

Disrupting the Binary, Reclaiming the Narrative:
The Representation of the Eastern 'Other' in Shirin Neshat's *Turbulent* and *Rapture* and
Emily Jacir's *Memorial to the 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and
Occupied by Israel in 1948*

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Introduction

The Iranian artist Shirin Neshat and the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir are often referred to, occasionally in conjunction with one another, as members of Generation 1.5—immigrants whose identity is split between their homeland and their adopted country in Europe or America. Neshat was born in Iran in 1957 and attended art school in California and New York during the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution.¹ She could not visit her homeland until 1990, and was ultimately banned from returning to Iran after her art practice in New York took up the subject of the post-revolution Iranian woman. Jacir, on the other hand, was born in 1970 in Bethlehem, and spent her early life in Saudi Arabia and Italy before moving to Texas and then Tennessee for her BA and MFA, respectively.² Until 2003, she lived in New York, but now splits her time between Italy and the city of Ramallah on the West Bank.³ Crucially, because she holds an American passport, she is one of few Palestinians who can enter Israel. Despite this, by virtue of Israel's geopolitical occupation, she is still very much an artist in exile. The majority of Neshat and Jacir's work responds to their native cultures, exploring themes of diaspora, Otherness, and division, particularly in relation to the Western narrative of the East-West binary that pervades the countries where they now live. These themes manifest themselves most clearly in three specific pieces: *Turbulent* (1998) and *Rapture* (1999), two early video works by Neshat, and Jacir's *Memorial to the 418 Villages Destroyed*,

¹ Bill Horrigan, "A Double Tour" in *Shirin Neshat: Two Installations* edited by Bill Horrigan (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 2000), 10.

² Martin Sturm, introduction to *belongings* edited by Stella Rollig and Genoveva Rückert (Linz, Austria: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria, 2003), 3.

³ John Menick, "Undiminished Returns: The Work of Emily Jacir 1998-2002," in *belongings* edited by Stella Rollig and Genoveva Rückert (Linz, Austria: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria, 2003), 32.

Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948 (2001), an installation piece consisting of a burlap refugee tent. All three of these works were created while the artists were living in the U.S., and are almost always exclusively shown outside of Iran and Palestine.

In this thesis, I will argue that Neshat's video works and Jacir's tent piece⁴ employ two distinct processes of representing the 'Eastern other' for primarily American and European audiences: Neshat's is a dialectic one, using a system of hyper-aestheticized divisive binaries that dialectically break down into a network of ambiguities, while Jacir takes a factographic approach that is unequivocally political and pedagogical in everything from its deadpan materiality to its title. These two processes, I argue, are not merely formal decisions, but are tailored specifically to the sociopolitical circumstances of Iran and Palestine, respectively. This thesis will be broken into three sections examining the means of these approaches. My first chapter will provide an in-depth visual analysis of all three works and will examine the way in which their hyper-aestheticization or factographic approach construct their processes of representation. My second chapter will discuss Neshat and Jacir's use of the body, and the way in which their works' immersive viewer experiences make the spectator's body a site that questions the boundaries enacted by the East-West binary. Crucially, this chapter will also examine the ways in which Jacir's tent piece begins to operate dialectically—though still in a very different mode from Neshat's videos—by using Western bodies to invoke

⁴ Because Jacir has repeatedly remarked that the title's lengthiness is a means of preventing press and critics from avoiding or obscuring the true meaning of the piece, I will take this significance into account, acknowledging the connotations of the full title in the visual analysis and interpretation of the work. However, since brevity is needed, I will regularly refer to the work as "the tent piece" (as Jacir herself often does) rather than truncating it to *Memorial*.

the presence of Palestinian bodies within the tent. Finally, my third chapter will look at the two women and their oeuvres as products of two very different exiles, and will examine the ethics of the appropriation of the exilic condition for the Western gaze. This chapter and the conclusion will ultimately attempt to provide a critical stance on Neshat and Jacir's relative success of their objectives.

It is important to note that this thesis is not attempting monolithically to collapse Iran and Palestine together as a generalized, mythic 'Middle East,' nor is it attempting to falsely posit Neshat and Jacir as artists produced by and working within the same generalized 'Middle Eastern' culture. The very content of the works at hand disprove this homogenization: *Turbulent* and *Rapture* are in direct response to the Orientalization of Iranian gender roles in relation to Islamic culture, while Jacir's tent piece is an attempt to memorialize a Palestinian trauma that has been manipulated and ignored by Western political narratives. In addition, Neshat comes from a Persian culture, while Jacir is Arab. They are embedded in specific histories, and to conflate the two would be to play into the West's conception of a homologized Middle Eastern world. That said, Neshat and Jacir do share important common ground: they are both artists of exile living in Western countries, and their work is in response to these diasporas as well as the condition of living in a place with a monolithic conception of their homelands. The choice to bring them together is precisely because their work responds to the "Middle Eastern" narrative created by the West, appropriating and addressing it as a means of intervention.

Chapter One: Film vs. Fabric

In *Turbulent*, Neshat responds to Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini's policy against women singing or performing music publically.⁵ Viewers enter a darkened space in which two screens occupy opposing walls of the gallery room. On one side (henceforth known as Screen A), the camera pans over men in white shirts sitting in an auditorium before cutting to a static shot of the audience from the stage. On the other side (Screen B), the camera does the same panning movement in the same auditorium with empty seats. A man in a white shirt (played by Shoja Azari) walks onto the stage in Screen A, facing the viewer so his back is turned to the similarly dressed men in the audience, who applaud him (fig. 1). Simultaneously, a woman in a black chador (played by Sussan Deyhim) walks onto the stage in Screen B (fig. 2). Immediately, a visual distinction is made between the woman's heavy black garment, which covers her entire body except for her face and hands, and the man's European-style white button-down shirt and slacks. The camera is set up in the same shot as Screen A, but the woman turns toward her empty 'audience' so the camera/viewer cannot see her face.

She remains in that position as the man sings a traditional Persian love song (accompanied by music, though we see no band or instruments) for his audience, who again applaud when he finishes. The man turns to bow, then slowly turns back to face the camera, staring intently into its lens, creating a gaze that transcends the assumed spatiality of the auditorium within the interiority of the film and crosses through the literal, exterior space of the gallery and onto Screen B. This constructs an unseen, fictional space, in which the man and his audience face the mirror image of their

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rissoli International Publications, 2010), 9.

auditorium where the chador-clad woman turns her back to them. The woman begins to sing, emanating a complex but wordless melody. As her aria builds in intensity and volume, the camera of Screen B slowly pans around her body, finally showing her face (fig. 3). From here, the camerawork becomes more fluid, never holding one shot statically but circling around Deyhim so we see her body set against the black, void-like background of the stage behind her or the empty auditorium in front of her. The sounds she make range from drawn-out operatic notes to chant-like warbling to high-pitched screeching. For the last thirty seconds, the woman ends her song and stands in silence as the men on Screen A maintain their gaze, transfixed. In a gallery setting, the video then loops and begins its nine-minute duration again.

Rapture, a video often considered to be a sequel to *Turbulent*, employs the same two-channel format, with large groups of women and men on opposing screens. The camerawork in *Rapture* is more complex, using cinematic cuts and angles to build a more deliberately defined narrative. The men on Screen A wear the same European-style garments as those in *Turbulent*, and move throughout a fortress replete with lookout spots, cannons, and a maze-like architecture (fig. 4). On Screen B, a group of chador-clad women, no longer represented by the solitary figure of Deyhim, occupy a natural, desert-like landscape. The men and women move as groups within their respective spaces, performing arbitrary tasks with a sense of purpose and concentration that give their collective actions ritualistic connotations: in one instance, the men systematically unroll Persian carpets (fig. 5) while the women arrange their bodies in a triangular formation, lift their palms to the sky, and *kell*, or chant (fig. 6).⁶ A large portion of the action on

⁶ Horrigan, "A Double Tour," 12.

Screen B shows the women occupying a barren beach landscape (fig. 7). Eventually they begin struggling to push a wooden boat from the beach to the sea. When the boat reaches the interstitial space of the shore, where the sand meets the tide, several of the women climb into the vessel and raise their hands in an ambiguous gesture. The camera watches them float away slowly, becoming smaller and smaller within the frame of the composition. On Screen A, the men gather at the edge of the fortress, which looks out onto the sea, and wave their arms above their heads.

From a purely visual perspective, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* establish an extensive series of oppositions, all symbolic illustrations of the primary binary of men and women. Both films are shot in black and white, a formal decision that emulates the emergence of the movie industry in America and the ensuing golden age of Hollywood films, but also visually emphasizes the stark differences between light and dark elements of her videos, divulging them as conscious aesthetic choices of locations, lighting, and costumes (particularly when shown in abundance, as in the black chadors of the women and the white shirts of the men in *Rapture*). The division of the narrative into two screens on opposing walls creates a physical binary between the realm of men and the realm of women. From here, the two films break down further into specific visual oppositions: the women are covered by their chadors, while the men are relatively uncovered in their European garments; the presence of the audience of men in *Turbulent* creates a sense of fullness that contrasts with the empty auditorium in front of Deyhim; and the contrasting landscapes in *Rapture* create an opposition between city/culture and nature. Also in *Rapture*, the many actions of the men are rigidly performed, as though they are systematic steps in a dance or a ritual. The women, on the other hand, complete their

actions more fluidly, their movement paralleling the uneven natural landscape they occupy. As they walk along the beach, they move independently yet as a group: each individual actress is not prescribed the exact same movements as her peers, but they all walk in the same direction (fig. 7). However, Neshat does block the women in several constructed formations; they organize themselves into a triangle and *kell*, and in a later shot they arrange themselves in haphazard lines on their hands and knees in a ritual prayer pose. Still, the reverberation of their chant and the dark void of their black chadors moving fluidly in the wind undermine the rigidity of these poses.

This system of visual oppositions represents the aesthetic symptom of Neshat's dialectical process: because her work seeks to expose the reductive binaries of Orientalism through their visual manifestations, it is also in part predicated upon them. This introduces the opposition of the East (the Orient, the other) and West (the Occident, the norm): the binary of Muslim men and Muslim women cannot be made without invoking in Western viewers the assumption of Islam's subjugation of women, a postulation predicated on the assumption that women enjoy better treatment in the West than in the East. This distinction plays directly into Edward Said's notion of Orientalism as a Western invention to justify and uphold white supremacy. However, Western art historical scholarship has frequently avoided interrogating why and how Neshat uses these binaries, instead taking them at face value as confirmation of the assumed differences between East and West.⁷ In order to avoid these contemporary Orientalized traps, it is imperative to acknowledge these binaries, recognize the artist's attempt to

⁷ Dabashi, "Transcending the Boundaries of an Imaginative Geography," 61.

make a critical intervention upon them, and, as this thesis will later do, assess whether or not she succeeds.

However, it is also important to note here that *Turbulent* and *Rapture* are equally critical of the actual, lived oppression of Iranian women as they are the Western conception of Eastern difference; neither video work attempts to absolve Iran of blame, nor do they suggest that a binary system of gender roles does not exist at all in Iranian culture. In a 2010 Ted Talk in Washington D.C., Neshat discusses returning to Iran after the revolution, saying “I found a country that was totally ideological and that I didn’t recognize anymore.”⁸ She notes the risks of “censorship, harassment, arrest, torture—at times, execution” for artists in Iran, condemning the Iranian government for “[doing] every crime in order to stay in power.”⁹ However, she also notes the importance of “being critical of the West...[and] the image that is constructed about us, about our women, about our politics, about our religion.”¹⁰ With this in mind, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* can be read as efforts to negotiate this double-edged sword of lived Iranian oppression and the Western conception of it, which suggests a fundamentalism that does not necessarily exist beyond a governmental level. While the video works attempt to suggest a network of ambiguities regarding Iranian culture and gender roles, the assumptions they attempt to contradict are not only those of the West, but also the ideology of the oppressive Iranian regime.

The dialectical processes of *Turbulent and Rapture* play out via their hyper-aestheticization, aided by their specific medium and materiality. The two video works

⁸ Shirin Neshat, “Art in Exile,” (speech, Washington D.C., December 2010), TedX TedWomen.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

emphasize the artifice of the assumed binary structure of Iranian gender roles by emphasizing the artifice of the filmic medium itself, particularly in response to the conventions of mainstream Western cinema. In her treatise on video art theory, Nancy Westgeest writes of the notion of video's assumed reality: the camera, as a technical apparatus, seems to be a "neutral recording device, with little more evident scope for creativity than a copying machine."¹¹ However, as Walter Benjamin writes, this apparent neutrality becomes an illusion in a cinematic context, in which "the finished film is the exact antithesis of a work created at a single stroke."¹² Here he refers to the conventional qualities of the filmic medium and its editing process—actors' performances, cuts, zooming, close-ups, multiple takes, etc.—which allow a film to become a work of "montage,"¹³ a carefully edited and intentionally fabricated object, not a neutral duplicate of reality.

Neshat adopts these formal techniques of narrative cinema, but allows them to operate disobediently. Most significantly, *Rapture* and *Turbulent* appropriate the technique of intercutting¹⁴ but do not fully implement it, instead maintaining the original separation of the shot and counter-shot by placing them on opposite screens. Her audience is forced to alternate their attention between the two screens in order to "acquire the continuity that conventional cinema provides via the pushy consolation of

¹¹ Nancy Westgeest, *Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach*, (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 3.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in vol. 3 of *Selected Writings 1935-1938*, ed. Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴ The splicing together of two shots in a way that creates the illusion of a back-and-forth dialogue between two characters, according to Horrigan ("A Double Tour," 12).

montage,”¹⁵ in turn losing visual information from one screen as they gain it from the other—effectively counteracting intercutting’s constructive purpose of creating an illusion of reality. Other appropriated elements of mainstream cinema achieve the same effect: the male actors’ movements are always stilted and noticeably systematic; the black and white format highlights the conscious aesthetic choices of settings, lighting, and costumes; and the spaces the works present are either imaginary (as in the doubling of the auditorium in *Turbulent*) or conspicuously and theatrically chosen (*Rapture* was shot in Morocco, in a location that looks more like a staged movie set of a vaguely ‘Middle Eastern’ landscape than a specific geographical locale¹⁶). The result is a visual mythologization of the narrative of gender roles in Iran. By appropriating the conventions of narrative cinema and emphasizing their artifice, Neshat attempts to dialectically overemphasize her videos’ strict binaries in order to expose them as potentially arbitrary.

However, it is important to note that this reading of Neshat’s work as a dialectical operation does not always succeed. As discussed earlier, American and European art history and criticism tend to take the binarism of Neshat’s early video work at face value. Hamid Dabashi writes that this criticism reads Neshat’s work as “tak[ing] advantage of and thus reforc[ing] the existing stereotype of Muslim women and as a result perpetuat[ing] that image.”¹⁷ In effect, it accuses Neshat of self-orientalizing and “aestheticizing and thus celebrating what she ought to be criticizing and subverting.”¹⁸ As this chapter has discussed, *Turbulent* and *Rapture*’s hyper-stylization attempts to self-reflexively emphasize their own construction, in turn challenging the rigid binaries they

¹⁵ Horrigan, “A Double Tour,” 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Dabashi, “Bordercrossings,” 43.

¹⁸ Ibid.

present. However, this response to Neshat's work does beg the question: what is the use value of a critique that is so easily misinterpreted by its typical viewer? Where the videos' hyper-aestheticization is meant to expose their artifice through the appropriation of conventional cinematic techniques, it results in a work so slick and professionally produced that it begins to resemble mainstream cinema or pop music videos. Thus, the Western art historical response to Neshat is not necessarily an uninformed or critically disengaged reading of her work, but rather a result of the videos' ability to be easily and consistently taken at face value. The reading of *Turbulent* and *Rapture* that this thesis takes acknowledges the potential complexities they produce, but it is equally important to recognize the way in which these videos run the very real risk of reinforcing the very binaries they purport to subvert. This problem, which is crucial to an analysis of the two works, will be discussed again in the third chapter.

While the construction of Neshat's works rely on a complex system of binaries and filmic narrative structures, Jacir's *Memorial to the 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948* is straightforward in its aesthetic approach: it consists of an off-white burlap refugee tent, measuring approximately 11.5 feet in length, 8 feet in width, and 10 feet at its peak height (fig. 8). The tent is rectangular, with an internal structure of metal poles that create a peaked triangular roof; its form's simplicity is reminiscent of a child's rudimentary drawing of a house. In the front, the burlap is divided, creating two flaps that can be pinned back to create an entrance. On the remaining three sides, words are embroidered onto the burlap in a consistent, stencil-like typeface (fig. 9). As the title suggests, these are the names of the Palestinian villages destroyed during the 1948 Palestinian war, in which 780,000

Palestinians were displaced.¹⁹ From inside the tent, the ends of the embroidery thread dangle down from the burlap (fig. 10).

The tent piece was created during Jacir's residency in the MoMA PS1 Studio program in the spring of 2001. Initially, the artist attempted to embroider the 418 names herself, but soon realized she would be unable to complete the project before the program's May exhibition. An open call for embroiderers yielded a motley crew of volunteers ("Palestinians, Israelis, Americans, Egyptians, Syrians, Yemenis, Spaniards"²⁰), adding a collaborative dimension to what would have been an otherwise isolated individual process. In a 2003 interview with the cultural critic Stella Rollig, Jacir indicates that the tent was unfinished by the May 2001 exhibition (see fig. 9), saying "the tent was made...with a certain community of people, and it was specifically about being there at that moment with those people and that history."²¹ Rollig asks her if she thought about continuing to stitch with collaborators every time the piece was exhibited, to which Jacir replied that she wanted the tent to "function like a document, a photograph...[to] show the remains of something that happened."²²

The materiality of the tent itself is equally important: it is not merely a facsimile, but a factographic readymade, an actual refugee tent that could be found in a camp for people displaced by war, politics, or natural disasters. According to a short essay written by a friend of Jacir's who volunteered for the project, Jacir bought the tent from an

¹⁹ Menick, "Undiminished Returns," 20.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stella Rollig, Interview with Emily Jacir in *belongings* edited by Stella Rollig and Genoveva Rückert (Linz, Austria: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria, 2003), 15.

²² Ibid., 16.

“obscure supplier”²³ online, enacting the process of purchasing and setting it up. Though it cannot be confirmed in print or online sources whether this tent is indeed the exact kind used to house displaced Palestinians in 1948, a Google Image search for “Palestinian refugee tent” brings up an abundance of social documentary images of refugee tents comparable to that in Jacir’s tent piece (fig. 11). Similar web searches for present-day refugee tents (like those used in Turkey for the Syrian refugee crisis of recent years) show tents nearly identical to Jacir’s, suggesting her tent is indeed a readymade product of a contemporary refugee tent distributor (fig. 12). Her tent is made of plain, off-white burlap, and is utilitarian in a dispassionate way. This sense of unfeeling is not to say that the tent enacts in its materiality a sense of solemnity or gravity, as a postmodern memorial like Maya Lin’s Vietnam War memorial might, but rather that its materiality alone attempts to resist emotion altogether. However, this is not to say that the tent’s aesthetic approach does not have an emotional impact on the viewer; on the contrary, the deadpan quality of its materiality serves to amplify for the spectator the factography of the historical narrative at stake, and thus, by extension, the sheer scope of its historical trauma.

The motive for the tent piece’s stripped down aestheticization is embedded within its general context of exile and displacement. At the beginning of his book *The Migrant Image*, art historian T.J. Demos asks the question, “How is it possible to represent artistically life severed from representation politically?”²⁴ As Chapter Three will demonstrate, this question resonates on an ethical and moral plane, but Demos initially poses it on a literal level: through what means—aesthetically, materially, conceptually—

²³ <http://oznik.com/art/010501.html>

²⁴ T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xv.

can an artist best represent the experiences and bodies of those living under the conditions of displacement and exile? Here, the tent as a factographic readymade functions as a literal representation of an apparatus of the exilic condition. As a readymade, the tent's aesthetic is deadpan; the conditions of the refugee camp preclude any stylization, providing nothing beyond the bare necessities of survival. Jacir's ensuing transformation of the tent into an artwork follows suit, using stencils and a monochromatic color palette to mimic these circumstances.

Beyond the literal-symbolic paralleling of exile and its representation, Jacir uses a stripped down aesthetic to respond to the particular historical-political context that created (and continues to maintain) the Palestinian exilic condition and the specific Zionist history that conceals the true effects of its occupation. Demos discusses the erasure of the Palestinian narrative in *The Migrant Image*:

Because of the polemical terms of the political conflict, the violent origins of the creation of Israel have been subjected to much denial in Israel in the West, in favor of a whitewashed narrative that claims...that Palestinian villagers 'voluntarily' left their homeland during the conflict of 1948, a mythologization that minimizes Israeli responsibility for the violent events of the war.²⁵

The tent piece's deadpan aesthetic, in effect, is a direct effort to counteract the continuous mythologization of Palestine's narrative; in the face of Zionist revisions to the historical record, Jacir has no choice but to abandon a mythical or romanticized aesthetic in order to privilege the factic and the factographic. According to Demos, her tent relies heavily on "language's transparency and directness," unable to engage in the "frequent artistic focus on semiotic play and representational multiplicity"—like that in Neshat's work, for instance—because it cannot afford to "blur the boundaries between fact and

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

fiction.”²⁶ While the claim that Jacir cannot afford to blur boundaries between fact and fiction rings true, it is important to note here that Demos’s conception of language as “direct” and “transparent” is problematic and improbable; language, like all semiotic sign systems, can never be transparent, neutral, or objective. In fact, Jacir’s use of language in the tent piece directly contradicts Demos’s notion: the tent piece must literally spell out the names of the 418 Palestinian villages in order to contradict their erasure from geographical maps, most of which contain the new Israeli names given to these locales. These words are not transparent or direct at all; on the contrary, the signifiers at hand are in constant semiotic dispute, precisely because their referents (i.e. the land on which the villages once stood) are in political dispute. In order to represent the mere facts of the Israeli occupation of these lands, Jacir has to focus attention onto a specific set of signifiers—the transliterated Arabic names of the villages.

Thus, the specific political situation of Palestine “leaves no room...for ambiguity,” forcing Jacir to take a factographic approach in both her use of materiality and language (which here are intertwined). The tent’s lengthy title lays bare exactly what the piece is: a refugee tent, covered in the names of the villages destroyed, depopulated, and occupied by Israel. The crucial addition of the word “memorial” in the title didactically lays out the primary objective of the piece in its very name. More subtly, the use of the three verbs in conjunction with one another suggest a narrative chronology to the events while also actively defying the widely-used Zionist language of Israeli ‘independence.’ The embroidered words resist Orientalization: rather than use the Arabic script, the cities’ names are stenciled onto the burlap in their Westernized, Latin alphabet

²⁶ Ibid., 116.

versions. Though they may not carry semantic meaning to an uninformed Western viewer, they are legible, and their significance becomes clear in conjunction with the title of the piece. In denying the words an Orientalized aesthetic personality (or rather, by assigning them a neutralized and utilitarian character), the tent announces the destruction of these villages as statement of fact, didactically demanding the viewer to acknowledge this specific moment of history.

The use of embroidery brings a host of connotations to the tent piece. The lengthy process of forming each signifier in this way—using a needle and thread to make hundreds of stitches for each word—lends a sense of tenderness and deliberate craft to the utilitarian tent. Particularly because the tent was embroidered collaboratively, this process becomes ritualistic and meditative. The domestic femininity traditionally associated with embroidery thus renders ambiguous the stenciled form of the letters; when sewn with fabric thread onto burlap, the embroidered words highlight the tent’s materiality as a textile, rather than merely a sign or a document. This simultaneously endows the tent with a sense of domesticity while also highlighting its ineffectiveness as a shelter: the tent itself is nothing more than a textile, a category of domestic objects (e.g. drapery, an upholstered couch, a pillow, bedding, etc.) that belong exclusively within the interior of a home rather than the exterior. Such an inversion emphasizes the tent as a travesty of shelter, which this thesis will discuss further in Chapter Three.

The embroidered words thus function doubly as part of the shelter-as-textile as well as a written document of a historical event. This reliance on an “information-based use of language”²⁷ is mirrored by Jacir’s use of a factographic academic compendium as

²⁷ Ibid., 117.

empirical evidence for the narrative her tent presents. She took the name of the 418 towns from Walid Khalidi's historical study "All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948,"²⁸ making the tent a replica of a document of facticity, a new format for the communication of the same factual information. Khalidi's title, from which Jacir directly borrows, effectively lends "scholarly support" to the tent piece's own name.²⁹ Volunteers in Jacir's studio read the text in addition to embroidering, and when the tent was originally installed in PS1's Clocktower gallery in May 2001, Khalidi's compendium and a "day-by-day roster of sewing participants" were shown alongside it.³⁰ The tent thus functions as an evidentiary document of the Palestinian trauma as well as the literal process of the tent's creation in Jacir's studio.

The divergent aestheticizations of both Jacir's tent and Neshat's video works are paradigmatic manifestations of their opposing processes: where the latter appropriates and relies on a mythologization of Oriental aesthetics to produce a fictive exploration of Iranian gender roles, the former uses factography and a deadpan aesthetic in order to present a factic history. Where Jacir resists, Neshat gives in, embracing the Western aesthetic conception of the East. The result is, in *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, a visual experience that superficially corroborates an Orientalized reading of the spaces and people within the videos. As this chapter discusses, she attempts to undermine the rigid oppositional structure of Western misinterpretations of Iran through the extreme aestheticization of an artificial Iran, using aesthetic conceptions of the 'Middle East' to hyperbolically suggest their artifice. The result is an inconclusive series of ambiguities

²⁸ Menick, "Undiminished Returns," 24.

²⁹ Demos, 117

³⁰ Menick, 25.

and ambivalences that ultimately suggest the supposed rigidity of Iranian gender roles—and perhaps the notion of gender itself—are, in fact, arbitrary or at least contingent categorizations.

Jacir, however, does not have the space for ambiguity that Neshat does: to appropriate or hyperbolically emphasize the widely spread Zionist history of Israeli ‘independence’ would not perform a dialectical, liberatory intervention upon the Palestinian narrative. Because the mainstream narrative of the political conflict is already mythologized in a manner that actively exerts violence onto Palestinian bodies, Jacir has no choice but to eschew mythologization altogether and present the Palestinian narrative in a conclusive, factographic way. The pedagogical aspect of the tent piece is inherently embedded within this factographic approach; the history presented by the tent’s factic title, readymade materiality, and grounding in scholarly sources automatically becomes a tool of pedagogy when it presents a reputable narrative contradictory to that of Israeli independence.

Ultimately, where Neshat’s process is one of purposeful destabilization, Jacir’s is necessarily stabilizing: *Turbulent* and *Rapture* can present an ambivalent, open-ended conclusion as a means of disorienting the spectator’s subject position, but Jacir’s tent piece is forced to be steeped in documentary evidence in order for Western viewers to consider the legitimacy of its historical fact. This is complicated in both artists’ cases when their works begin to invoke the specific bodies of their spectators.

Chapter Two: Western Bodies and Eastern Bodies

In a gallery showing *Turbulent* or *Rapture*, Neshat corrupts the traditional film-viewing experience by spreading the narrative onto two distinct channels occupying opposing walls. As Westgeest notes, the “multi-channel video experience” was not invented by Neshat nor by video art in general, but it has generally been used as a means to present multiple streams of information simultaneously.³¹ However, Neshat negates this functionality of multi-channel video by placing the screens on opposing walls. A large block of multiple screens showing live tape from security cameras or a television control room may force its viewer to focus on one or two channels only, but the rest, ostensibly, would be in their peripheral vision at all times and could be easily viewed by simply refocusing their eyes onto them. With *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, this simple transfer of attention becomes problematized, with the viewer having to physically turn their body to complete the action.

This required participation by the spectator has two results: first, it creates a loss of information on one screen in order to gain information from the other (as discussed in the first chapter), and second, it requires a more extensive physical movement on the part of the spectator than a single-channel or a side-by-side multi-channel installation might. The operation of physically moving one’s body in order to watch the video transforms the passive act of watching and looking into an active operation. This, in turn, creates the spectator’s sudden awareness of their body and its position within the gallery. This is not active participation in the same way that closed-circuit video installations (like Bruce Nauman’s *Live/Taped Video Corridor*) reflect the real time and space of the gallery

³¹ Westgeest, *Video Art Theory*, 89.

itself,³² but rather an implication of the Western spectator's body in relation to the non-Western bodies shown on the screen. In *Turbulent*, when Azari and his audience stare at Deyhim, they also stare directly into the eyes of the viewers who face Screen A, creating a sense of physical confrontation between the filmic bodies and gallery bodies. The physical maneuvering required by the two-channel opposition performs a similar function to cinematic blocking; Neshat's deliberate positioning of the screens complicates the spectator's corporal placement within the room. The viewers themselves become actors within the space of the gallery, unsure of which screen they are meant to privilege with their attention.

The implication of Neshat's spectators' bodies simultaneously serves to emphasize the importance of the body within the narratives of the videos themselves. By virtue of splitting the screens into the world of men and the world of women, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* rely on the assumption of the male/female gender binary, which is automatically associated with the realm of the body. The sexual difference predicated by this binary manifests itself sensorially in the many ways mentioned earlier. Most of these oppositions are visually played out on the bodies of Neshat's actors. The men wear Western-style white shirts and black slacks, while the women are covered from head to toe in their black chadors, with only their eyes and hands showing. Here, the opposition of men's bodies and women's bodies act symbolically, representing the multiplicity of assumed gender disparity in Iranian society via the juxtaposition of uncovered and covered bodies. This is heightened by the way in which their clothes are manifestations of the gendered relationship to European and American imperialist power. Where the

³² Ibid., 91.

men adopt a uniform of contemporary European fashion, itself a symbol of Westernization, the women are dressed in a garment that, to Western eyes, is the most visible and paradigmatic signifier of Islamic fundamentalism.

Dabashi calls Neshat a “visual theorist of the body,” with the bodies within her videos being “the sites of critical contestations that create, seal, and sign them.”³³ With this, he refers not only to the Iranian conceptions of sexual difference, but also the Western interpretations of them, which project onto Muslim bodies contemporary Orientalist regarding sex and gender in Islamic societies. This is why the chador, and more broadly, the veil, becomes a particularly salient metaphor: because Muslim bodies are “already inscribed, constituted, defined, [and] veiled beyond recognition” by the West, the literal veiling of Neshat’s women is just a “slightly more exaggerated veneer of cultured bodies.”³⁴ The West assumes the veil to be an emblem of the Islamic oppression of women, and Neshat’s visual invocation of it—though not the main narrative topic of her videos—uses the chador’s “symbolically ambiguous imagery”³⁵ as a paradigm for her works’ broader implications of ambivalence and ambiguity.

In conjunction with the presence of the veil, the presence of the spectators’ bodies highlights the ambivalences of *Turbulent* and *Rapture*. The material opposition of the two channels creates an internal uncertainty for the viewer, who does not know where to look or when. In conjunction with the symbolic use of the bodies within the videos themselves, this exposes the relationship between Western spectators and Eastern actors. The viewer, unsure of their position within the gallery space, becomes over-aware of

³³ Dabashi, “Bordercrossings,” 45.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Horrigan, “A Double Tour,” 12.

their own body, which in turn creates an opposition between their suddenly obvious physicality and the ambivalent nature of a body shown through film, which is present but not material or tangible. This relationship parallels the distinction between the Western 'us' and the Eastern 'other:' while the viewer's Western body exists in the flesh, the Iranian bodies play out in a predetermined, constructed narrative on the screen, creating a psychological distance of the former to the latter. The spectator's awareness of such distance exposes the underlying Otherization of non-Western bodies already in place. As with her cinematic techniques, this is a deliberate intention of Neshat's dialectic process: it is only via the presence of the Western spectator's body that the videos are able to challenge the rigid binary of gender and gender roles projected onto the Iranian body by Orientalized thought and the repressive Iranian government alike.

However, the problematization of Neshat's spectators' bodies is not immediate; this dialectic process requires embedding the viewer within the narrative of the video and the space of the gallery in order for her interventionist gestures to take place. It is just that: a process, occurring over the period of time the viewer stays within the room, oscillating between the two screens and attempting to piece together the filmic narrative. Jacir, on the other hand, immediately problematizes her spectators' bodies as soon as they enter the gallery space. The presence of the tent as a readymade—that is to say, an actual refugee tent rather than a facsimile or an artist's reproduction—creates a literal boundary between the interior of the tent and the exterior. The tent is human-scaled, but in the most rudimentary way. It is an apparatus of the exilic condition; it provides the most basic form of shelter and nothing more. It is a last resort, a temporary structure that houses people who have no other place to go. Transposed into the space of the gallery, the tent's

fundamental form refuses any idealist aesthetics the institution might impose on it, instead bringing into the museum the situation of the Palestinian refugee crisis implied by the title. This, in turn, invokes the body of the viewer by presenting them with a human-scaled shelter that they can physically enter. Such an act, much like Neshat's two-channel installation, compels viewers to participate. However, unlike *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, in which viewers are placed in an ambiguous physical and psychological position, the tent piece's strict boundaries require viewers to be in one of two places—inside the tent, or outside the tent.

Outside the tent, the Western spectator is faced with the names of the Palestinian villages, legible in the Latin alphabet. By engaging with the museological apparatuses of the object label, which contains the piece's explicit title, and the accompanying Khalidi compendium, the viewer gains comprehension of the semantic meaning of the words. Thus, by simply reading the title of the piece and recognizing the embroidered words as names of villages, the spectator fulfills the work's initial pedagogical objective: to merely acknowledge the historical facticity of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. This recognition first occurs outside the tent, where the words are legible. By virtue of the work's human scale, the viewer's body is immediately involved, but its exterior position incriminates the viewer in context of the tent's political statement. The interior-exterior relationship of the tent mimics the bilateralism of the East-West boundary: the exterior of the tent, with its de-aestheticized materiality constructed primarily for the comprehension of a Western audience, marks the space of the Western outsider, the non-Palestinian. The interior of the tent, in which a displaced Palestinian could literally take refuge, represents the space of the East. By standing outside, the spectator is implicated as Western, aware

of their subject position by virtue of their body's location in relation to the tent. Like in Neshat's videos, this self-awareness of the spectator's body implicates them as a participant in the work, willing or not. If the spectator then decides to enter the tent, they effectively switch their subject position from an outsider to the symbolic position of a refugee within the tent. However, from the interior of the tent, the legibility of the embroidered words disappears altogether when they are viewed inside out, with dangling thread further obscuring their forms (fig. 10). Though the viewer can physically occupy the space of the East, their ability to read and process the tent's semantic meaning is withdrawn, suggesting the inability of the Western spectator to psychologically comprehend the Palestinian exilic subject position.

The tent as a readymade connects Jacir's work to larger implications of the concept of the camp, which artists Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri consider the "paradigm of our time,"³⁶ a result of a rapid and violent globalization. In a later chapter in *The Migrant Image*, Demos discusses the camp's various manifestations: internment camp (e.g. Guantanamo Bay), POW camps, Native American reservations, relief camps, et cetera. Though disparate in circumstance, these many iterations of the camp share a fundamental function in that they all "[reduce their] inhabitants to a state of political dispossession."³⁷ In effect, according to Demos, the camp as a whole is an apparatus of Foucauldian biopolitical power: the camp becomes a space in which a regime of authority can control the bodies within it.³⁸ In the case of a camp like Guantanamo Bay, this means a violent control over the life processes of its prisoners as a means of exercising

³⁶ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 225.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

jurisdiction over bodies that supposedly pose a threat to Western democracy. In the case of relief and refugee camps like that of the exiled Palestinians, the authoritative regime controlling the camp exercises biopolitical power as a means of maintaining the conditions of those inside it; though the camp itself does not exert violence onto its inhabitants, it still controls the bodily processes within it.

The notion of Jacir's tent piece as a tool of biopolitical power complicates her invocation of her Western spectator's body, which, like in Neshat's videos, she uses as a means of drawing a relation to the Eastern body. With *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, Iranian bodies are visibly present within the gallery, although in a filmic, intangible manner. In the tent piece, however, it is the non-presence of the Palestinian body that draws this relation. John Menick writes that Jacir's work often "draw[s] attention to a lack;"³⁹ with the tent piece, this lack is heightened by its utilitarian materiality. Though the tent is a human object meant to shelter, Jacir does not represent or make visible the bodies of the 780,000 displaced Palestinians, instead invoking them indirectly by stenciling the names of their destroyed villages onto the burlap. This lack of representation of the Palestinian bodies at hand returns to the concept of the refugee tent as a travesty of shelter, as discussed in Chapter One. Although the conditions of the refugee camp require a biopolitical intervention on the part of a political entity, it is not the tent itself that exerts this control. Rather, the tent is a signifier of the larger history of Palestinian exile and displacement. The conspicuous absence of Palestinian bodies in Jacir's tent piece suggests that its structure cannot protect or provide a home for these bodies. The mnemonic inscription of their villages names thus serve simultaneously as stand-ins for

³⁹ Menick, "Undiminished Returns," 30.

the Palestinian exiles, as well as reminders that this tent is a weak, provisional substitute for their former homes.

At the same time that the tent emphasizes the absence of Palestinian bodies, its strict delineation of exterior and interior begins to give way to an interstitial space for the bodies of the museumgoers within the gallery. Here the tent piece begins to slip toward a dialectic process: like the space caught between Neshat's two screens, in which the spectator is ambiguously placed both within and outside of the filmic narrative, Jacir's readymade is a literal space of interstitiality in that its original function was to temporarily house displaced bodies. Though its physical boundary is fixed, delineating a clear exterior and interior, the spectator's ability to move in and out of the tent, mimicking the flow of displaced refugees, suggests that this border is, in fact, fluid. Like in Neshat's work, the presence of an interstitial space begins to expose the East-West binary as arbitrary: if a boundary, by definition predicated on exclusion, is unstable, then its rationality for its exclusion begins to collapse as well.

This becomes particularly salient when applied to the borders created by the Israeli occupation; though not Western itself, the West, and in particular, the US, backs Israel both politically and economically.⁴⁰ The Western-supported occupation creates boundaries predicated on the literal exclusion of Palestinians, much like the West created a binary predicated on Eastern 'otherness.' This exclusion is not merely psychological or legislative, but is directly enacted upon the Palestinian body: Palestinians are not only stateless (a subject position that in and of itself complicates the body as the displaced 'other'), but are also often under curfews regulated by Israeli officials, prohibited from

⁴⁰ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 114.

traveling or working, made homeless, and are subject to border checks.⁴¹ Like Palestinian land, the Palestinian body is controlled and occupied. Thus, the invocation of the invisible Palestinian body in Jacir's tent piece does not merely draw a relation between itself and the body of the Western spectator (as Neshat does with her visible Iranian bodies), but also implicates the Western body as complicit in the Palestinian body's occupation, particularly by way of ignoring or obscuring the historical information that Jacir attempts to present.

The notion of the body in Jacir's tent piece is further complicated by the collaborative process by which it was made, particularly because it incorporated an ethnically and culturally diverse group of people. According to Menick, some participants were Palestinian-American and wanted to embroider their families' villages, several volunteers "learned of the expulsion for the first time,"⁴² and others yet were Israeli. The presence of these bodies within or outside of the tent, physically laboring to create the memorial, again emphasizes the instability of the physical borders enacted and implied by the tent's form. This is not to say that Jacir's piece becomes any less didactic within this collaborative context, but rather that its pedagogical objective simultaneously acknowledges the complexity of identity, particularly in relation to the East-West binary.

However, it is important to note that the dialectical element of Jacir's process does diverge from that of Neshat's. The latter invokes an interstitial space as a means of complicating the viewer's physical and psychological position in order to undermine the Orientalized Western thought that sets up such oppositional binaries in the first place.

⁴¹ Edward W. Said, "Emily Jacir," in *belongings* (Linz, Austria: O.K. Center for Contemporary Art Upper Austria, 2003), 47.

⁴² Menick, "Undiminished Returns," 24.

Jacir's tent similarly uses interstitiality to complicate the spectator's subject position, and indeed, does suggest that the borders erected by the East-West binary are in fact inherently unstable; that is to say, these borders are constructed by the specific historical, social, and political circumstances of Eurocentrism and white supremacy, rather than any 'inherent' or 'naturally-occurring' hierarchy. However, the acknowledgment of neocolonialism's instability is ultimately a means of emphasizing the way in which these boundaries manifest themselves literally, with violent results for their victims. When *Turbulent* and *Rapture* undermine the East-West binary, they ultimately conceive of an ambivalence in which the Orientalized conception of the 'Middle East' or 'Islamic gender roles' gives way to a utopian global society in which categorizations and borders have no consequence: if Iranian gender roles and the Western notion of them can be broken down through their dialectic appropriation, then the East-West binary has the potential to collapse altogether in this way. The dialectic of Jacir's tent piece does precisely the opposite by emphasizing the very real violence enacted by these borders. The tent piece thus recognizes the unstable nature of the binary as a means of accentuating and challenging the cruelty of its violent outcome. As Demos writes, Jacir's work is "clearly not about an imaginary, utopian escape from the restrictions of occupation," but rather a site where this idealist concept is "continually rendered ironic."⁴³ Not only does Jacir purposefully reject the utopian solution that Neshat embraces, the factographic grounding of the tent in empirical evidence precludes it altogether. As such, the pedagogical objective of the tent piece operates doubly: in using a deadpan, factographic approach to present a didactic historical narrative for a Western audience, the tent simultaneously

⁴³ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 111.

rejects any fictive attempts at utopia, instead situating itself within a historically accurate moment.

This dialectical process is found in many of Jacir's other works. In *From Texas With Love* (2002), she asked Palestinians what music they would listen to if they could drive for an hour without being stopped, detained, or harassed. She then listened to these songs, filming herself for an hour as she drove aimlessly around Texas. "When one endlessly repeats the freedom of movement *here*, in Texas," Demos writes of the work, "one also continually reenacts the painful memory of its impossibility *there*, in Palestine."⁴⁴ The same dialectical switching occurs in the tent piece, only this time reenacted by the Western audience rather than Jacir herself, again implicating the viewer's bodies as a site of both privilege and control: while the tent guides the spectator's body and behavior around or in it, they can ultimately exit the space of the tent, and thus, the realm of the displaced, an action not permitted by the true exilic condition. Jacir's ability to do this along with her Western spectator emphasizes her own privileged position; with her American passport, Jacir can traverse Israeli borders far more easily than many other Palestinians.⁴⁵

While Jacir's participants were notably international, this chapter is predicated on the idea that both the tent piece and Neshat's video works were made primarily for a Western viewer—specifically, an American, museum-going audience, which itself implicates a series of identity categories beyond mere geography. This claim, which this paper will substantiate in the following chapter, is inextricably tied to concepts of the

⁴⁴ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 111.

⁴⁵ Moukhtar Kocache, "From Others to Self: Traversing the Work of Emily Jacir" in *Generation 1.5* edited by Finkelppearl and Valerie Smith (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2009), 75.

body, as demonstrated by the deliberate invocations of spectators' bodies in the works at hand. Both Neshat and Jacir use the Western spectator's body to draw a relation between it and the 'Eastern' body. However, where Neshat employs her spectator's body to uncover her Orientalized aestheticization of her Iranian actors, Jacir's invocation of the Western body is not revelatory. Rather, it is a way of indirectly invoking the Palestinian body missing from her work, emphasizing the violence of the borders that necessitate a structure like a refugee tent and the original displacement of so many Palestinian bodies. This, like Neshat's implication of the audience within the filmic narrative, requires a primarily Western audience in order to be effective. As the following chapter explains, a Western context is crucial to the objective of all three works.

Chapter Three: Exile and The Ethics of Its Appropriation

In the exhibition catalog for “Generation 1.5,” a 2007 Queens Museum exhibition (and one of the few group shows featuring both Jacir and Neshat in the same lineup), curator Tom Finkelppearl posits members of Generation 1.5 as people who can “bridge cultural difference and thus be comfortable anywhere”⁴⁶ due to their deracination from their native land at a young age. While this statement is true to a certain degree, Jacir and Neshat’s work does not merely bridge cultural difference, but rather challenges and intervenes upon it, exposing the assumed binary of ‘cultural difference’ as largely a one-sided Western invention. Finkelppearl goes on to argue that “biculturalism” allows one to “see from both sides of the fence” and to “see freshly what insiders experience as routine.”⁴⁷ Distance allows one to make observations about their homeland from afar, and the foreignness of an adopted land allows one to make outsider observations from within. Neshat and Jacir use this double method of understanding, but with a crucial adjustment: rather than presenting an insider’s view of the East or an outsider’s view of the West, both artists critically appropriate their Western context to intervene upon the West’s outsider view of the East.

The outlook of “Generation 1.5” is a positive one, suggesting that migration at a young age is ultimately a generative process. While this is true to a degree, and has been echoed by exiled cultural figures like Edward Said, “Generation 1.5” as an affirmative concept plays into the neoliberal portrayal of globalization as a phenomenon that “represents a worldwide interlinking of free markets and cultural institutions” and

⁴⁶ Tom Finkelppearl, “Fresh Eyes of the Alienated Insider” in *Generation 1.5* edited by Finkelppearl and Valerie Smith (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2009), 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

“identifies a new world order that promises democraticization and egalitarian participation in society,”⁴⁸ according to Demos. The overt support of global capitalism in this approach thus precludes the recognition of the “imperialist realities of ‘empire’” that globalization entails, which lead to the “increasingly unequal command of resources by the privileged few occupying elite corporate multinational and governmental positions.”⁴⁹ Demos deems this “crisis globalization,”⁵⁰ a phenomenon led by Western imperial powers that directly leads to economic disparity, military conflict, and migrant crises. The figure of the exile, then, serves as a direct “counternarrative”⁵¹ to the neoliberal conception of globalization that posits the West as an economically and thus socially positive force. While Neshat and Jacir are indeed members of Generation 1.5, it is ultimately from this circumstance of crisis globalization that their work derives. It is also precisely why Neshat and Jacir’s works can be read in relation to the West, and, indeed, why the works at hand were in fact created in a relational dialogue to the West.

Before discussing this further, it is vital to justify this interpretation of Neshat’s video works and Jacir’s tent piece as artworks made for a primarily Western, non-Muslim, non-Arab, non-Persian audience. Neshat rarely shows in non-Western countries and is widely referred to as an Iranian-American artist, and the production of Jacir’s tent piece is specific to New York. The most up-to-date list of Neshat’s exhibitions indicates that from 1990 to 2013 she displayed work 220 times in North America and Europe, and only 20 times in non-Western countries.⁵² This includes group and solo exhibitions,

⁴⁸ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, xiii.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵² <http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/biography>

participation in biennales and other art fairs, and several site-specific commissioned pieces. Of the 20 non-Western countries, only two—Turkey and Iran—were majority Muslim regions.

While a large number of non-Western people, including Iranians and other people from majority-Muslim countries, can be presumed to have seen Neshat's work at any of these 240 shows, the interest of primarily Western museums and galleries does reflect Neshat's existence as an artist in exile. As an artist living in Manhattan and participating in the New York art world here (she and her former husband ran the Storefront for Art and Architecture),⁵³ her work became socially, financially, and culturally embedded within an American art scene. Her work has only been shown in Iran twice, once in 2002 and once in 2004.⁵⁴ This is primarily because her art is banned in Iran due to her exile,⁵⁵ but it is also important to note that the exile itself was ordered in direct response to her work in the first place: as discussed earlier, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* are in fact equally critical of Iran as they are of the Western conception of the 'Middle East.' The disproportionate number of times Neshat has shown in Western museums and galleries is thus not necessarily a deliberate choice on the part of the artist, but rather can be attributed to the rejection of her work by the Iranian government and, potentially, other repressive regimes that similarly view her art as dangerous. Regardless, despite rarely being shown in Iran, *Turbulent*, *Rapture*, and a large majority of her other works continue to investigate Iranian culture and society as its critical subject matter.

⁵³ Horrigan, "A Double Tour," 10.

⁵⁴ <http://www.artnet.com/artists/shirin-neshat/biography>

⁵⁵ Dabashi, "Bordercrossings," 40.

Jacir's exhibition history reveals a similar pattern to Neshat's. According to the most thorough and up-to-date list, which lists 60 exhibitions from 2015 to 2005, Jacir's work was shown only 11 times in non-Western countries, including just four Arab nations (UAE, Turkey, Jordan, and four times in Lebanon). Despite this, Jacir is still considered a "global nomad" according to the "Generation 1.5" catalog, particularly because she oscillated between Saudi Arabia, Italy, and the US in her younger years, and now travels between Rome and Ramallah.⁵⁶ However, without denying the international aspect of Jacir's career, the specific conditions of the tent piece, its initial production, and its iterations in later exhibitions are inseparable from its context within the Western art institution. As discussed in Chapter One, Jacir created the tent piece her residency at PS1, and incorporated a collaborative effort from a myriad of New Yorkers, immigrants, and visitors, including many from Palestine, Israel, and other Middle Eastern countries. This in itself makes the tent's production site-specific to Jacir's studio; this is highlighted by her choice to display the roster of participants alongside the tent at its first exhibition in May 2001. Again, while the tent piece was presumably seen by a large number of non-Western people (not to mention Jacir's non-Western volunteers), its production within the Western art institution—particularly within the pedagogical apparatus of the residency program—and its translation of the Palestinian villages' names into the Latin alphabet suggest it was constructed primarily as a confrontation of the Western spectator.

A later iteration of the tent piece's installation brings Jacir's invocation of the Western art viewer to the surface. In 2002, Jacir was invited to show her tent piece at the Queens International exhibition at the Queens Museum, an institution located inside the

⁵⁶ Moukhtar Kocache, "From Others to Self," 73.

building originally designed to house the New York Pavilion of the 1939 World's Fair. In this context, the tent gained another degree of site-specificity: from 1946 until 1950, the building served as the first headquarters of the recently founded United Nations, and was the very location of the UN decision to partition Palestine in 1949. Additionally, at the 1964 World's Fair held in the same location, the Jordanian Pavilion included a mural and poem dedicated to the Palestinian people, inciting public controversy.⁵⁷ Alongside the tent, Jacir displayed reproductions of photographs taken at the partitioning meeting and facsimiles of the 1964 World's Fair pamphlets, which contained the poem and an image of Jordan's pavilion. In this way, the tent piece became an institution-critical work: by invoking the specific space and history of the Queens Museum through additional factographic documents, the work's original pedagogical statement directly challenges and confronts the Western participation in Israeli occupation that occurred in the same geographical and architectural space the work now occupied.

The Queens Museum only heightened the tent piece's institution critical impact when it partially censored Jacir's work: after complaints were filed from museum-goers, the museum prohibited the artist from disseminating the facsimile pamphlet unless it was distributed by mail to spectators who had requested one or affixed with a sticker saying "I reprinted this brochure from the 1964 World's Fair as my artwork—Emily Jacir."⁵⁸ While the original pamphlet was thus "transformed into a historical relic instead of a work to be actively distributed,"⁵⁹ the museum's partial censorship serves to emphasize the obfuscation of the Palestinian history that the tent piece set out to confront in the first

⁵⁷ Menick, "Undiminished Returns," 33, 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

place, only now positioning it within a distinctly American institutional framework. In doing so, Jacir's confrontation of the Western spectator becomes all the more potent by situating the Israeli occupation within a compliant Western context: the museum's censorious response confirms precisely and makes explicit the repressive histories of the site and the larger culture of Western revisionist history that Jacir's installation attempted to reveal in the first place.

As Finkelppearl discusses, the immigration from one place to another at a formative age brings forth a specific set of circumstances that allow artists to blur the line between insider and outsider status. Neshat and Jacir certainly fit into this framework, and indeed much of their work is influenced by their dual modes of understanding. However, it is not merely their migration from one place to another, but rather their specific, diasporic removals from their homelands that serve as a catalyst for their artistic practices. The condition of exile itself is a particular mental, emotional, and cultural state produced by violence, loss, and trauma in a way that standard immigration is not. Edward Said calls exile the "unhealable rift forced between a human and a native place, between the self and its true home."⁶⁰ However, he also notes that this state of being often leads to the production of art or literature, in an attempt to "compensat[e] for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule."⁶¹

This is clear in Neshat's work: she creates a fictive Iran using actors, specific cinematic techniques, and landscapes that resemble an invented 'Middle Eastern' location

⁶⁰ Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 137.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

but are decidedly not Iran.⁶² However, as paradigmatically demonstrated by *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, her work is self-aware of its condition, and attempts to use it to its advantage. Because she occupies a liminal space between American artist and Iranian artist, Neshat uses this opportunity to exploit the inherently fictive nature of her art caused by her exile. In *Turbulent* and *Rapture*, she emphasizes the unreality of her narrative through the cinematic techniques and use of the body discussed in earlier chapters. This creation of a fictive version of Iran attempts to reproduce her native homeland, but is ultimately unable to do so because of her increasing distance imposed by exile. It is only from this position of straddling two cultures, yet not fully belonging in either of them, that she can employ and then dialectically expose the hypocritical misconceptions of the West as well as the very real gender oppression and segregation perpetuated by the Iranian government itself. Dabashi calls her practice an act of “categorical bordercrossing,” in which she systematically “defies any distinct moral or political, social or cultural, boundary.”⁶³ As an artist occupying multiple spaces mentally and emotionally, she can move somewhat fluidly between these boundaries, viewing her subject matter from the multiple lenses of what bell hooks would call the center (America, the West) and the margin (Iran, the East).⁶⁴ However, when it comes to the physical and the geographical, she is barred from re-entering the margin—hence her required use of fiction and artifice. As Demos writes of other contemporary artists

⁶² Horrigan, “A Double Tour,” 12.

⁶³ Dabashi, “Bordercrossings” 42.

⁶⁴ bell hooks, “marginality as a site of resistance” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* eds. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 341.

working with the theme of migration and mobility, Neshat is an artist who “[blurs] the divisions between fact and fiction in order to propose a new politics of truth.”⁶⁵

As discussed in Chapter One, Dabashi claims that Western art history and criticism tend to take the binarism of Neshat’s work at face value, thus dismissing Neshat’s work as reinforcing the stereotypes of Muslim women and Iranian gender roles. However, *Turbulent* and *Rapture* attempt to do just the opposite, exposing the “existing stereotype of Muslim women” as an invention of the Western viewer. Such criticism is “predicated on an outdated identity politics,” Dabashi writes, that relies on a notion of “a static world to the East and a creative world to the west.”⁶⁶ This false binary is precisely what Neshat seeks to expose, and its misinterpretation by western art criticism only serves to corroborate her case. This connects directly to her position as an artist in exile: as someone who understands the Western perspective of the East as well as the Eastern reality, she relies on her Western viewers’ aesthetic illiteracy, playing into their neo-Orientalist assumptions in an attempt to uncover them. In Dabashi’s view, the self-conscious formal qualities of her work prevent this exploitation from being a mere reproduction or observation of such Orientalist assumptions, instead marking it as a productive criticism that comments on their mendacity by paralleling them to the cinematic artifice of the videos. However, as discussed in Chapter One, the ability of Neshat’s objective to be easily misread as a reinforcement of these assumptions ultimately weakens its critical impact.

Like Neshat, Jacir uses exile to her advantage. However, rather than using her diasporic distance from Palestine to suggest an ambiguous alternative to the East-West

⁶⁵ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 237.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

binary, Jacir employs exile as a subject, not a tool. While Neshat uses the conditional terms of her specific exile as an individual artist as the locus of her work's perspective, Jacir's exploration of exile is endowed with the trauma, violence, and loss of the collective Palestinian narrative. In other words, where *Turbulent* and *Rapture* use the exilic condition as a catalyst for their explorations of gender and Orientalism, the tent piece treats exile as its discursive topic. "Homes are always provisional," Said writes, and for the exiled person, "the only home available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing."⁶⁷ He refers to the literary tradition of texts by exilic writers, but this statement could easily refer to visual artists: Neshat's video works, for instance, are an effort to rebuild her homeland through its cinematic construction as a means of "compensating for [her] disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule."⁶⁸ Jacir, on the other hand, does not attempt to rebuild a fictive or utopian homeland, but rather insists wholly on the provisionality of the home and the impossibility of its recreation. The tent, as a form of shelter, attempts to provide a literal home in which to house bodies and lives, but it is temporary, endowed with associations of war-torn villages and crowded refugee camps. The pathetic materiality of the tent—as a flimsy textile and a space that cannot control, protect, or contain the bodies within it—serves as an indirect but powerful reminder of this trauma. As discussed in Chapter One, the tent piece is a travesty of a shelter. It acknowledges the impossibility of the home, accepting its nonexistence through its provisional, degraded materiality as well as its self-referential inscription of literal lost homes. With these embroidered names of destroyed villages, the work thus becomes not only a product of exile, but also a work that announces exile, questions its condition, and

⁶⁷ Said, "Reflections on Exile," 147.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

memorializes its victims. Jacir's work paradoxically parodies and reinforces Said's claim at the same time: the tent piece creates a home so fragile and so vulnerable that it is not really a home at all. The tent's attempt to shelter or protect is ultimately fruitless, suggesting that artistic intervention can never fully make up for the exilic condition.

Neshat and Jacir's exploration of the exilic condition in their work brings up a question that Said poses to his readers later in "Reflections on Exile:" "is exile so extreme and private that any instrumental use of it is ultimately a trivialization?"⁶⁹ This is not a question of whether it is ethical or not to rely on the biases of Western viewers as a means of pedagogy or otherwise. Rather, it is a question of whether it is ethical to employ a Western context while using the distance created by exile to appropriate the narrative of a land one no longer can return to. Can it ever be accurately represented in this way? Does it exploit the narrative of the cultural group at hand?

This is where the success of Neshat and Jacir's objectives begins to diverge. Though Dabashi rejects outright the notion that *Turbulent* and *Rapture* are self-orientalizing, Neshat's hyper-aestheticization of her video works does have direct implications for the Iranian narrative depicted within them. The choice of such hyper-stylization, particularly through the filmic medium, purposefully constructs a fiction that is automatically in danger of misinterpretation. In one of his essays on Hans Haacke, Benjamin Buchloh writes that the "inextricable entwinement of the aesthetic and the mythical make the resurrection of the aesthetic dimension in the historical project...problematic."⁷⁰ This is clear in Neshat's work: her hyperbolic representation of

⁶⁹ Said, "Reflections on Exile," 145.

⁷⁰ Benjamin Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" in *Obra Social* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995), 54.

Iranian gender roles does operate dialectically, but the presentation of such a slick, fictionalized narrative—particularly within the context of the filmic medium—problematizes her representation of actual Iranian bodies.

This can best be understood vis-a-vis Jacir's complete rejection of the documentation of Palestinian bodies. "The documentary mode is always a form of representation," Demos writes, "Always a construction requiring the process of interpretation, its meaning never univocal or unambiguous."⁷¹ While the factographic approach is also a form of representation, and thus always requires an interpretive process as well, Jacir's rejection of the documentary image—or any image, for that matter—resists the visual instrumentalization of Palestinian bodies as a tool for manipulating the viewer's emotions. In using the metonymic substitution of the 418 villages' names, Jacir's tent refuses the documentation of Palestinians in order to temper the subjectivity of image-based representation that could both undermine her tent's factographic basis as well as exploit the lives of the people she purports to memorialize. Neshat does not enact such a rejection; thus, many critics are able to take her representation—though not documentary, she still employs the image—at face value. As such, the dialectical operation that *Turbulent* and *Rapture* attempt to perform ultimately undermines its own success: though the video works attempt to destabilize the East-West binary through its hyperbolic visualization, this hyper-aestheticized image runs the very real risk of exploiting its subject—particularly in the context of a Western audience—paradoxically preventing its own objective from fully being achieved.

⁷¹ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 99.

Conclusion

As the preceding chapters demonstrate, Neshat and Jacir's work are in conversation with similar discursive topics, negotiating visually the ways in which an artwork can represent the Eastern 'Other' for a primarily Western art audience. Their divergent processes are not just formal decisions, but respond specifically to the sociopolitical circumstances of their subject matter: where Neshat's exploration of Iranian gender roles is afforded the luxury of stylization, Jacir's tent has no choice but to adopt a deadpan aesthetic in order to drive home the hard-edged fact of the Israeli destruction of these Palestinian villages. The invocation of Neshat's spectator ultimately places them in an ambiguous interstitial space. The tent, while itself a symbol of interstitiality, cannot afford to do so out of the necessity of emphasizing the very borders that enact(ed) violence upon Palestinian refugees. For Jacir, these decisions are not merely aesthetic, but are required by the historical moment her work presents: in order to represent an exiled people—who, by virtue of their displacement, are not represented politically—an artwork *must* negotiate a mode of representation that can reclaim the narrative at hand by grounding itself in a non-negotiable factography. *Turbulent* and *Rapture* actively avoid the factic; Neshat purposefully confects a fiction. And, as this thesis has discussed, the success of Neshat's objective falls short precisely because this critique is couched in a way that can be so easily misread.

This is not to say that *Memorial for the 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948* fully achieves what *Turbulent* and *Rapture* do not; the latter video works can indeed be read as dialectically complex, as this thesis has demonstrated. Rather, it raises a larger question about art made by artists like Neshat

and Jacir: in an age of crisis globalization, to borrow Demos's term again, how is it possible to represent the Eastern 'Other' in a world where the assumed gulf of cultural and political differences between the East and West seems to be growing every day, with increasingly violent results? Where Neshat's work attempts to traverse this gulf and envision a utopia in which this binary ultimately breaks down, all Jacir's tent piece can do is merely acknowledge the gap and the violence it enacts, and pedagogically communicate this narrative to her audience. In terms of a critical intervention, it is the latter's approach that seems to make the most sense: in contemporary society, where no mode of representation (including the factographic) is ever fully adequate or free from subjectivity, perhaps we no longer have room for a fiction or a stylization that purposefully makes ambiguous the inequity of our globalized world. Maybe the best we can do is present the facts.

Illustrations



Figure 1: A still from Screen A of *Turbulent* showing Shoja Azari with his back to an audience of men. (Neshat, Shirin. *Turbulent (Turbulento)*. 1998. Digital image. El Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Madrid. Accessed 18 December 2015.)



Figure 2: Sussan Deyhim with her back to the camera in a screenshot from *Turbulent*. (Neshat, Shirin via Youtube user Joachimstillier. *Shirin Neshat's Turbulent*. Digital Image. 2009. Youtube. Accessed 18 December 2015.)



Figure 3: A still of Sussan Deyhim singing as the camera pans around her. (Neshat, Shirin. Still from *Turbulent*. Digital image. 2012. Outcasting: Fourth Wall Film Festival, Cardiff, Wales. Accessed 18 December 2015.)



Figure 4: The men turn to look at the camera in unison in a production still from *Rapture*. (Neshat, Shirin. Still from *Rapture*. Digital image. 1999. ARTstor. Accessed 18 December 2015).



Figure 5: Men unrolling Persian carpets systematically in a still from *Rapture*. This video is taken by a person standing within the gallery, and the camera physically pans from Screen A to Screen B. This is currently the only available video of *Rapture* on the Internet. (Neshat, Shirin via Vimeo user InEnArt. *Shirin Neshat Rapture, 1999*. Digital Image. 2013. Vimeo. Accessed 18 December 2015.)



Fig. 6: Women chanting in a triangular formation in a production still from *Rapture*. (Neshat, Shirin. Still from *Rapture*. Digital image. 1999. ARTstor. Accessed 18 December 2015).



Figure 7: The women occupy the area of the beach in a production still from *Rapture*. (Neshat, Shirin. Still from *Rapture*. Digital image. 1999. Smithsonian Institute. Accessed 18 December 2015).

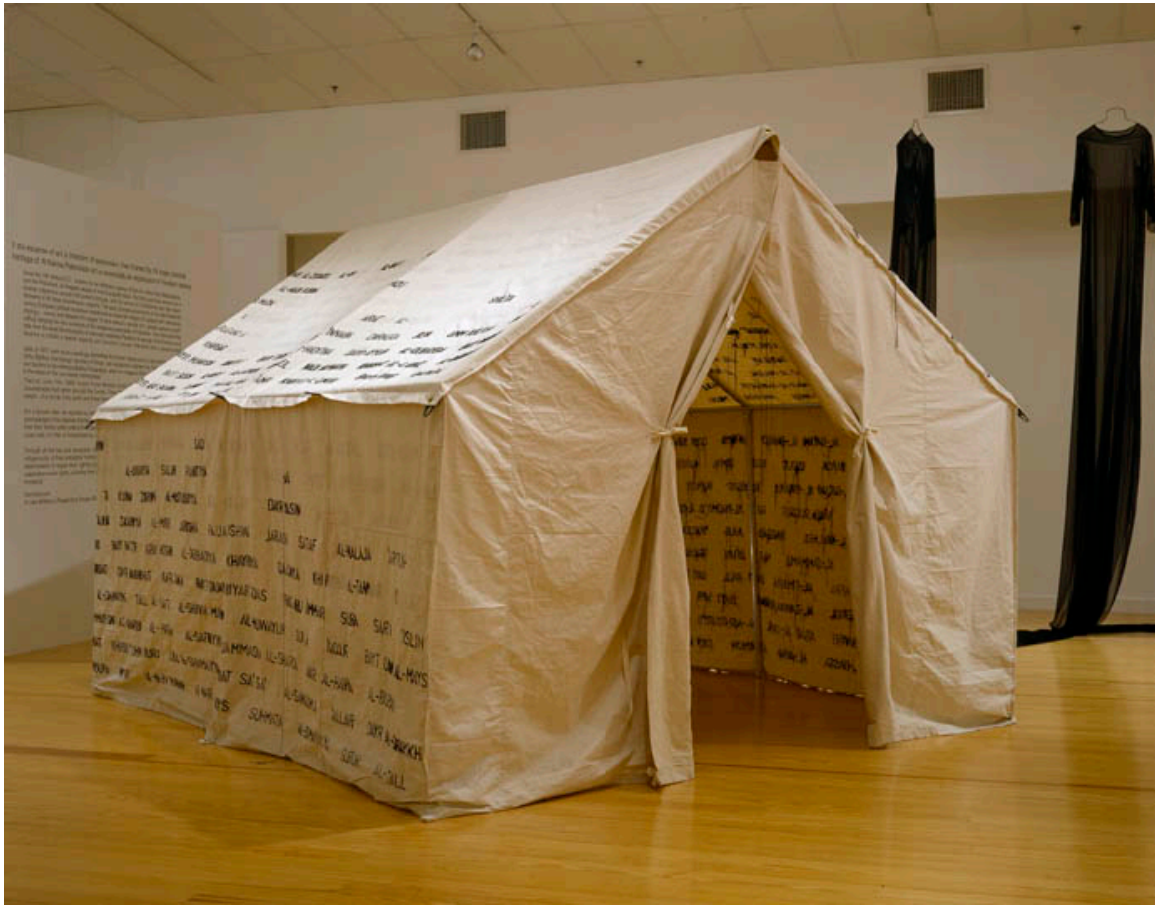


Figure 8: An installation view of the tent piece. (Jacir, Emily. *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. Digital Image. 2003. Station Museum, Houston, Texas. Accessed 16 April 2016.)

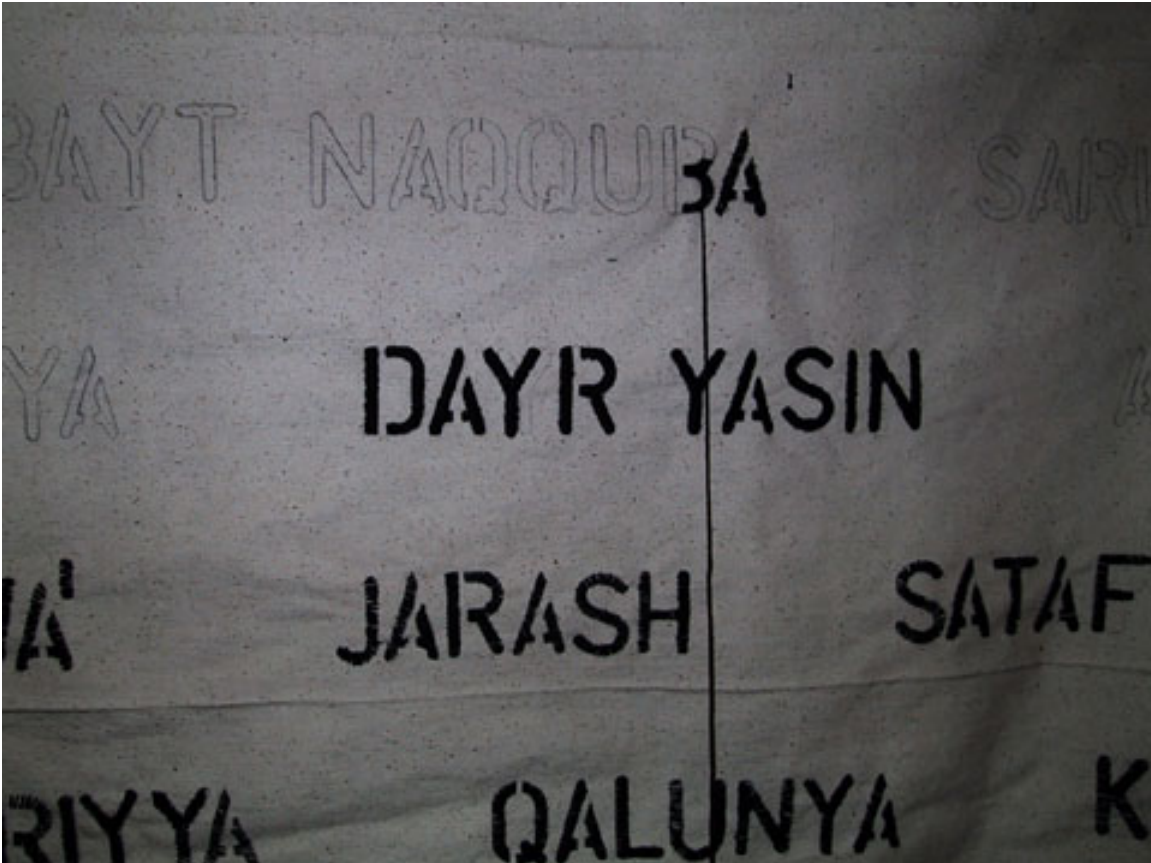


Figure 9: A detailed view of the tent piece's embroidery during its installation at PS1. (Nizri, Yigal. *Emily Jacir's Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. Digital image. May 2001. oznik.com. Accessed 16 April 2016.)

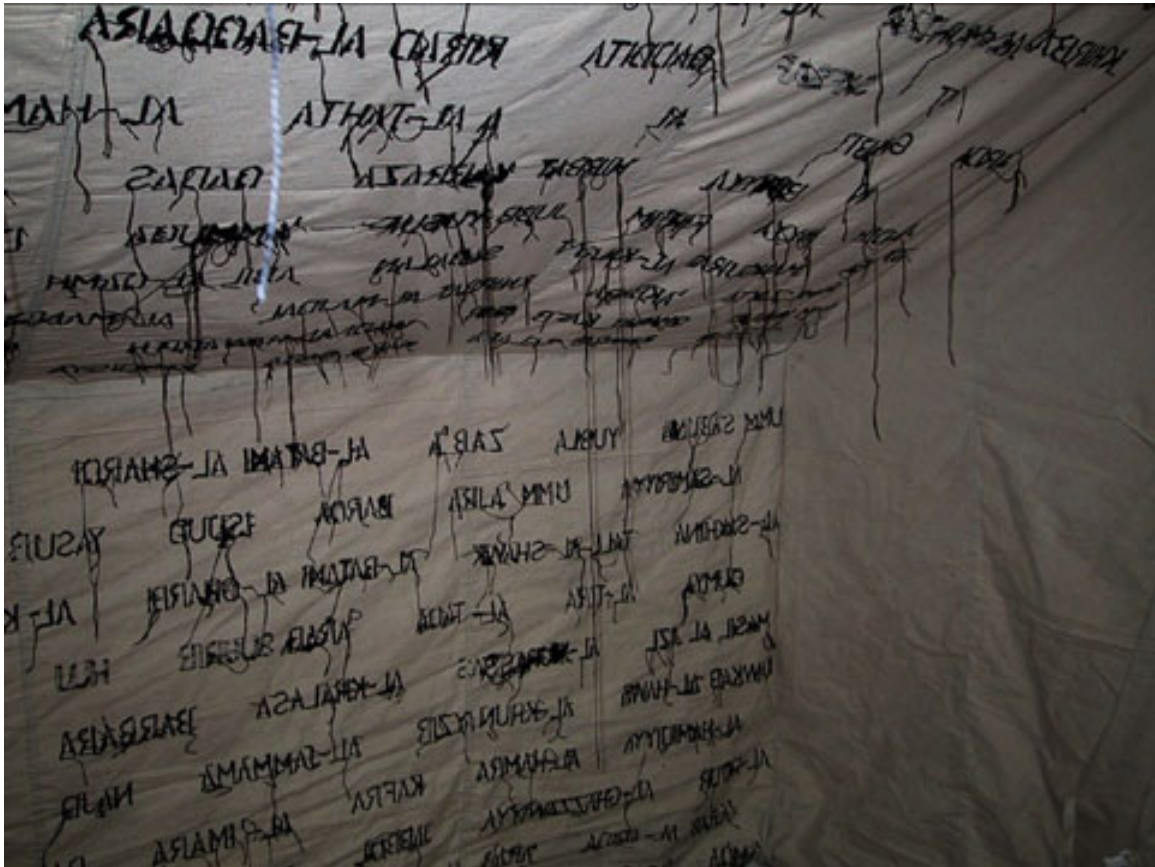


Figure 10: An interior view of the tent piece's embroidery during its installation at PS1. (Nizri, Yigal. *Emily Jacir's Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. Digital image. May 2001. oznik.com. Accessed 16 April 2016.)

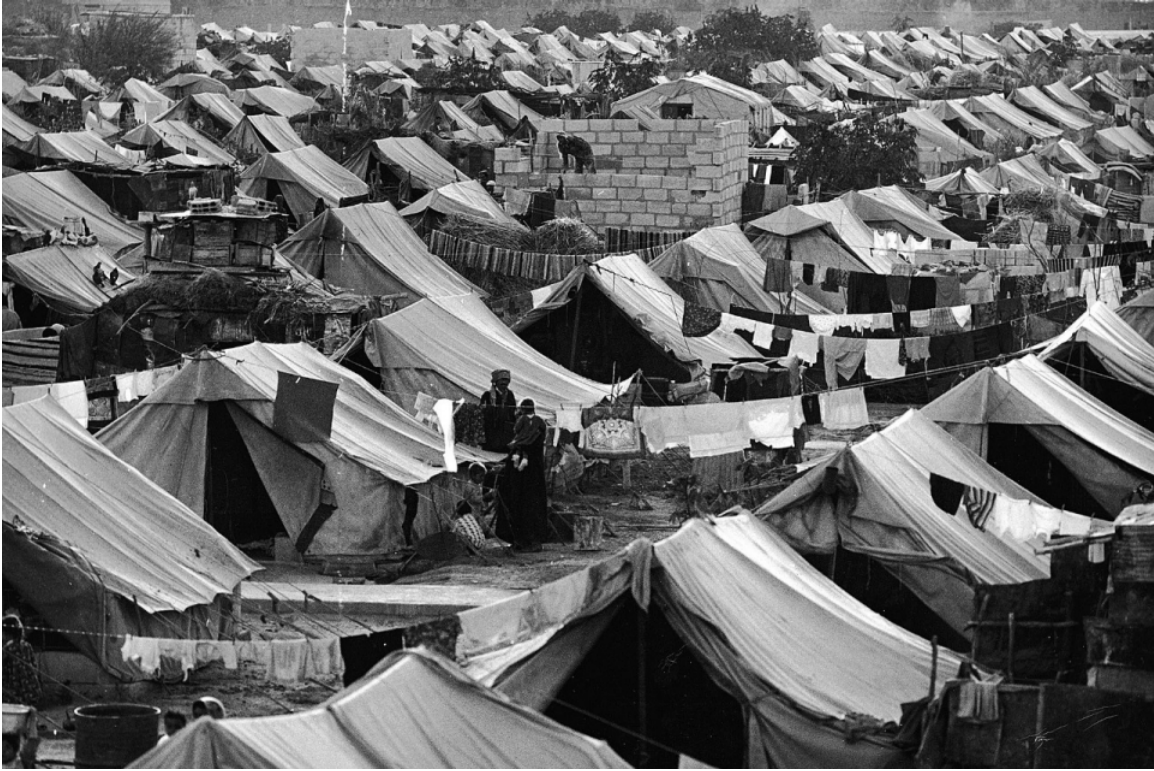


Figure 11: A 1967 image of a Palestinian refugee camp, with tents resembling the one Jacir used for the tent piece. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images. *Syria, 1967. A camp administered by the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for homeless Palestinian Arab refugees near Damascus.* Digital Image. 1967. Al Jazeera America, New York. Accessed 16 April 2016).



Figure 12: Contemporary refugee tents that are almost identical to the one Jacir used in her tent piece. (AP Photo. Syrian refugee tents in Turkey. Digital Image. 2015. Hurriyet Daily News, Istanbul, Turkey. Accessed 16 April 2016).

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