, they present their research focused on artistic and cinematographic narration and question the writing of history and the construction of imaginaries as well as explore the prevalent notions of territory, cosmopolitanism, and contemporaneity.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS and KHALIL JOREIGE collaborate as filmmakers and artists, producing cinematic and visual artworks that intertwine. For the last fifteen years, they have focused on the images and representations of their home country, Lebanon, and have questioned the fabrication of imaginaries in the region and beyond. Their feature film *Je veux voir* (I Want to See), starring Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroué, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008. In 2012, they presented their feature documentary *The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Race*, and a series of artistic installations connected to it. Their artworks have been exhibited i.a. at 3rd Kochi-Muziris Biennial (2016), 56th Venice Biennial (2015), and 9th Gwangju Biennial (2012). They have presented solo shows at Haus der Kunst, Munich (2016/17), the Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates (2016), MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge (2016), and Jeu de Paume, Paris (2016). Recently, they have been nominated for the 2017 Marcel Duchamp Prize and will display their new work at Centre Pompidou, Paris, in fall 2017.

5–7 pm

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Sweet Talk

Walid Raad

“In the past few years, I have had a hard time finding my way to my own thoughts without passing through the writings and concepts of Jalal Toufic. In some instances, when reading his books, I sense that he is transcribing my internal monologue with his own words. How did he access it? Did I let him in?” (Walid Raad)

WALID RAAD is an artist and a Professor of Art in The Cooper Union, New York. Raad’s works include *The Atlas Group*, a fifteen-year project between 1989 and 2004 about the contemporary history of Lebanon, and the ongoing projects *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* and *Sweet Talk: Commissions* (Beirut). Raad’s works have been shown in the Louvre, Paris, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, Festival d’Automne, Paris, Homeworks I and III, Beirut, and documenta 11 and documenta 13, Kassel.

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

I Want to Be a Party

Mounira Al Solh

Inspired by pages on Facebook of second-hand items sold by Syrians and Lebanese in Lebanon as well as in the region, Mounira Al Solh reflects on the ongoing impact that war and crisis have on people. Based on her previous work—a series of anecdotes, personal stories, and semi-fictions, captured in paintings and embroideries—Al Solh recollects how her family members had to sell some of their belongings to escape wars in Syria, Lebanon, and the region from as early as the 1940s to the present day: selling objects enabled people to flee or to survive a few more weeks under curfew. In personalizing disasters and in connecting networks over time, spaces, countries, objects, and in the imagination, this work reflects an ongoing and growing crisis.

MOUNIRA AL SOLH is an artist who works with video and video installations, painting and drawing, embroidery, and performative gestures. Irony and self-reflexivity are central strategies for her work, which explores feminist issues, tracks patterns of micro-history, is socially engaged, and can be political and escapist all at once. She studied painting at the Lebanese University in Beirut and Fine Arts at Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam where she was also Research Resident at Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten. Her work has been shown i.a. at documenta 14, Athens/Kassel (2017), 56th Venice Biennial (2015), The New Museum’s Triennial, New York (2012), Manifesta 8, Murcia (2010/11), and 11th Istanbul Biennial (2009). In 2018, her solo show *If I Can’t Dance I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution* will be shown at the Art Institute of Chicago.

7.30–11pm

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Bird Watching

Lawrence Abu Hamdan

In this live audio essay, surveillance, racist violence, and illegal incarceration are the instruments of an aural inquiry. It focuses on Abu Hamdan's acoustic investigation into the prison of Saydnaya, 25 kilometers north of Damascus. Being inaccessible to independent observers, the memories of those who survive are the only resource available from which to learn of the violations taking place there. As the capacity of detainees to see anything was highly restricted, the prisoners developed an acute sensitivity to sound. Abu Hamdan reconstructs the prison's architecture and events through ear-witness interviews and invites us to listen to the threshold of experience where sounds are remembered as images, where objects have unexpected echoes, and where silence becomes language.

LAWRENCE ABU HAMDAN is an artist, "private ear," and fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School, New York. His projects have taken the form of audiovisual installations, performances, graphic works, photography, Islamic sermons, cassette tape compositions, potato chip packets, essays, and lectures. His interest in sound and its intersection with politics originates from his background in DIY music. He has made audio analyses for legal investigations at the UK Asylum Tribunal and advocacy for organizations such as Amnesty International and Defence for Children International. The artist's forensic audio investigations are conducted as part of his research for Forensic Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he is also a PhD candidate.

## LECTURE PERFORMANCE

Sand in the Eyes

Rabih Mroué

Rabih Mroué explores the image politics of Islamist recruiting videos in the German state of Hesse. Aimed at recruiting mainly teenagers and young people, these videos are characterized by formats and image styles that correspond with popular viewing habits among youth growing up in Europe, while deliberately testing the limits of what one wants to see and stomach. Based on research material comprised of both recruiting videos and conversations with officers of the German Intelligence Services, Mroué asks not only what these videos reveal about their producers or the videos' capacity to engage young people for the means of Islamist propaganda, but also questions the politics inherent in dealing with these propaganda videos from the point of view of the state and society.

RABIH MROUÉ is a theater director, actor, visual artist, and playwright. Taking the form of theater pieces as well as video and installation art, his work employs both fiction and in-depth analysis as a tool for engaging with the interpretation of histories, the politics of truth, and the role visual and media cultures play therein. He is a contributing editor for *The Drama Review / TDR* (New York) and co-founder of the Beirut Art Center (BAC). From 2012 to 2015, Mroué was a fellow at the International Research Center Interweaving Performance Cultures at Freie Universität Berlin. He is theater director at Münchner Kammerspiele, Munich and has created numerous works, i.a. *Rima Kamel* (2017), *Ode to Joy* (2015), and *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012). His works have been performed and exhibited internationally including at CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid (2013/14), The ICP Triennial, MoMa, New York (2013), and documenta 13, Kassel (2012).

## ROUND TABLE

with Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Hoda Barakat, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Lina Majdalanie, Walid Raad, Mounira Al Solh, Akram Zaatari  
 moderated by Ahmad Beydoun and Rabih Mroué

*Why Are We Here Now? 3 Weekends with Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, Rabih Mroué* is organized by the Department Literature and Humanities.

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**Artists and Curators:** Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, Rabih Mroué  
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## Why Are We Here Now?

How can the past be inscribed into the present not as a relict, but as lived experience “here and now”? Adania Shibli, Mohammad Al Attar, and Rabih Mroué investigate key discourses that have underlined political, social, and cultural transformations over the past century in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.

They deliberately avoid the grand narratives like progress, civilization, or orientalism. Instead of generating knowledge about an irrevocable truth, they invoke new perspectives, seemingly minor details, undetected connections, and narratives not yet explored.

In *After the Wildly Improbable*, writer and cultural researcher Adania Shibli follows the traces of the Ottoman railway to disclose its potentialities as a witness to major shifts in the 20th century. Motivated by a desire not to yield to a language of loss, playwright Mohammad Al Attar asks with *Aleppo. A Portrait of Absence*, how it is possible to reconstruct Aleppo based on people’s testimonies about their beloved places in the city. Finally, with a series of “non-academic lectures” entitled *How Close Could We Get to the Light and Survive?* artist Rabih Mroué endeavors to find out how art can establish new forms to speak about the complexity of history.

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