

Royal Holloway  
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**The Audience Dug the Graves:  
Interacting with Oral History and Mourning in Live Art**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Theatre Studies

by

**Tania El Khoury**

2017



**DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I, Tania El Khoury, certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature:



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## ABSTRACT FOR THE THESIS

### **The Audience Dug the Graves: Interacting with Oral History and Mourning in Live Art**

**By Tania El Khoury**

Submitted for the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017.

This practice-based thesis asks, “What is the political potential of interactive live art and how is it achieved?” The guiding question is borne out of the conditions and experiences of the Arab uprisings as well as the necessity of exploring the intertwining of art and politics beyond the Western art scene that art history and criticism overwhelmingly focus on. The research addresses three main elements in which the intersection of politics and live art can be analysed: interactivity, the use of oral history in performance, and mourning as militancy. The analysis takes as its subject of study the live art practice of Tania El Khoury, both as a solo artist working in different international contexts and as a co-founder of Dictaphone Group, a collective coupling urban research with live art and producing mainly site-specific projects in Lebanon.

The practice component of this doctoral thesis is an interactive sound installation performance entitled *Gardens Speak*. Ten oral histories from people who were killed in Syria in the early period of the uprising and were buried in home or public gardens constitute the content of the piece. The work has toured in five different continents. In March 2016, it was presented in London at the

Battersea Arts Centre, where it was attended by the examiners. The thesis draws on the inter-disciplinary scholarship on art and politics, putting it into conversation with the responses of critics and audience members to *Gardens Speak*. Both the written and the practice components of this doctoral project focus on addressing and re-imagining oral history collection and its use in performance, mourning as resistance, and the politics of audience interactivity.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **“Death But Not Humiliation”**

#### **Political Context: The Arab Uprisings**

The Arab uprisings and revolutions began when Mohammad Bouazizi, a young Tunisian street vendor, set himself alight as an act of protest against the confiscation of his goods by a notoriously corrupt and repressive police force. His live action proved the catalyst for the Tunisian revolution, which then inspired a wider wave of protests, uprisings, and revolts across the Arab world and beyond (Haddad, Bsheer, and Abu-Rish). Bouazizi was not a live artist. However, as his means of protest, he created a spectacle with his body on a busy street. Did Bouazizi perform death, considering that he actually died performing his act? Did his performance accomplish successful interactivity, since it touched so many people (audience), and eventually contributed to political change (i.e., the fall of the Tunisian regime)?

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, as a live artist I found myself reconsidering and questioning how performance and politics intertwine. Like millions of young Arabs, I wondered if and how the uprisings would forever change our reality, our politics, economies, cultures, and—even—our artistic modes. At the time, particularly between December 2010 and May 2011, the possibilities seemed endless (Haddad, Bsheer, and Abu-Rish 1-6). The political potential of art and activism, whether in countries that had featured uprisings or those that had not yet experienced them, seemed immense and certain. Little did many of us consider the nature of counter-revolution, and the lengths regimes and their allies would go to ensure their own survival and that of their ilk (Heydemann

and Leenders). Suddenly, the imaginative possibilities of revolution were replaced with stark realities, military assaults, the levelling of neighbourhoods, mass displacement, and a rapidly climbing number of disappeared, detained, and dead.

Despite these transformations, the inspiration for this doctoral project was born in the early period of the uprisings. It is for this reason that it remains loyal to the revolutionary potential of collective action and bodily exposure to politics. While dealing with what some consider to be morbid content, this project insists on recognising and celebrating the lives of early protestors across the Arab world: those who took to the streets, risked body and life, and chanted “Death But Not Humiliation.”

### **Interactive Live Art after the Arab Uprisings**

Discussions about art have been a central component of debates about the Arab uprisings, more commonly and problematically referred to as the “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening” (Gelvin 32-33; Rabbani).<sup>1</sup> Much of the art world, mainstream media, and several social theorists seem to have been surprised by the so-called awakening of the Arab peoples. In many instances, they pointed to certain artworks as symbols of an allegedly sudden move toward ‘democracy’ in

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<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the mass mobilisations and protests movements that broke out in December 2010 and afterward, some journalists and commentators—primarily based in US and European institutions, used terms such as “Arab Spring” and “Arab Awakening.” Historian James L. Gelvin provides one of the most succinct explanations for why such terms are inaccurate. Yet perhaps the most significant reason such a term is problematic is that it assumes and plays into the ahistorical notion that Arabs (and the range of populations of the Middle East and North African (MENA) region more generally) had not exhibited mass mobilisation or collective action prior to 2010-2011. Such an assumption runs against the bulk of the historical literature on the modern period in MENA history, to say nothing of previous periods (Anderson; Bein; Thompson). The history of the region is in fact replete with protests, rebellions, and revolutions—some successful and some failed—across the time and geography of the modern history of the region.

particular and 'civilized' politics more generally. However, such views ignore two important facts. First, 2010-11 was not the first time communities in the region mobilised, risking their lives, in pursuit of accountability, transparency, and social justice (Khalidi; Thompson). Second, individuals and groups in the Arab world have produced and consumed art with political motivation and implication since as far back as when a modern public sphere came into being in different parts of the region (Khuri-Makdisi; Shafik). One need only examine the trajectory of mobilisations around a particular cause such as Palestine or review the critical academic research journals that have had a long-term focus on the region.<sup>2</sup>

Many protestors in the Arab world describe what they experienced and accomplished during the early days of the uprisings as "breaking the barrier of fear."<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true in the case of Syria, where the Ba'athist regime had since 1963 violently repressed critical and dissident voices (Hinnebusch 44-110). Such violence included the monitoring, targeting, silencing, and co-opting of Syrian artists across a variety of mediums (M. Cooke). Despite more than four decades of the regime's authoritarian rule, many Syrians openly produced and shared artwork in the public sphere beginning in 2011 with little self-imposed censorship.<sup>4</sup> Syrian artists paid a heavy personal price for contributing to their

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Arab Studies Journal's* special issues on "Visual Cultures" (2010) and "Cultures of Resistance" (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Since the Tunisian uprising took place in December 2010, and subsequent protests and mass mobilizations erupted in others states in the region, reports in media talked about citizens and protestors "breaking the barrier of fear." This is juxtaposed to the period before the eruption of mass mobilizations in which citizens were said to be complacent, fearful of their rulers and the state's coercive apparatus. For a critical assessment of this trope of "breaking the barrier of fear," see Mouin Rabbani and Paul Sedra's articles, respectively titled "Egypt, Tunisia, and 'The Resumption of Arab History'" and "The Revolution and History."

<sup>4</sup> I have co-written a short book in Arabic archiving many of these practices, which Syrians organized both online and in public spaces. They include flying protests, animation videos, and

country's uprising, like many of their counterparts within Syrian society and across the region (El Khoury, "The Contested Scenography of the Revolution"). In some cases, the regime beat them up, specifically targeting their working hands like they did to cartoonist Ali Ferzat. In other cases, they repeatedly detained them, murdering many of them such as comedian Hassan Hassan (El Khoury, *Gardens Speak*, 59-63). Similarly, the Bahraini and Egyptian regimes labelled many artists as *persona non grata* and terrorists, consequently forcing many to choose exile over bodily harm.

In this context, a transformation occurred in both the form and content of Arab artwork since 2010-11 for various reasons. This includes mass demonstrations, the occupation of public spaces, forced exile, cross-border solidarity, and shifts in the global art market (e.g., funding and festivals).<sup>5</sup> There was also an explicit expanded interest in using art as a tool to inform, mock, challenge, revolt, and re-imagine socio-political realities.<sup>6</sup> As an artist invested in several political networks and campaigns, I am interested in exploring how the context of the Arab uprisings created an opportunity to more critically understand the political potential of my own work as well as that of my colleagues.

My practice-based PhD project takes seriously the implications of the Arab

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songs. The book is titled "Tactics of the Syrian Revolutionary Movement," published by Dawlaty in 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For example, new organisations have started with focus on revolutionary art, including The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution. Funding bodies such as Ettijahat and Bidayyat have also focused on supporting and enabling Syrian voices openly critical of the regime and in support of the opposition. International festivals and venues have programmed art created during or about the Arab uprisings, including Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings in New York City (2016) and the first edition of Shubbak Festival in London (2011).

<sup>6</sup> A number of these practices that took place in Syria are documented in the booklet *Tactics of The Syrian Revolutionary Movement*, discussed previously. For example, *Freedom Wo Bass* web series, the *Masasit Mati* puppet show, that satirical social media page "The Chinese Revolution Against China's Dictator," among many others (El Khoury 2013).

uprisings on our understandings of the politics of live art. For example, I am interested in the realities and experiences of witnessing activists inadvertently filming their own death on their mobile phones, all the while trying to document the regime's attacks on protestors. Watching many of these videos, I realised that there would be no other immediate, dangerous, happening, live action performance that could result in such an unsettling performance: a few seconds of recorded live action followed by the death of the performer that dramatically exposes the political reality and oppressive state power. Its audiences are various: the sniper who shot the protagonist, the protestor-witness-martyr, those who witnessed the crime, and people across the world who have watched the video and interacted with it.

Reflecting on such actions and their incredibly high stakes, I ask what is the political potential of interactive live art and how is it achieved? Bringing these two worlds into conversation (i.e., the Arab world in revolt and live art as a global practice), this thesis engages the theories and practices of interactive performance while focusing on the process of collecting oral history and performing public mourning through embodiment and witnessing. Oral history serves as a mechanism to challenge state-imposed and counter-revolutionary narratives vis-à-vis contested spaces and events. Mourning practices make visible the nature of state violence and recognise its martyrs, while offering a space for audiences to embody and witness other people's lives and deaths. Both oral history and mourning practices offer a structuring framework for the performance of resistance. Exploring interactive performances in this manner can help inform discussions of the political potential of live art in a changing political environment.

## Why Live Art?

Perhaps the most significant theoretical starting point of this doctoral thesis is a clear understanding of the use of the terms live art and interactivity. The choice of using the term interactive, rather than participatory, immersive, or any other of the terms is taken up in chapter one. For now, it is worth considering the choice of live art as a medium and basis of analysis. Key in this respect is live art's distinction from performance art, theatre, installation art, and visual arts—even if it is related to them. This is important for several reasons, mostly because artists working in these mediums often borrow from each other, work in inter-disciplinary ways, and/or define themselves in opposition to one other.

Live art is a term that originated in the United Kingdom but gradually became understood and employed around the world in its various translations (Heddon 1). The London-based Live Art Development Agency defines live art as: “a research engine aimed at opening up new methods and strategies regardless of forms, contexts, and spaces” (“What is Live Art?”). Therein, they quote artist Joshua Sofaer who refers to live art as “an explosion of conventional aesthetics” and continue by disclosing that the form disrupts distinctions between spectator and participant:

The term Live Art is not a description of an artform or discipline, but a cultural strategy to include experimental processes and experiential practices that might otherwise be excluded from established curatorial, cultural and critical frameworks. Live Art is a framing device for a catalogue of approaches to the possibilities of liveness by artists who chose to work across, in between, and at the



edges of more traditional artistic forms (Live Art Development Agency.)

In a personal attempt to describe live art in 2010, I contextualised it as a form concerned with liveness, consequently standing in opposition to death—the killing and effacing of people and causes.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps I had naïve hopes at that time. Nevertheless, I have since remained on a constant quest to find political meaning in the artistic form.

As my own practice has developed to include video and sound installations, I find that the term live art is better conceptualized as an umbrella for the various mediums myself and many others work with. Whether there is a performer present or not, live artists seek to create art that is experienced by the audience. The methods of live art are fluid, as its practitioners borrow from theatre and visual arts. It can be scripted or not. It can happen in an art venue or a public space. Perhaps the only fixed aspect of the practice is the innovative and always-changing relationship between audience, artists, and the spaces they collectively inhabit.

Believing in the inclusiveness and political potential of live art is what convinces me to use the term in reference to the work I do, as well as that which I encounter beyond the Western art scene and the labels that come with it. Journalists and curators often tell me, “there is no live art in the Arab world.”

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<sup>7</sup> My submission for a zine published by Forest Fringe and distributed during Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2010 was entitled “What is Live Art?” It took the form of a text placed over a Lebanese newspaper showing a photo of a person lynched in Lebanon in 2010. The text reads, “I was trying to explain to my friend what live art means. I said something pretentious like it’s live as opposed to death. We were sipping cocktails at a trendy café in Beirut. 25 km away, at that exact moment, a horrendous crime was taking place. Somebody had been stripped naked, dragged around and hanged on an electric pole in a public space. Watchers were taking photos using their phones. Videos have been uploaded on Youtube. My friend wanted to know if this too was considered live art.”

Alternatively, they describe me as “probably one of the only “live artists” in Lebanon” (Shooter). It is undeniable that the term live art is mainly used in the West, where there are also institutions that research and fund the practice. These include the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), Compass Live Art, and many more. This does not mean, however, that what we perceive as live art is not practiced elsewhere—even if it is called something entirely different.

There have been several attempts in the last few years to study and archive live art production beyond the more privileged locations and visible practices. LADA, for example, sought to archive the practices of less visible communities and people from all parts of the world in their *Restock, Rethink, Reflect* research project, focusing on race, disability, and feminism. This project included the creation of *Mapping Feminism* in which I was commissioned along with other artists to each design a map of what we consider as feminist practices in live art. In the map I created, I place actions and performances made by female artists and non-artists during the Arab uprisings (figure 1). The genesis of this idea was that I found myself as a live artist inspired by other artists using their work to address feminist concerns. At the same time, I was inspired by the actions of non-artists, such as protestors, in the Arab uprisings. These women placed their bodies in the public space, occupying it, forcing it to listen to them, braving beating as well as sexual torture and harassment. As both a homage to these women and a nod to the live art world to see them, I created this map.

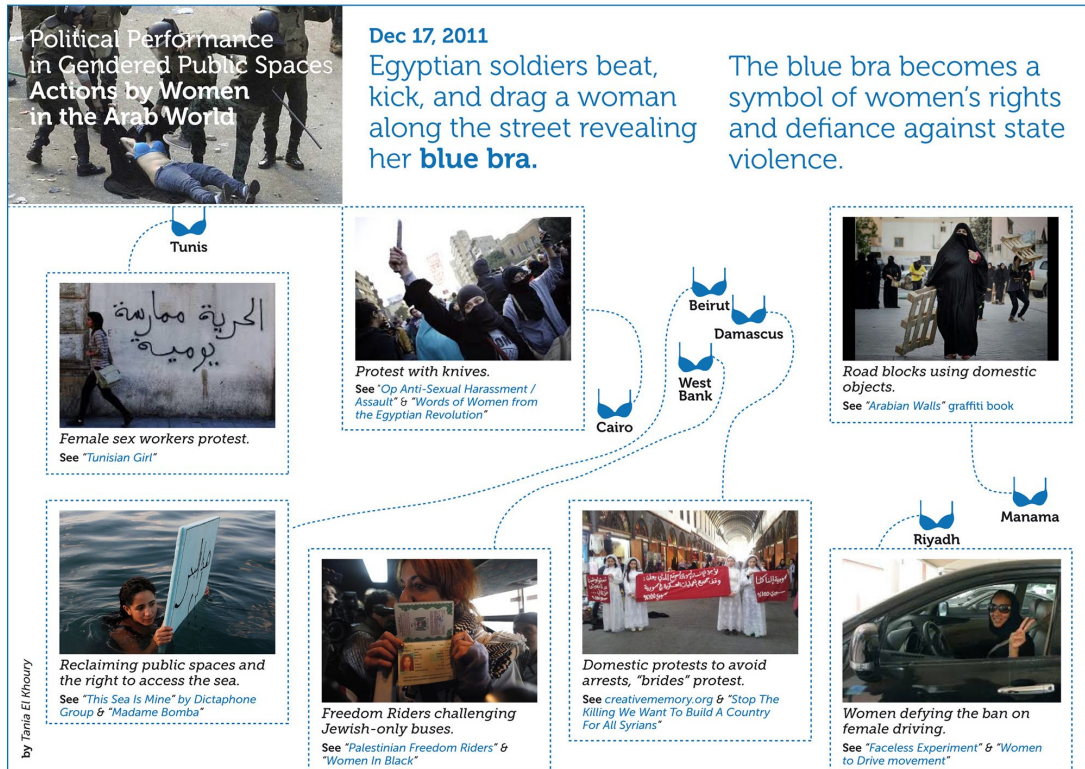


Fig. 1. Tania El Khoury's "Mapping Feminism" in *Political Performance in Gendered Public Spaces*. London: Live Art Development Agency, 2014.

## Beyond Western Centrism

The vast majority of knowledge produced on performance and live art, its trends, and its meanings tend to originate in the West, in particularly through English-language publications, debates, and exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> This knowledge follows a particular history of ethics, values, and temporality. The majority of books and essays discussed in this thesis were written by Western theorists who primarily refer to art produced in the Western world, and by individuals drawn from the dominant power groups of their societies. To be fair, some of these authors, such

<sup>8</sup> Although performance art has roots all over the world, its historicisation has widely focused on the practices of European and US artists. See, as an example, Roselee Goldberg's *Performance Live Art Since the 60s* to notice that the vast majority of artists discussed in this context are of US or European extraction.

as Claire Bishop, Jen Harvie, and Adam Alston do mention, in the introductions of their books, the limits of critiquing works made in a language they do not speak or in an unfamiliar context—and as a result their being confined to a geographical and cultural region they know. Yet we remain trapped by these very limitations when discussing theory, art, and politics. Art criticism began in eighteenth-century England and France and has since been articulated mainly in English and French. It was not until 1950 that “various experts anxious to develop international cooperation in the fields of artistic creation, dissemination and cultural development” founded the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) (“AICA History”). According to artist and art historian Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, it is very recently in the 1990s that the understanding of contemporary art broadened beyond Western Europe and North America. He however explains that although artists from Africa are increasingly recognised in the global art scene, they do not become “the bastion of measuring the state of contemporary art” (27). Nzewi relies on the argument of philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their book *Empire*, in which they explain that globalization absorbs non-Western cultures in order to represent an image of a cultural democracy without actually challenging the hegemony and dominance of Western culture (28).

The problem with Western-centrism is not merely ethical or political in the sense of diversity. Examining a large number of publications on live art, one can notice that Western-centrism also removes the ability to capture a full set of experiences that feed into each other. This seems particularly crucial at a time when the global south-north refugee flows are only increasing, and the international art scene appears to be attempting some type of response.

During the Arab uprisings, protest, political activism, and state repression were contagious: they travelled from one town to another, from one city to another, and across national borders. Yet so too was the liveness with which many of those around and afar experienced and witnessed the uprisings. Amidst these political upheavals, there was a cultural boom of sorts. How does bringing the Arab uprisings into conversations about the political potential of interactivity in live art help us better understand the stakes? As much as artists would like to think that we function beyond the limitations of geography, the production of art in the West is not, nor should it be, the standard reference for a discussion on art and politics. This is both a theoretical and practical concern. What does it mean to discuss art and politics in a context devoid of colonial legacies and the constant threat of foreign intervention? How do these realities complicate the very simple acts of funding sources, co-sponsorship, and promotional language? This is to say nothing of the lived realities in non-Western societies at the level of political systems, economic development, and social composition. Looking at the Arab uprisings as a context for discussing the political dimension of interactivity in art helps de-centre the West. In particular, the Arab region and the period of the uprisings provide a number of features that challenge the implicit assumptions and static contexts of much of the knowledge produced on art and politics. I mean this in three ways:

- 1) During the Arab uprisings, there was a possibility of fundamental change to the existing political order. This belief moved people to act, intervene, interact, and put their bodies at the forefront of multiple struggles (Haddad, Bsheer, and Abu-Rish 1-6). It also mobilized political regimes to engage in wanton violence and destruction, as they understood the existential threats these

uprisings represented (Heydemann and Leenders). What does it mean to produce art in a context in which fundamental change is not simply wished for, but literally at the cusp such that it could occur at any moment? The imaginative possibilities and political interventions of the art produced during this time speak directly to that context.

- 2) Many Arab states feature authoritarian systems of rule that have been in place for decades (Posusney and Angrist). In addition to the institutional and social bases of authoritarian rule, such regimes regularly relied on the reality and threat of imprisonment, torture, and/or death. Prior to the Arab uprisings, a vibrant art scene in many of these countries expended great energies to navigate this censorship. But during the uprisings and because of them, we witnessed many artists break through the barrier of fear with all its implications for art production. This was a time when the basic ordering of society was thrown into question, and not simply as a hypothetical scenario in an academic article. What does such an explosion of artistic production and break of decades-long taboos in the public sphere mean for art and politics?
- 3) Many Arab artists joke today that Berlin is now the Arab cultural capital. This statement emanates from the reality of relocation and resettlement of many Arab—and primarily Syrian—political refugees to Berlin. The number of these individuals, who found themselves joined by a large number of their colleagues, art professors, collaborators, and others only increased as the destruction in Syria continues and the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Asad continues to appear to have secured for itself an afterlife in Syria. Art festivals and venues in Berlin and beyond are now interested in collaborating with newly arrived refugees, hearing from them, and forming new dialogues

through art. But many of these individuals are artists in their own right, have lived the reality of art and politics and all its stakes.

Exploring the Arab uprisings therefore offers us a different context for discussing the political potential of art. It is particularly remarkable to me how and why state repression through assassination, torture, imprisonment, and exile are not present in debates on interactivity within art. However uncomfortable this discussion might be, it brings to the fore the identities of artists and their relationships with state power. An inclusive discussion would allow for a closer look at spaces of interaction and their relationship to safety, surveillance, and repression. For example, when presented in a museum, the works that are often debated in art theory would most certainly incite a different interactivity than when they are presented in a market in Damascus. Discussions about audience interactivity and its political dimensions therefore need to include discussions on the politics of space.

### **Scenography of the Revolution**

Public spaces are gendered, controlled, negotiated, and contested.<sup>9</sup> Since December 2010, protestors occupied public squares around the world, activists and refugees squatted abandoned hotels and buildings, and communities fought for their right to the city and their right to access public beaches, and conserve the

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<sup>9</sup> In an article entitled “The Scenography of The Revolution,” I discuss examples of the practices by which both protestors and counterrevolutionary forces sought to control public space in the context of the uprisings. The focus in the article was on the Arab uprisings. Other contestations can be found across the world, namely in the increasing privatisation of urban spaces and its effect of freedom of speech and right of protest. For example, the site of the Occupy London movement has since the protests first began been subject to an injunction rendering protests impossible on this corporate-owned space.

public domain (Carothers and Youngs). The fight for equality, political change, open borders, and liberation was happening, and in some cases, continues to happen in the public space. Across the Arab world, protestors performed revolution using various tactics. They transformed public space into camping sites, pop-up cinema, free universities, open political debate areas, and consequently a scenography for the revolution. Mass protests took place, millions of people joined, thousands sang the same anthem, and hundreds participated in a line dance. Layers of interaction were simultaneously taking place: protestor-to-protestor, protestors to citizen journalists, citizen journalists to Internet users, people to government, just to name a few.

The urban landscape is both a site for popular uprisings and their crushing (El Khoury 2013). It is a battle zone that takes several shapes ranging from a fight over accessibility on pavements to a full destruction of cities by missiles. There are endless examples of contestation over public space's sovereignty since the Arab uprisings erupted in December 2010. For example, in the early period of the Syrian uprising, activists hid in public areas, small speakers blasting protest chants effectively challenging the state-imposed ban on protests in Damascus. They also released a large number of bouncy balls from up the hill towards the presidential palace. They dyed public fountains' water red. They painted walls with anti-regime slogans. They appeared in public spaces in what they called 'flying protests.' They wore the same colour shirt to recognise each other and be able to organise. The Syrian regime response was a complete destruction of cities especially in cities and areas that protested the most.

Privatisation of public space and the use of laws that protect private property are another way in which governments silence protestors and push them



out of revolutionary squares. The site of Occupy London is now a surveilled private property.<sup>10</sup> Governments around the world use anti-terror justifications for surveillance, policing, securitisation, and militarisation of urban spaces (Cram). In Bahrain, the fight over politics is apparent in the urban space. Opposition groups took it upon themselves to change the names of the main roads and streets from those belonging to the ruling royal family to instead referring to the popular uprising, their quest for freedom, the key events and martyrs of the uprising. Communities also shut down roads leading to their neighbourhoods using domestic material such as bin bags, sofas, and even toys. These aimed to stop police vehicles in raiding neighbourhoods after a police car ran over and killed a Bahraini teenager. Photos of women literally moving their kitchen appliances to the streets in order to make a barrier symbolise the intersection of public and private, the domestic and the urban, in the struggle for political change.<sup>11</sup>

It seems to me that people were and continue to fight for their right to re-imagine a different social and political landscape. The right to be involved in and display a re-imagination of the political reality comes hand in hand with art

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<sup>10</sup> Occupy London is a protest movement that began in London in 2011. It was inspired by Occupy Wall Street in New York, which was in turn inspired by the Arab uprisings. Like most protestors around the world that year, Occupy London demanded more just and equal political and economic systems. The protests started outside the London Stock Exchange, then moved to the area outside St Paul's Cathedral where around 170 tents were set up and remained until they were forcibly removed in February 2012. On the issue of privatization of the site, see Sarah Sackman's article titled "The Occupy London Result Raises the Thorny Issue of Property V. Protest."

<sup>11</sup> The recent practices of contestation over public space and political expression in Bahrain that started with the mass protests in 2011 were the subject of an art installation that took place in London during the July 2015 Shubbak Festival. Titled *Road Block*, the installation comprises of a large map of the changed street names, a sound piece of an interview with an activist detailing the contestation with the police, as well as photos of road blocks. The installation was made by an anonymous group of artists and activists under the name of The Road Bloc Collective. See some of the collected photographs from road blocks in Bahrain on the "Road Block Bahrain" account on Instagram (@roadblockbh).

production. The post-2010 break in the barrier of fear meant that activists and artists across the Arab world looked at the city's public space as a potential for creation and interaction. We saw a movement from inward-focused gatherings (e.g., art venues, university libraries, and other small gatherings) to outward-focused constellations (e.g., squares, roads, beaches, and walls). We saw an expanding amount of performance and art festivals that happened in the streets (e.g., al-Fan Share' in Cairo and Dream City in Tunis). We saw art that took place primarily in the streets and was about the streets. For example, the dance video *Cairography* (2013) by Dalia Naous involved testimonies by women about harassment while walking in the streets of Cairo and a series of secretly filmed performance interventions in the streets. Lebanese performance artist Rima Najdi dressed as a bomb and walked into the streets of Beirut in her *Madame Bomba: The TNT Project* (2014) as a critique of the normalisation of death in the region. Saudi artist and researcher Rana Jarbou conducted a social experiment/performance called *The Faceless Experiment* (2012) in which she wore the niqab for one week and blogged about her experience. In these works, as well as others, artists looked for inspiration, interaction with politics, and interactivity with audience in the public space beyond the safety of art institutions.

### **Research and Practice: *Gardens Speak***

I remain grateful that I was alive during a period where fundamental political change felt palpable and when individuals and collectives felt empowered enough to risk all as they challenged regimes, their oppressive systems, and their armies. It was this experience that led me to reconsider the ethics and politics of interactivity in my own work. I did so in my work both as a

live artist working around the world and as a co-founder of Dictaphone Group, an urban research and live art collective that focuses on site-specific projects in Lebanon with questions on our relationship to the city and its public spaces. I had, at least since 2005, primarily been interested in putting up work in 'real' spaces (rather than theatres, studios, and galleries). Yet the Arab uprisings and its many events, battles, and debates—not to mention the knowledge we accumulated—meant that I started to experience public space differently. It is no longer just a space where encounters cannot be restrained and where experiences cannot be limited. It became a politically charged space in which different groups and forces contested one another for power and through power. Whether performing a woman passing in the streets and being controlled through wireless headphones by a man/audience/collaborator (*Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* 2011) or making work that directly challenges the privatisation of the seashore (*This Sea is Mine* 2012), my research and practice were implicated in a study of the politics of space.

In this sense, this doctoral project is an extension of my artwork, as I continue to explore research through practice and vice versa. This written thesis has thus allowed me to engage with both the debates that are currently taking place in the art world as well as the debates taking place in the worlds of political and community activism. A co-constituent element of my doctorate project is *Gardens Speak* (2014). *Gardens Speak* is an interactive sound installation performance, as well as a book, and the practical component of my PhD project. The performance is based on the oral histories of ten people whom the Syrian regime killed during the early period of the Syrian uprising. These ten individuals were subsequently buried in domestic or public gardens across Syria, a fact that

reveals much about the nature of the uprising and regime's attempts to suppress it.

*Gardens Speak* was conceived with the political motivation of challenging the regime-imposed grand narrative of the Syrian uprising. Central to this hope is uncovering the individual histories of ordinary people who were killed in the early period of the uprising. The performance is devised with the aim of placing the audience in these people's narratives and spaces, inviting them to bare witness to their lives and deaths. The following chapters have similar aims. They seek to engage, challenge, and analyse dominant understandings of political live art. The thesis proposes a new reading of the tools and functions of performance, directly linking it to the changing political realities around us.

## **Research Methodology**

Like many of my performance projects, *Gardens Speak* is based on a preliminary research phase (i.e., oral history and readings). Yet it simultaneously formed a research in practice in and of itself. The different layers of research practice complemented and completed each other, negotiating the tensions between accessibility and knowledge, theory and practice, and ethics and presentation. An awareness of the different layers of research constitutes the core of my artistic practice: self-reflective of the ethics of work that it proposes. The first research phase comprised oral history interviews conducted with Syrians in London, Beirut, and different parts of Syria (the latter through Skype). Also important to this phase was reading various reports about the uprising, regime repression, and the overall context as well as analysing the conditions that made it common for people to bury their loved ones in gardens across Syria rather than

formal cemeteries. Further efforts at data collection in this first phase were made through direct contact with a journalist friend embedded in Aleppo. She sent me various photos and stories of gardens turned into cemeteries. After this complex first research phase, the collected oral histories were transcribed and transformed into a text written in the first person. They were later fact-checked, edited, performed, recorded, designed, and incorporated into the performance. This process was collaborative and provided a space to analyse the politics and ethics of collecting oral history as a collaborative project, which was reflected on in the writing of these thesis chapters.

The second phase of research in *Gardens Speak* began with the first public presentation of the work. It continues while the piece tours around the world (see Appendix 2). The encounter of the work with various audiences allows an additional space for research through practice. My thinking on the political potential of interactivity has developed through this practice. Examining audiences' interaction with the work, participating in feedback sessions, artist talks, and public conversations, as well as reading the letters written by audiences in the performance, were key in articulating the ideas that I present in these chapters.

To understand the ethical and political potentiality of interactive live art, I turned to my art practice as a knowledge generator. I looked closely at the elements that constitute the audience interaction with *Gardens Speak*. These are primarily: the act of listening to oral histories, bearing witness, embodiment, as well as mourning as a collective political practice.

In that sense, the written and practice components of this doctorate project informed and fed into each other. *Gardens Speak* had a number of alterations

inspired by theoretical readings, various drafts of writing these chapters, as well as encounters with audiences. For example, the role of the audience guide appeared to be more important than I originally thought. I therefore decided to work with a trained audience guide who would travel with the work and encounter its audience. This has proven important in achieving the interactivity that I aim for: one that is neither fully controlled nor random (see chapter 1). The trained audience guide (performed by Naya Salamé) implicates the ethics of interactivity I explore in this text. She does so by insuring that the audience know that they have the ability to alter or stop the piece as well as understand the instructions as an invitation rather than an imperative.

During the first public sharing of *Gardens Speak*, audience were instructed to read out loud the writing that they find in the soil stating where each martyr is buried. While many people found that action to be powerful, others believed that it was overwhelming. I decided to let go of this part of the instructions, fearing that those who prefer not to perform out loud, would do so anyway, in order not to disappoint the crowd.

I made further alterations regarding the space and time of the piece after showings in Cairo and Beirut. For example, allowing more down time for audiences after the piece. In these two Arab cities, the piece was presented in Arabic to an audience who could relate to what was happening in Syria—at least in the sense of having lived under decades of authoritarian rule and experienced the initial mass mobilizations that made up the Arab uprisings. Moreover, a significant number of Syrian audience came to see the work in Cairo and Beirut. This was reflective of a large number of them having fled Syria to neighbouring Arab countries and Turkey. In these two presentations, I met audience who are

close friends with or related to one of the martyrs whose story is in *Gardens Speak*. In these cases, the rather symbolic mourning ceremony became an actual commemoration in the presence of people who were still in mourning—or never had the chance to mourn their lost loved ones. In Cairo, a close friend of Bassel Shahadeh (one of the martyrs whose story is narrated in *Gardens Speak*) spent a long time lying on the soil crying after the performance ended. She later told me that it was the first time that she cried over her friend's death. For her, the experience was cathartic. She explained later that she cancelled meetings she had scheduled for after the show. Instead, she went to swim as she wanted to cleanse her body from the soil, while also extending the ceremonial experience that made her closer to her friend and to her own mourning process.

This encounter, as well as many others that happened around the world with various people, informed the writing of these chapters and in some cases the implementation of changes in the practice (noted in the course of the thesis). Those alterations were made in order to achieve ethical interactivity. They were almost made so as to communicate to the audience an understanding and a belief that each one of them witnesses and embodies differently.

### **Interactivity, Oral History, and Mourning**

In times of intense socio-political upheaval, the intersection between art and politics is put in question. The binary between what we consider as audience interactivity and passivity must consequently be readdressed. Taking this into consideration, I ask what constitutes active spectatorship, and what does interactivity achieve for the audience. Chapter one explores these questions drawing from theories of participation (both from the contemporary art world and the development industry), theories of interactivity (computer gaming industry),

and writings on immersive theatre. In this chapter, I offer my own views on the subject, building on my experience as an artist working mainly in interactive performance and installation. I explore ideas such as randomness, control, co-creativity and indeterminacy in relation to interactive live art. The chapter also examines the notion of political art asking what makes a work political while critiquing the binary between quality and function of art.

Chapter two explores the political motivations and effects of artists using oral history in performance. It argues for a conceptualisation of oral history interviews as One to One performances. Doing so helps us reflect on the politics and ethics of oral history encounters borrowing from literature and practices on intimacy and shared vulnerability in One to One performance. The notion of collaboration extends from the oral history interviews to the process of editing the material. I ask whose voice remains after we edit oral history material. Chapter two delves into the debate on oral history use in performance practices such as verbatim and documentarist theatre with the focal point on the notion of veracity and authenticity in relation to the theatre of the 'real.' It also derives inspiration from oral historians' ethics and practices in conducting interviews with people who have suffered trauma as well as constructing oral histories of people who are now dead.

Chapter three is where I move from discussing the political motivation to exploring the political potential of interactive live art. Here, I take as the central example the audience interactivity with *Gardens Speak*. I divide the political potential of this piece into three main elements: bearing witness, mourning, and embodiment. Bearing witness is when the audience witness oral histories, but also and importantly witness a depiction of these stories through performance. In other



words, the audience witness artists witnessing. In mourning, I discuss public grievability as a site for militancy. I describe the political context of Syria and the right of mourning as resistance in the early days of the uprising. In embodiment, I visit theories of physical theatre that discuss the embodiment of the performer of different roles and training techniques. I propose to look at the audience involvement in *Gardens Speak* as embodiment of people's stories and political realities. I argue that in embodiment, the political potential of interactivity is at work.

Finally, a note about the titles of the thesis chapters is in order. Each title used in the chapters of this thesis is a homage to a public sign, chant, or graffiti that was used during the Arab uprisings. The title of this introduction, "Death but not humiliation," is a popular chant in Syria that expressed how demonstrators were ready to die protesting than continue to live under the humiliation of regime rule. Chapter one is entitled, "No Dialogue With The Killers." This was a protest sign raised in Bahraini as a direct response to those who were calling for protesters to participate in the regime-initiated dialogue on reforms while it continued to assassinate and torture dissident voices. Chapter two borrows its title from a graffiti that was painted on the wall in Homs, Syria. Written anonymously, it read, "When I Am Gone, Be Sure That I Did My Best To Stay." This might have been written during the siege of Homs after which large numbers of people evacuated from the area in 2014. For me, this graffiti also sounds like a conversation between those who departed and those who remained, perhaps even a continuous conversation between the dead and the living. The title of chapter three is "No Aesthetics Outside My Freedom." This sentence comes from a poem by iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, titled "State of Siege" and written in 2002

while under siege by the Israeli army. The full verse says, “The martyr teaches me: There are no aesthetics outside my freedom” (Darwish). In 2012, ten years after the poem was written, and a few months after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, a revolutionary digital art group known as The Syrian People Know Their Way designed a poster using the words “No Aesthetics Outside My Freedom.” Through this sentence, whether under siege by an occupying army or calling for the downfall of a dictatorship, both the poet and the digital artists communicate their awareness that art and politics are closely intertwined. Darwish explains that this is an awareness was taught to him by the falling martyrs during the siege. For that reason, I chose this sentence to be the title of my chapter on “mourning as militancy” and the intertwining of aesthetics and politics during such act of resistance. The title of the conclusion, “Despair is Betrayal,” is borrowed from a sign that was held in Alexandria, Egypt during the second anniversary of the January 25, 2011 revolution. I find all of these slogans particularly inspiring when working in the current political context of fear and despair. Just as these slogans constitute a public declaration of the politics that the protestors held, I wrote this thesis as a declaration of the politics and the ethics I believe in and strive toward in my work as a live artist.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **“No Dialogue with the Killers”:**

#### **The Politics of Interactivity in Live Art**

I have come to realize that my art practice has always been interactive. It has been so since before I became aware of this word in English. For the past eleven years, I have created artwork using different mediums such as movement, text, video, and sound—among others—in spaces ranging from a museum gallery to the Mediterranean Sea. The only commonality across such works is that I never thought of the audience as a group of spectators. Conceptualizing audience involvement was central to the work process of each of these pieces. I consistently ask, who are these people with whom I share this work? The answer is never the same. Depending on the project, they are partners in crime, relationship therapists, friends and relatives of the deceased, or something else altogether. Like performers, the ‘audience’ could be (and become) anything and anyone depending on the specific artwork. In the making of my live art, the audience become my collaborators.

One could argue that every artwork requires active spectatorship. Indeed, in his influential book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, philosopher Jacques Rancière rejects the binary between active and passive—where being active means being effective and being passive means being un-engaged and submissive (12). What constitutes active spectatorship then? And what does it achieve for the audience? I engage these questions throughout this chapter. In doing so, I draw on my own artistic practice and position my work in dialogue with other artists, curators, and scholars who have explored the political and social dimension of ‘participatory,’

‘relational,’ ‘immersive,’ or ‘interactive’ performance—each of which I define below.

This chapter comprises two main sections, each exploring one of the questions stated above. In the first section, I discuss the politics of ‘participation’ as a concept and practice. I do so in order to elucidate the reasons behind my own use of the term ‘interactivity’ to answer the first question, ‘what constitutes active spectatorship?’ In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the political function of interactivity. Therein, I explore various theories and concepts in order to answer the second question, “what does interactivity achieve for the audience?”

## **I. What Constitutes Active Spectatorship?**

### **The Myth and Tyranny of Participation**

During the past decade, many art critics have increasingly labelled my own practice and that of many of my colleagues as participatory (for example, scholar James Frieze in his book *Reframing Immersive Theatre*). In this context, they use the term to signal an active engagement with an invited audience or a certain community. Artists themselves as well as critics, producers, programmers, and scholars deploy the term to highlight active spectatorship in certain performances or installations. For example, Next Wave Festival in Melbourne advertised my work *Gardens Speak* as “participatory.” They also employ the term in reference to people who contribute to a project whose ultimate staging is elsewhere (e.g., galleries), for other viewers (who are not the ‘participants’). When marketing shows, describing the work as participatory functions as a disclaimer to prepare the audience for engagement on their part: at least a few of the audience—and possibly all of them—will not be sitting anonymously in a theatre seat in the dark

throughout the performance. Instead, the audience might be asked to speak, move, or even make choices. While the label ‘participatory’ excites many—evoking board games, pub quizzes, and promenade shows—it also alienates some audience members. The latter tend to find themselves wanting to avoid the risk of feeling trapped, exposed, or uncomfortable in a potentially awkward art experience (Nield).

Outside of the art world, participatory seems to be an adjective used to describe virtually anything that involves the general public and a certain manifestation of authority. To name a few examples: participatory architecture, participatory city planning, participatory design, participatory development, participatory economics, participatory education, and participatory politics. Below, I explain how in many of these fields, practitioners and scholars have criticised the political manipulation of participation. The question they often ask is whether or not participation truly shifts the balance of power between decision makers (i.e., authority figures) and those who will be most affected by these projects—as champions of participation claim it does. Sceptics seem to be arguing that the insertion of the myth of participation in political speeches, public funding, promotional campaigns, and development projects is used as a tool to draw people in and convince them that they are part of the decision-making process even when they are not (Rahnema).

One of the more useful critiques of participation comes from the field of development and urban planning, as it often resonates with the stated aims of art projects in marginalised communities. In the introduction to their edited book *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, scholars Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari critique the

spread of participation in development. Their book examines how participation is “counter-intuitive and contrary to its rhetoric of empowerment” (3). They do so by discussing three dynamics: the political co-option of participation; the myth of communities as one harmonious group with similar needs; and the concept of ‘local knowledge’ supposedly attained during participatory processes (but often dictated to communities by those very same processes). Such critique is directed at big development organisations such as the World Bank that employ and advocate for the idea of community participation. Cooke and Kothari offer examples in which participation is more harmful than empowering. They do so by analysing the micro-relationships between ‘the professional’ and ‘the community.’ The ethics of such relationships are useful for the purposes of this thesis, especially when considered in relation to artists working in communities. In particular, questions on the power relations between participants, facilitators, and funders need to be addressed.

In the *Development Dictionary*, writer and diplomat Majid Rahnema examines the manipulative purposes of participation. He explains that it was social activists and fieldworkers who first used the term in the 1950s. They were criticising the top-down structure in failed development projects and consequently called for a more participatory process (117). Soon after, governments and other institutions adopted the term. As a result, communities were “led to take actions which are inspired or directed by centres outside their control” (116).

According to Rahnema, some grassroots activists are well aware of the pattern of governments and other institutions co-opting participation. Yet they

still naively insist that participation is a community-empowering mechanism (117). Rahnema's harsh criticism of such claims is based on his assertion that the only real political outcome of participation is to provide unquestionable legitimization for development plans and the authorities that oversee them. Moreover, the assumption that communities need to be empowered because they are currently powerless (rather than resistant) reproduces the fundamental dynamics as state power (top-down decision making).

The participation phenomenon in urban development has allowed 'change agents' to become self-appointed authorities. They often project their own views on what change needs to happen in the society rather than learn from the communities they claim to be representing (Rahnema 123). Placing themselves as bearers of higher consciousness than communities, "some participatory activists have been seen to outdo the paternalistic arrogance of the conventional expert/evangelizer" (Rahnema 125).

The target of Cooke and Kothari's critique are developers, whereas that of Rahnema are activists. Yet we can borrow from their analysis to critique the participation trend in the arts in order to question its value as a political project. Scholar Helen Freshwater explores this very subject, stating that participation in theatre can be both disappointing and questionable. As she explains, "These strategies are as disappointing and mendacious, in their own way, as governmental consultation exercises which simply provide an illusion of public dialogue whilst functioning to legitimate decisions taken by the authorities" ("You Say Something" 406). In order to avoid the reinstatement of other forms of manipulation and control exercised on already marginalised communities, artists need to question the instrumentalisation of both communities and our work with

them as solutions for social issues such as xenophobia, poverty, civil and human rights abuses, and so on.

Returning to Rancière, he reminds us that “there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action” (134). In other words, raising awareness through art is synonymous neither with political action nor political change. I would add to this that presenting our work as having the aim of raising awareness is based on the problematic assumption that we as artists are already more aware than others. In this sense, our work ceases to serve as a platform for mutual learning and becomes one for campaigning and propagating a certain truth claim. This is particularly questionable when the target audience for our art are those very people who are the ultimate victims of the problems we are claiming to raise awareness about. The term participatory connotes a sense of hierarchy whereby a skilful expert such as an architect, urban planner, or artist ‘allows’ a local community (or member thereof) to ‘participate’ in a project that is essentially about the community. If anything, it is the local communities who should allow and facilitate such participation for an alleged expert, and not the other way around. Continuing the conversation on the power dynamics and manipulation in participatory art projects, I next explore the link between neoliberalism and participation.



## Participating in Neoliberalism

A number of performance scholars have written on the instrumentalisation of participatory art in neoliberal governmental policies. These include Claire Bishop, Jen Harvie, Shannon Jackson, and Adam Alston. Speaking about community-based art projects, Bishop makes an important point: arguing that government officials have developed a habit of literally throwing artists at social problems, so they can “mop up wherever the government wishes to absolve itself of responsibility” (“Where Are We Now?” 3). She argues that this results in a focus on the efficacy of art rather than on its artistic merit. Bishop shows how this efficacy-centric dynamic is paired with the encouragement of a quantitative evaluation of art in which results need to be palpable and enumerated. In her book *Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism*, Harvie argues along the same line as Bishop. She explains that there is a broad instrumentalisation of community-based art in the age of neoliberal capitalism whereby governments expect art and artists to fix societal problems. Harvie’s analysis takes aim at curator Maria Lind’s claim that participatory art is a model for social relations and an “intrinsic critique of individualism and profit-seeking” (28). Alternatively, Harvie posits participatory art as problematic temporary relations that are distracting and superficial (42). Her criticism is based on the fact that these participatory works do not in practice or aim dismantle neoliberalism. Rather, according to Harvie, they distract the audience from that task by offering them a space where interdependency is fake or, alternatively, by actually preparing them for the precariousness of work in neoliberalism (187).

Harvie's analysis helps us inquire into whether what she identifies as trends in art, are in fact complicit with neoliberal governmentality. For her, these trends offer a "spectacle of communication" and therefore contribute to social inequalities (3). Harvie argues that this effect is produced by limiting the agency of the audiences while simultaneously distracting them with the fake promise of social change (49). For Harvie, there is a fundamentally unequal relationship at play: the artist's social and economic capital increases, the audience internalizes the precariousness of the cultural economy, and capitalism remains the beneficiary (48).

Harvie draws important comparisons between unpaid volunteers in acclaimed participatory performances (e.g., *You Me Bum Bum Train*) and the paid labourers in the work of Santiago Sierra. She points to the fact that audience members are now often made to do the work for interactive performances. Harvie refers to the audience as "prosumer" a term that combines the role of producer and consumer (50). This is a term usually used in online banking and shopping, referring to the tasks now carried out by the consumer rather than the service provider. In everyday life, the prosumer may feel empowered by her ability to produce her own shopping or design experience. Yet the term also applies to interactive performances in which the audience is invited to produce their own experience, possibly feeling like empowered prosumers too (50). In both cases, prosumerism may saturate people and give them a sense of fatigue as they find themselves trapped into undertaking endless tasks and having to work during their leisure time. Harvie's point is that the role of an audience member in such work is in line with neoliberalism: we reject those depending on the artist (or state) as failures and parasites while we applaud alleged individualists (56).

Certainly, we should avoid perpetuating the idea that performance needs to prioritize combating neoliberalism above everything. At the same time, Harvie is on to something with her sense of the dangers of prosumerism in performance. Reading participation through the current regime of global political economy is crucial. In various fields (e.g., art, development, and politics), many have used participation to manipulate people into thinking that they have choices when they do not. In doing so, these interactions tend to silence resistance. While artists might choose to not engage with political content in their work, that is significantly different from being oblivious to how the politics of their work functions. In other words, performance and politics are intertwined as the former deals with people, relationships, locality, and its own industry.

### **Interventions and Invisibility**

In addition to the danger of offering artists as quasi-liberating interventionists, it is also necessary to question the employment of the word intervention when talking about working in public spaces or communities. Public space is hardly an empty canvas. It is inhabited, used, controlled, contested, and negotiated. Intervening in public space means intervening in the daily lives of one or more communities.

To intervene is to interrupt and to change realities, sometimes irreparably. For lack of a better word, I have sometimes used the word intervention when talking about my own work. As Dictaphone Group, my collaborators and I have sometimes described the site-specific performances we conducted in public spaces in Lebanon as interventions in the public space. Yet in reality, they hardly interrupt or intervene. As a form, they use invisibility and the act of blending into the city. They do not appear as a performance, but instead as a walk, a picnic, a

swim, a debate, a tour, and other activities that one might very well encounter in a public space. In this sense, our form parallels that of Augusto Boal's Invisible Theatre, a method developed to take theatre to the streets and public spaces while avoiding police authority and using audience as actors or 'spect-actors' in Boal's term (xxi). Dictaphone Group's site-specific works are similarly created to draw in accidental audiences and passers-by. Though unlike street performances that might draw audiences in by using spectacle and calling out for a crowd to surround clearly visible artists, these works might solicit a second look, an intimate conversation, or an improvised debate. Dictaphone Group is intentional about not producing spectacles in order to intervene in public space. We found that subtle and invisible performances that take the shape of an accessible form and language such as a city tour, a city walk, and others are more adequate in allowing a space where everyone encounters each other outside of the hierarchy of theatricality. The aim is to create encounters that do not alienate people but instead lead them toward understanding that they are welcome to interact and co-create.



Fig. 2. From the performance of *This Sea is Mine* by Dictaphone Group. Beirut, 2012.  
Photo by Hussein Baydoun.

### **Who Are the Audience?**

Scholar Sophie Nield explores the rise of a theatre character named ‘Spectator.’ In her article on the subject, she taps into the overwhelming feeling of embarrassment while being spectator to immersive theatre. Faced with an actor speaking to her, she finds herself wondering who exactly does this actor think she is (531). Nield explores the answer across a number of experiences conveyed by spectators responding to actors and interactive settings. The question that Nield asks as a spectator resonates with the question that I ask at the start of this chapter: “who are my audience?” As an artist, it is crucial to recognise that in interactive performances, often audience members ask themselves the same question: who am I supposed to be right now? Bearing this in mind is therefore necessary (even if not sufficient) if artists wish to avoid embarrassment, awkwardness, and invisibility on the part of spectators. Nield finds an answer to the question in

viewing the role of spectators as a mirror to theatre itself. The theatre in question does not see its spectators, at least not for who they are, or who they want to be. The theatre has imagined its spectators long before they arrive. When they do arrive, the theatre looks at its very own image in the spectators (535).

I carry this idea of the theatre mirror with me, not because I like it, but because it troubles me. I have certainly been a spectator where I felt I was made invisible, moved around, and treated as an extra on a busy film set without my consent. I carry the idea of the theatre mirror with me, as a promise to myself that as an artist, I never want to be guilty of it. While the role of the audience is already set prior to the encounter, it is important to view such a role as an invitation that the audience can accept, reject, slightly shift, or entirely transform.

I prefer the term audience to that of spectator, as I find the former to be broad and thus inclusive of all forms of encounters (e.g., sound, movement, and interactivity). Artist and curator Kristy Edmunds suggests that the 'viewer' (in visual art) and the 'audience' (in performance art) have deeper engagement with the art than the 'spectator.' She explains, "if we are a spectator of art, we offer a brief and statistical presence, but as a viewer of and/or an audience for works of art we offer our commitment as fellow journeymen in the artist's invitation to perceive" (2). In an article titled, "Interactivity and Immersion In A Media-Based Performance," scholar Catherine Bouko uses the word 'immersant' in reference to the audience of immersive theatre. The term immersant seems to be suitable to immersive multi-media performances in which the audience gets immersed in a virtual or enhanced reality. As a result, the word immersant connotes an introverted experience rather than a relational one. That said, Bouko agrees with author Elena Gorfinkel's research on video games in which she explains that

immersion is an effect rather than a form or a method that stands by itself (Bouko 260).

Agreeing that immersion is an effect that could or could not be achieved by interactive performances and installations complicates the use of the terms immersive and immersant because there is always a possibility that the audience might not achieve such immersion. When discussing active spectatorship, performance scholars such as Keren Zaiontz and Adam Alston use the term immersive. Alston presents immersion as a type of engagement rather than a category in performance. Zaiontz alternates between using immersive and interactive. I lean toward the belief that immersion may be attained through interactivity but not necessarily achieved. In that sense, presenting work as immersive connotes a determinist position that immersion will be achieved. This description might however be suitable to the type of work in which the relationship between the artists and the spectators are already determined.

I employ the term audience in my work, and throughout this thesis. There are several reasons I do so. First, the term acknowledges the traditionally materialistic relationship between audience and artist, in which an audience often pays to see, enjoy, consume, or experience the work of an artist. Acknowledging such a relationship is a necessary first step to discuss the power dynamics between artists and audience, which I am examining in this chapter. Second, the audience's role varies during each performance. In one of my interactive performances, *Fuzzy* (2012), the audience becomes a therapist once they enter the performance space, and they leave again as an audience member. In *Jarideh* (2009), the audience is a partner in crime in a two-person operation performed by them and myself. In *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* (2011), they play the role of a *male*

choreographer of a performer/women (me) passing in the streets. Just like performers take on different roles, I envisage my audience as taking on different roles. This vision remains an invitation rather than a dictation. To ensure that it is so, moments need to be devised in which the audience have chances to slip in and out of the characters they themselves create. One audience depiction of how to perform a choreographer ends up being entirely different than another audience. Additionally, their ability to come in and out of their role as they please, facilitates a critical distance towards the work, the material they are subjected to, and their own involvement.



Fig. 3. From the performance of *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* by Tania El Khoury. Edinburgh, 2011. Photo by Ibrahim Fakhri.

The performer and audience member both surprise each other. They are both unaware of the extent to which the other person is performing, reverting to fiction, or being confessional. In some instances, the audience and performer achieve collaboration so that, if watched from a distance, one would find it difficult



to decipher who is performing to whom or who is leading whom. When such relationship between performer (or artwork, when it functions without a performer) and audience is achieved, the question that Nield asks as a spectator, shifts. In this case, the audience might ask questions such as: What am I in this story? How would I play this role? Do I want to perform this, and why? The agency of the audience in deciding how, and to what extent, they would like to be involved end up ensuring that the mirror that this art produces is of each person's own politics, and that of the society at large. It is no longer a mirror of a predetermined theatre and its controlled image.

### **Consuming Spectators**

In his book *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, Alston examines two main forms of audience participation: the narcissistic and the entrepreneurial (10). Narcissistic participation, he argues, is one that revolves around the audience members making themselves central to the aesthetics of the piece. On the other hand, entrepreneurial participation is one in which the audience roams freely in the performance space encouraged to take initiative and be rewarded by special encounters. Both forms of participation encourage problematic dynamics between the audience, the work, and the artist. Alston draws his analysis from his engagement as a researcher-spectator in the productions of *Shunt* and *Punchdrunk*, among others, to ask whether immersive theatre can “resonate with neoliberal productivism, or produce dissensus” (226).

In her article “Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance,” Zaiontz examines the lack of audience agency in *Audience* (2011), a performance by the company *Ontroerend Goed*. In this show, the performers literally put the audience under the spotlight in order to prove that “any crowd is

susceptible to manipulation” (Ontroerend Goed). She asks about the appeal of such a type of participation in which the audience is disempowered or even bullied (405). For Zaiontz, such experiences feed into people’s narcissism. She explains, “a narcissistic spectatorship encourages the viewer to fully engross herself in an artistic production in a way that highlights her own singular relationship to the piece” (407). The self-absorbed audience or “experiencer”—a term she borrows from Robin Nelson—derives pleasure from being central to the art piece despite the undemocratic nature of the power relations in that piece (408). One effect of such artwork is to provoke competitiveness between spectators who do not necessarily compete among each other but are encouraged to prioritize their own unique and individual experience. As Zaiontz puts it, “*Audience* was like setting out on an amusement park ride, with the exception that the entertainment being consumed was spectatorship itself” (405).

The notions of experiencer, consumer, prosumer and entrepreneur that Harvie, Zaiontz, and Alston examine, center the conversation around the ethics of how audiences are engaged in the performance industry. What I find particularly insightful in their analyses is the risk of perpetuating the phenomenon of narcissism in the very act of creating audience-centric performances. How did the late artist Adrian Howells negotiate such a thing in his body of work that was physically and emotionally focused on the audience? The intimate encounters that Howells devised did not consume spectatorship, to use Zaiontz’s formulation. Neither did he utilise audiences as a mirror, let alone bully them. I examine Howells’ work and his writing, as well as the related theories on intimacy and care more closely in chapter two. Considering the relationship between artists and audience requires us to first engage with the ethics and politics of interactivity. In

order to do so, I next explain the use of the term ‘interactivity’ and my understanding of this relationship—drawing on my art practice as well as common definitions of interactivity.

### **Achieving Interactivity: Interactivity as Process**

My employment of the word “interactivity” in reference to active spectatorship is a deliberate choice. In this thesis and throughout my practice, I conceptualize interactive performances as a collaboration between the audience and myself whereby we are both active in a relationship that is horizontal (rather than vertical, hierarchical, and controlled) in nature. In this sense, the audience can decide to stop the performance, shift it to another place, or make from it whatever they would like. This is achieved not merely by telling the audience that they do have choices to choose from but by creating a space in which the audience understand early on that they have agency in transforming that space. While I have experimented with audience interactivity since the very first performance piece that I created in 2005, my understanding of this type of encounter with the audience was deepened in 2009.

In *Fuzzy* (2009) I invited the audience to act as a relationship therapist for my then-relationship. I started the piece by giving the audience (often one person at a time, but sometimes a couple together), a letter written and signed by my then-partner explaining what he felt was going wrong with our relationship. I then proceeded to give my own version of the story. Each of the hundreds of audience members who participated in this piece while it toured (the piece toured until the real life romantic relationship it was addressing ended) had a unique way of performing the role of the therapist. Some listened quietly and left the room, in that sense acting like conventional theatregoers, but also like quiet therapists who

never interrupt your flow. Some interrupted and preceded to analyse. Some gave precise advice and tips. Some spoke about their own lives and experiences consequently shifting the performer-audience roles. During the test run of this piece, a colleague advised me that I should find a way to contain the audience responses and to shift the conversation back to my original script. The argument was that it would be a shame not to be able to share the whole story with them and that it is too big of a risk to allow “uncontrollable interaction.” I decided to take the risk. The only limit that I have set for the interaction is a specific duration for the encounter (30 minutes). After all, therapy sessions in everyday life tend to have time limit. What happens during that time limit, however, would carry unlimited possibilities depending on audience interactivity. The piece took the shape of a scripted monologue created to last for the duration of the session/performance but it was often interrupted, transformed into another conversation, or a monologue by the audience, or an argument, perhaps some awkward moments, or anything and everything else. These interactions were not open for other audience members to watch. The audience simultaneously and exclusively acted as both a collaborator and a spectator. There was no audience member that was not a collaborator, and no collaborator that was not an audience member. *Fuzzy* was my first attempt in creating work that is dependent on the relationship between audience and performer as equal partners. In that sense, it was a performance about that interactivity. Negotiating control over the outcome of the performance with the audience is what draws me into studying interactivity. Next, I explore theories of interactivity that are not directly linked to live art but nonetheless offer an examination of the balance of control in order to achieve interactivity.



Fig. 4. From the performance of *Fuzzy* by Tania El Khoury. London, 2010.

### **What is Interactivity?**

In his essay “What is Interactivity?” philosopher Aaron Smuts outlines different theories of interactivity in relation to today’s technologies and art. He is particularly interested in the issue with specific reference to the concept of control. Smuts argues, “to be interactive, something must be responsive in a way that is neither completely controllable nor completely random” (54). Smuts mentions the notion of “concreativity,” a collaborative creative process, and a useful idea in analysing interactive artwork (54). He also criticizes other theories of interactivity that confuse it with control, particularly control over how the ultimate narrative is presented (55).

Novels, television and web series, and games are offered to the public as interactive only because they allow their audience to choose the order of the

information they are receiving. Yet the users are never able to affect the predetermined range of outcomes. Similarly, interactivity in performance is not achieved by simply allowing the audience to move around in the performance space or choose the order in which they watch the different scenes. Achieving an interactive relationship with the audience is allowing them to distort the piece and construct 'new art' from it, "making each encounter between a participant and the work unique" (Dixon qt. in Bouko 256). Philosopher of art Dominic McIver Lopes picks up on this dynamic when he differentiates between "weakly interactive" and "strong interactivity" art (68). In weak interactivity, the audience or user in the case of digital art is given control over the sequence of the content. Strong interactivity however is only achieved if the participant is given the ability to structurally modify or shape the artwork (ibid).

Smuts, Dixon, and McIver all agree that 'real' or 'strong' interactivity is achieved by giving the audience agency over creative input, or what Smuts calls "concreativity." Yet Smuts' notions of randomness and control are not entirely effective when applied to performance. He says,

X and Y interact with each other if and only if (1) they are mutually responsive, and (2) neither X nor Y completely control the other, and (3) neither X nor Y responds in a completely random fashion. Based on this relation we can derive a definition of interactive: Something is interactive if and only if (1) it is responsive, (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a completely random fashion. (65)

Responsiveness is crucial to achieving interactivity, according to Smuts (63). This might be true when humans are interacting with computers, but not necessarily in

interactive live art. Let us consider a counter example. In one of my performances, *Fuzzy*, if my audience decided to not respond, this is also considered interaction. Put differently, refusing to respond in an interactive performance is not synonymous with the interruption or failure of interactivity. Rather, it is one of many possible forms of interactivity. I find this notion to be at the heart of understanding interactivity as a process that is not predetermined nor entirely controlled by the artist.

Smuts also claims that randomness disrupts interactivity (63). This is not the case in performance work where randomness can be employed as a dramaturgical element. Smuts does not acknowledge that an intentional loss of control can be an element of interactivity. Such is the case in performances in which the body of the performer is placed under the control of an interacting individual or a group of people - for example, the early influential works of Yoko Ono's such as *Cut Piece* (1964) and Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* (1974). In both of these pieces, the bodies of the artists were presented passively to a group of audience members who made decisions about ripping their clothes off—and, in the case of Abramovic, pointing a gun to her head. In *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better* (2011), I experimented with the loss of control, giving the (male-only) audience member the chance to choreograph my body in the street. They watch me from a third-floor window passing below them in the street. The audience give me instructions through wireless headphones. In this performance, as in *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0*, giving up control to the audience is an artistic choice that does not interrupt interactivity, but enables it.

Smuts's insights are nonetheless important, but must be reframed with respect to the assumptions related to the control that automatically comes with the

artist, as a creator and enabler of the encounter with audience. At one point, Smuts gives an example of a tennis match between an amateur and a professional player. According to him, interactivity cannot be achieved between these two players, as one will always be controlling the other. Smuts' theory seems unable to consider the fact that an amateur or the weaker side of an encounter is able to surprise us.

Despite his determinism, we can draw a useful conclusion from Smuts' theory. That in order to achieve interactivity, the stronger side of the encounter needs to be aware of this power dynamic and negotiate it with the 'weaker' side. In that sense, an artist already starts with a stronger position over the audience. The control over the aspects of the encounter needs to be central to how we contextualise interactive work. Only when we are ready to negotiate power dynamics, that we allow interactivity to be a collaborative process. Such encounters would be far from bullying audiences (to recall Zaiontz) or dictating their behaviour.

A number of scholars have written about the power relations in interactive performances, including Punchdrunk's *In Sleep No More* (2011). Therein, the performance group gave audience members masks and instructed them to wear them at all times. They consequently turned the audience into a homogenous group and effacing their ability for facial expressions (e.g., clocking eyes, smiles, or looking bored and confused). Nield describes the impersonal spectatorship in such performances and the unequal balance of power between the actors (who know exactly what is happening) and the audience (who are thrown into it) as a nightmarish scene in which the latter feel exposed and abandoned. She explains, "perhaps we risk staring into the black hole of the theatre itself, mute, stage-affrighted, awaking to the actor's nightmare of being on the stage, and not



knowing the play” (535). In such work, the audience experience is both collective and lonely, and their individual presence in the endless runs of Punchdrunk’s productions are not meant to be unique or special. It does not matter who the audience members are as individuals. They can come very close to the artists (though not allowed to touch them) but will never achieve the visibility that the performers have. In that sense, the control and power that are inherent to the status of performers and artists are not put into question in order to achieve interactivity with the audience. On the contrary, they are emphasised.

The audience as individual is similarly not present in Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist is Present* (2010) in which audience members are invited to sit facing Abramovic while they look into each other’s eyes. The audience is surveilled by other audience members waiting in line for their turn and by the Museum of Modern Art security officers. The audience is expected to sit silently, smile, perhaps cry, and then decide to leave. The audience cannot reach out to the artist, or improvise should they feel the urge to. A scene from the film documenting this performance and bearing the same name shows an audience member who dared to improvise by stripping her clothes off when facing the very same artist who often performed nude. Security guards quickly pulled that audience member out of the show. This scene reminds me of a protestor being pulled out of a space after making a political statement somewhere that does not allow political statements. Beyond the importance and the quality of the two above-mentioned high-profile performances that a vast number of spectators seem to have enjoyed and appreciate, I present them as examples to situate my thinking on interactivity as well as my practice away from such encounters. I argue that interactivity is achieved through a more horizontal and co-creative relationship between artists

and audience. Such process includes a balance of randomness and control that allows the politics of both audience and artists to be revealed and to be potentially transformed.

## II. What Does Interactivity Achieve for the Audience?

### Political Performances

Different configurations of artists, curators, critics, and scholars use different terms to describe their views, methods, or critiques. In the rest of this chapter, I explore some of the more common terms and theories such as relational aesthetics, participatory art, and social practice. Regardless of the terms used, it seems that the main denominator in these artworks is their attempt to intervene in ‘the political,’ which I will focus on in the present section. This has been the case in work that claims to be taking art outside of the art institutions, or work that happens in communities or with communities or about communities, art that challenges laws, discrimination, borders and so on, art that is a campaign or a direct action, art claiming to create an alternative community, etc. Ultimately, artists present some of these works to the audience as political or as activism. These artists might even call themselves activist artist, social worker, activist, or something of the kind.

While some artists may well be activists beyond their artistic career, there is a drawback in declaring their artwork as activism. Rancière rejects the term ‘committed art’ as one can be a committed artist but commitment is not a category in art, and art need not be described as committed or uncommitted (*Politics of Aesthetics* 60). Similarly, scholar Deirdre Heddon states that one can be a feminist artist but “the feminism of a work is not a settled, inherent quantity” (“Politics of

Live Art" 191). Indeed, an artist who is also an activist does not produce work that is automatically activism. The art industry (from curators, publicists, programmers, and critics) play a major role in confusing the two by encouraging the labelling of artworks as 'political' or 'activism' or 'revolutionary' especially in times of uprisings, regime changes, or growing populism. Some even use a more vague term, such as 'socially-aware' art. This term suggests that art or any other public practice within a society is able to stand alone outside that society and consequently be unaware of it.

As artists who are also activists, we might find our work represented by the industry as activism, or the more brandish term artivism, or more patronising: useful. While this might be often used for marketing purposes, we need to ask: What does the labelling of our work as activism do? Accepting that our artwork is presented as activism is stating that it is created for the greater good of the society and that it is an agent of change, even before it is shared with society. This carries the risk of silencing the debate on the politics of the artistic form itself, which can only be discussed once the work encounters the audience.

Today, the debate on the intersection of politics and art is prevalent in both critical theory and art practices, but it is often unclear what makes a performance political other than the fact that it is being referred to as such by those representing the work. It seems that political performance is presented as a medium that stands in opposition to something (e.g., eviction, gentrification, discrimination, racism, global warming, dictatorship, oppression, and so on) or as a medium that advocates for a cause (e.g., gender and sexual rights, racial justice, refugee rights, and others). Often these two assumed intentions go hand in hand so that a

performance advocating women's rights also stands in opposition of the patriarchy and state laws that oppress women and control their bodies.

There is a common belief that political performance aims to ameliorate society, seeks change in the world and advocates emancipatory politics. But even with the noblest intentions, such performance can end up reproducing questionable politics particularly within its form or production model (rather than content). In this sense, a performance advocating a progressive cause might end up employing a problematic artistic form in which those on whose behalf the art speaks might feel silenced, excluded or oppressed and unheard. As an example, the majority of the criticism and opposition directed at artist Brett Bailey's show *Exhibit B* relates to the form the artist chose. In his show, Bailey displays black bodies in tableaux vivants to be gazed upon by audiences. As Bailey regularly states, he began his work with the ethical and political position that racism should be opposed and critiqued. However, many people on the receiving end of racism have found *Exhibit B* to be offensive and Bailey's choice of artistic form as a reproduction of human zoos, and thus an extension of systematic oppression.

As a result, the debate on the politics of interactive performance needs to involve questions on the ethics and politics of form. Moreover, such debate needs to happen after the work is encountered by the audience, rather than prior to it. In her writing on the politics of live art, Heddon rightly reminds us that the political potential of live art "needs to be underscored as 'potential' rather than being simply presumed" (176). She continues by explaining that we cannot guarantee the outcome of a live art event and "we cannot assume in advance a performance's efficacy, whatever the intention of its maker" (190). This is particularly resonant when the live art in question is based on interactivity with its audience. The

political potential of such work cannot be presumed, nor verified before that interactivity occurs.

In what follows, I explore theories of art history and art criticism that are relevant to discussing the politics of interactive performance. I present the different angles, discussions and debates that are prominent in contemporary art before proposing a different angle of reading interactivity in its political potential.

### **The “Alternative Communities” of Relational Aesthetics**

Since the 1990s, there have been trends and interests in contemporary art forms that are experience-based rather than object-based. In both its production and its consumption, art is increasingly communal, collaborative, social, and active. Galleries that displayed art objects for centuries while exclaiming, “do not touch the art” have become activated spaces. Today, it is a common sight to enter a museum or gallery and be asked to “contribute” to the art. Art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann argues that since the 1960s, “the creation and shaping of experiences have progressively become an integral part of the artwork’s conception” (2). This trend has led curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud to state, in his widely referenced book *Relational Aesthetics*, that exhibitions have become “arenas of exchange” (17).

For Bourriaud, the social and interactive turn in the art world should be celebrated as a return to collectivism and a creation of temporary communities revolving around human encounters and dialogue (15). His writing offers a thorough description of the shift from an object-based to a service-based cultural economy, while considering the rapidly changing technology and its effect on how we relate to each other. Bourriaud argues that such new (as of the 1990s and relative to what precede that period) art practices are filling the gaps created by

contemporary society in people's relationships. For him, people look in art for new ways of encountering each other so as to break from the ways in which consumerism plans our behaviours (ibid). Drawing from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, in which he analyses the need for people to break away from the passivity of watching the capitalist spectacle, Bourriaud argues that our inter-human relationships are no longer experienced outside of the processes of commodification, alienation, and their spectacular representation. This is where, "artistic praxis appears these days to be a rich loam for social experiments, like a space partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns" (9).

There is a sense in his writing that our mass-mediated society and technological communication traps us in a fake sense of conviviality that art can save us from. Quoting philosopher Pierre-Felix Guattari, Bourriaud advocates for a transformation of society through small-scale attempts operating at the level of neighbourhoods and small communities. For him, this kind of art constitutes an evolution out of and away from an "authoritarian version of art" (22).

Art critics Grant Kester and Maria Lind have also advocated the potential of art to create temporary communities (rather than reaching out to already existing communities). Lind defines social practice as a term that encompasses everything from community-based art to activist actions (Motta). This includes participatory projects, relational aesthetics, dialogical art, kontexkunst, and public art. Lind expands, "social practice can loosely be described as art that involves more people than objects, whose horizon is social and political change - some would even claim that is about making another world possible" (49).

Lind and Bourriaud seem to be placing collaboration and collectivism at the heart of 'socially-engaged' practices. This approach is meant to challenge a

romanticized status of the artist and allows the artist to become an operator of meaning, according to Bourriaud, allegedly distancing the artist from the status of a godly creator. Bourriaud himself, however, uses various religiously inspired terminologies to describe relational art, such as the term “angelic programme” (36). Moreover, the artists he points to throughout his book *Relational Aesthetics* can easily be described as highly influential figures in the contemporary art world. These include Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, and Marcel Duchamp. This is precisely why it is important to note that Bourriaud’s theory of authorship distances itself from the theory put forward in Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” where Barthes famously claims that the author is irrelevant and that every creative idea is the fruit of pre-existing ideas that came before it (3).

Bourriaud’s analysis is questionable on at least two levels. First, he is literally positioning art as the saviour of society and the creator of utopias and alternative communities. It is undeniable that some artists manage to create a significant connection with a community, and together they consequently form an alternative community, but the notion of ‘utopia’ remains a problematic one especially that what feels utopian and idealistic to some, might not feel as such to others. Second, I describe many of the artistic projects Bourriaud refers to as “instructions-based performances.” One example of this is when artist Rikrit Tiravanija cooked a Thai dinner for the audience and invited them to eat while speaking to one and another (*Untitled (Free)*, 1992). Another example is when artist Philippe Parreno invited people to pursue hobbies. Despite his incisive description of controlled behavioural patterns in consumer society, Bourriaud fails to explain why audiences look for refuge from dictated relationships in their society by seeking dictated relationships in artistic encounters. As Harvie remarks, these

performances end up reproducing the same behaviours as those dictated to us by consumerism. In other words, Bourriaud fails to see in those artistic practices he cites a particular form of the very controlled behavioural patterns he claims these artistic projects are providing alternatives to. The alternative communities that relational aesthetics claim to be forming, not only fail to offer an exit strategy from the more problematic relationships in the consumerist society. They also reinforce them.

### **Democratisation through Dialogue**

Relational aesthetics is borne out of the necessity of collectively rethinking art and contextualizing it as “a state of encounter” (Bourriaud 16). This is accomplished through creating spaces for dialogue. Dialogue, according to Bourriaud, democratizes relations and creates micro-utopias, a strategy of the 1990s art movement. Kester discusses dialogical aesthetics and discursive determinism by effectively challenging the simplistic notion that dialogue can eliminate power (6).

The ideas undergirding Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* and its foregrounding of dialogue as a saviour of society are still very much present in conversations on the political and social function of art today. The claim of creating alternative communities and open conversations with audiences is still commonly used by artists and art venues around the world. For example, the works commissioned by the Tate Modern gallery in London for their free-access space The Turbine Hall, have been discussed as experiences. They are thought of as an occasion for encounter and dialogue between visitors. Such was the case in *The Weather Project* (2003) by artist Olafur Eliasson. Marketing the artwork, the Tate Modern website reminds its readers that the weather is a common conversation



starter between people in England, clearly insinuating to the dialogue-inducing ability of the artwork. Many of these works are made with the best intentions and sometimes generate a much-needed dialogue especially when this dialogue pushes the boundaries of comfort and provokes political debates. Despite that, I have to agree with scholar and curator Claire Bishop's critique on the intrinsic privilege and elitism behind such claims.

According to Bishop, relational aesthetics is a method used by specific artists with their fans, dealers, and friends to create communities in which they relate to one another without taking any significant risk. Moreover, such works fail to address the politics of communication and exclusion. In response to artist Rikrit Tiravanija's claims that he turned a gallery space into "a kind of asylum for everyone," Bishop rightly asks whom this 'everyone' refers to, and what happens if someone who is in real need of asylum enters the gallery space where the art is taking place ("Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" 68).

Freshwater remains hopeful despite her own scepticism about such salvation claims of participation. In her article on participation which I previously mention in this chapter, she explains, "For me, this hope resides in companies and performers which have learned to trust audiences, offering them real choices and accepting that genuine participation has risks as well as potentials: that it involves vulnerability on the part of performers and participants, as both parties open themselves to unexpected experiences and outcomes" (409). The hope that Freshwater sees in performances that open dialogue with audience (she gives the example of Tim Crouch's *The Author*) does not derive from the dialogue itself. It comes from the political potential of live art that Heddon refers to, and that Freshwater sees in the encounter between the artist and the audience. For that

hope of political potential to occur, the encounter between audience and artists needs to be genuinely indeterminate, risk-taking, and somehow equal.

The claim that the mere dialogue between artists and audience is enough to produce democracy is simplistic and untrue. Dialogical art is not only incapable of producing a democratic space/society by itself but also poses an important question with regards to who is dialoguing with whom? When attempting to answer this question, we find that much artwork excludes the majority of society or those who are already marginalized by it. Additionally, I am particularly wary of advocating for dialogue as a democratising form of interactivity as it often ends up facilitating the oppressors' narrative of denying the political reality of an unbalanced conflict between occupied and occupiers, or oppressed and oppressors. After all, there is no shortage of dialogue that is either initiated by those in power or largely dominated by men. Here again we are reminded of the protest sign from which I borrow the title of this chapter. During the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, a protester held a sign saying, "No dialogue with the killers" in response to a call for negotiations and reformed with the dictatorship. Such refusal of dialogue is not a rejection of democracy, but a reminder that the two sides involved in such a dialogue are incredibly unequal and that justice should come first, before dialogue. But then again, relational aesthetics was never conceived, curated, discussed, and theorised in relation to oppression, resistance, or a pressing need to fight injustice. And perhaps this is where it appears as a space of privilege and exclusion.

### **Antagonistic Aesthetics: Shocking the Audience**

Bishop critiques participatory art's focus on social rewards and its tendency to ignore aesthetics. According to her, there is a danger in prioritizing ethics over

aesthetics. She draws on Rancière's argument that the aesthetic already carries with it a promise for change. In this sense, Bishop argues that it is "crucial to discuss, analyse, and compare such work critically *as art*" ("Social Turn" 180). Her view is rooted in the belief that artists do not naturally function in communities but rather take a critical distance from all the roles they have recently taken (such as becoming historians, social workers, urban planners, activists, or community organisers). She challenges the romanticism behind the claim that co-authorship results in 'good' art, a clear nod to Bourriaud. According to Bishop, breaking from the autonomy of the one author/artist does not necessarily democratize artwork or society. Furthermore, it definitely does not result in what should be evaluated as good art. Bishop calls for a rethinking of individual authorship rather than self-marginalising and self-effacing one's artistic voice in a Christian fashion of self-sacrifice. Her 'better' artists are those who "act on their desire without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt" ("Social Turn" 183).

Through her writing, Bishop appears to be judging artists who work in communities as rejecting quality when they reject traditional aesthetic standards. It is true that some artists position themselves as more socially-engaged or politically engaged or aware than others and as a result of that, they might feel that their work is exempted from art criticism. However, I would argue that rejecting the rigid boundaries of art history's aesthetics is not synonymous with a lack of artistic quality. A number of art movements and aesthetic tendencies started by a letting go of prevalent art aesthetics (such as Duchamp's *Fountain*). Similarly, a number of artists throughout history, have re-thought creation outside art institutions. For two examples, one could turn to the Dogme movement in cinema and the visual style of amateur Youtube videos from the Arab uprisings

that have rejected the visual aesthetics of cinema. In fact, there has been a launch of Syria Mobile Films Festival drawing clear inspiration from the use of mobile phones in archiving the Syrian uprising. Researchers Chad Elias and Zaher Omareen wrote an article entitled “Syria’s Imperfect Cinema” arguing that there has been a democratisation of digital documentary filmmaking facilitated by the practice of ordinary Syrians: “While some footage bears witness, others delve deeper into moral issues and make more cohesive aesthetic statements” (257). In performance, one could think again of Boal’s Invisible Theatre that could not be judged with the same aesthetic reference points as a play set in a theatre, since its premise relies on the work appearing as non-theatre. On this practice, Boal comments, “In the invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; only the theatre exists, without its old, worn-out patterns” (126). What the above examples show us is that Bishop’s argument disregards the aesthetic and political choices of a large number of artists whose work does not abide by the same aesthetic norms.

Bishop draws inspiration from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s ideas of hegemony in their *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. She borrows the notion of antagonism to argue that a fully functioning democratic society maintains its relationships of conflict rather than erases them (“Antagonism” 37). Therefore, Bishop argues that Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics are not as democratic as he claims (63). For her, they advocate exclusive harmonious communities and do not allow for friction, unease, or conflict—all necessary for challenging the status quo (79).

While Kester criticizes Dadaism and surrealism in their need to shock audiences into engagement, Bishop thinks that discomfort or even pleasure is essential for “gaining new perspectives on our condition” in the society (“Social

Turn" 181). Both positions seem to reduce political art to a simple recipe of interactivity: one by caring for the audience and producing alternative communities and the other by troubling audiences and relationships.

Just as I find it necessary to critique the claims that harmony and dialogue are democratizing forces, I argue that the use of antagonism in art as an enabler for social change is similarly questionable. Antagonistic art assumes that the artist is needed to put a mirror of the society in the face of audience. This assumption could only mean that the audience is perceived as privileged (untroubled) and unknowledgeable (needing to be told.) Bouko mentions the employment of the fear element to induce interactivity, which can be understood as 'troubling' to the audience but it is not quite the antagonism that Bishop is advocating. This latter is in place to shock, provokes, and be unapologetically controversial. By doing so, it assumes that its audience is pursuing a comfortable life and is therefore in need for such provocation. For example, Bishop uses the work of artist Santiago Sierra as a powerful case of antagonistic art that exposes how our society is "riven with social and legal exclusions ("Antagonism" 74). In his work *Palabra Tapada* (2003), Sierra asks visitors to present a Spanish passport to be able to enter the Spanish pavilion in Venice Biennale. The artist created an installation that critiqued national purity. While the guards who were only permitting entry to Spanish passport holders form a scene that might confuse certain audiences who have never been refused entry to a country, it hardly shocks the rest of us.

Examining the debate on relational aesthetics vs. antagonistic aesthetics, it seems to me that there is an assumption that the audience of these works need saving, either from a consumerist dull life and a lack of conviviality, or from a lack of political provocation and awareness. In both cases, there is a pressing need to

reconsider a more inclusive spectatorship beyond the assumptions we make on middle-class Western audience. In fact, if we look beyond whom we imagine to be the usual art-goers and beyond the Western art scene, many people are already troubled and do not look for art as a place to “shake,” “trouble,” or otherwise antagonize them on the miseries caused by capitalism or any other form of injustice they encounter in their everyday.

### **Interactivity as Aim: The Case of *Gardens Speak***

In the interlude following this chapter, I describe *Gardens Speak* from the point of view of audience experience. However, before doing so, I narrate below some of the responses that were made about the artwork by people before entering the performance space. I use this example to make a point that interactivity is not only a form, but also a process and an aim.

When audience and journalists hear that *Gardens Speak* invites the audience into what appears to be a gravesite, some assume that the piece aims to shock them or to dictate a certain emotion from them. Taking note of this dynamic, I have since tried to postpone discussing the aim of the piece with people until they have experienced the work. Journalists in particular needed to become audience members before writing their critique, otherwise they tend to assume that this is yet another performance art piece that they claim to want to shock society into empathy. I postpone these conversations because I believe that the political potential of interactivity needs to be discussed after the audience have encountered the work, especially that this is different and unique for each person. Some audience members have remarked that they have felt taken care of during the piece, which is oppositional to what they have imagined the experience to be. These comments informed my thinking on the type of encounters and images

people project upon hearing that the work they are about to walk into is interactive.

*Gardens Speak*'s audience are faced with the political reality in Syria through listening to the sound pieces, but the stories themselves were not written merely with the aim to raise awareness and were certainly not addressed to an ignorant audience. It is undeniable that being faced with stories of injustice might physically shake audience or shake their understanding of a certain event or their political beliefs. These reactions however are not what the piece aims to do. Failing to be shaken or shocked by the reality communicated in *Gardens Speak* is yet another way of interacting with the piece. Refusing to lie down in the soil and deciding to spend the entire duration of the piece standing alone in the dark because you are a catholic who believes that graves are sacred and should not be stepped on is also another way of interacting with the piece that I have discovered throughout the run. The work does not aim to antagonise people, just like it does not aim to educate them. It invites people to bear witness, listen to stories, and embody them. The way the audience would do so varies depending on the person.

The above should not be read as a statement that *Gardens Speak* could not fail. There are a number of ways in which this piece could fail for the audience and for me as an artist. In the latter case, I would think that the piece has failed if it is somehow used to exercise additional oppression on the Syrian people, or used to elevate the narrative of the oppressors. This failure will be linked to my own political motivation in working on a piece that tells the stories of those who were killed in the early period of the Syrian uprising (2011-13). Artistically, I started with the belief that the interactivity of the piece (as in most my work) is an aim in itself. When interactivity is both a process and an aim, each encounter with the

work becomes a valid interpretation of this interactivity, rather than an interruption or failure of an already determined unique scenario of interactivity.

### **III. Conclusion: Art Becomes Politics**

Working with audiences, there is no particular recipe that makes a performance an ethical encounter with a political potential. The performer could be present or not, the audience could be active or not. Our aim should be, as Rancière simply put it, “to place the question of the spectator at the heart of the discussion of the relations between art and politics” (*Emancipated Spectator* 9). The engagement with the other whether it is an audience or a participant in a project is a political one and it needs to start from the politics of the other. We need to engage, respond, oppose, and support the politics of ‘the other’ in its awkwardness, disappointments, empowerment and challenges. Reflecting on the political potential of interactive performances, we need to pose questions on whether these performances give audiences a space to reveal their own political assumptions and ideologies, share them, be surprised by them and allow them to be challenged. This is achieved in my work, I hope, through creating spaces where everyone’s vulnerability is shared equally, and where the notion of control is negotiated and re-imagined, rather than ignored.

What the current debate on interactivity does is provide recipes for achieving strong interactivity that might work for some art (e.g., digital art) but hardly for live performance. The current debate on participation reveals that the concept is manipulated by state policies, and that artists often reproduce this manipulation knowingly or unknowingly. Forming a microcosmic alternative relationship might appear to some as a suitable solution for shutting off the



problems of the world. On the other hand, making a work in the aim of antagonism and trouble might similarly seem to some as a swift solution for communicating the anger that is accumulating in our bodies and souls. Yet a difficult political situation demands a difficult process and that is to produce work where politics can be revealed with all the risks of sharing ugliness, discomfort, and vulnerability.

While it is attractive for our artwork to be presented as a solution for society, and while our societies are in desperate need for hope, it is in times of political despair that we need to be more critical than ever. Sadly, the world cannot be saved through performance. Even sadder is the belief that we as artists might be able to save it alone. Perhaps it is time to question the instrumentalisation of our art, to describe our work carefully and ethically, and produce art that makes space for interactivity rather than dictation: art that becomes the politics it wishes for.

## INTERLUDE

### *Gardens Speak*

#### **The Performance**

The audience is made up to ten individuals. Each one of them will listen to only one of the ten oral histories that make up *Gardens Speak*. An audience guide wearing a headlight and dressed in all black greets the audience as they enter a dark space. They are in a preparation room, and the guide asks them to sit on the benches. The guide then explains that they will need to take off their shoes and socks, and wear the provided plastic white coats. They are then asked to each pick one of ten cards, take a torch, and prepare to enter the garden space. Before the guide leads them to the garden, they are given time to examine the cards they drew. On one side of the card, there is the name of one of the ten martyrs written in the same Arabic calligraphic style used their tombstone in the garden space. The other side of the card gives the audience instructions.



## INSTRUCTIONS

Thank you for coming to listen to Bayan's story. Like all the stories presented in this piece, Bayan's story was told to us by her friends and family. We have attempted to record her oral history, as she herself would have told it.

Bayan was buried in a garden in Syria. I invite you to dig into the soil with your hands and to listen to the story that will be whispered to you from the ground.

Take your time in the space. When you hear sounds coming from beneath the soil, walk towards the plots and find Bayan's tombstone —it will match the back of this card, which says in Arabic "the martyr Bayan." Kneel in front of her tombstone and dig beneath the place where her name is printed on the wood. You will find information about where she is. Lie down, put your ear against the ground, and search with your ear for the voice that will tell you her story.

You can dig into the ground to get closer to the voice.

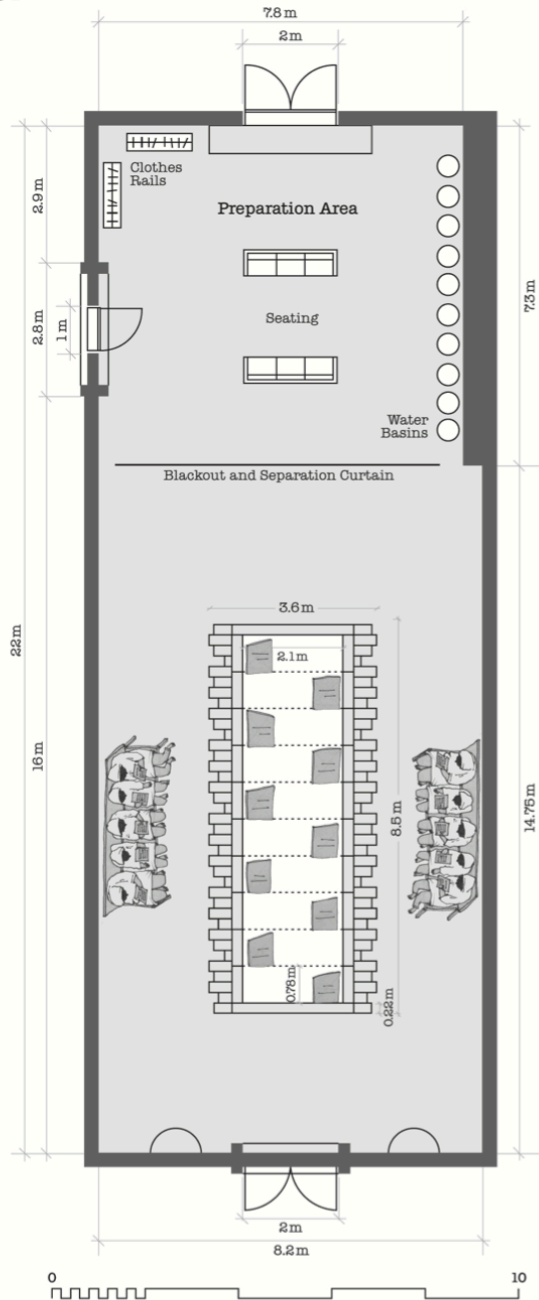
When you hear the whole story, return the soil to its original state and lie on your back until the end of the piece.

[Fig. 5 and fig. 6. Front and back of audience instruction card in *Gardens Speak*.]

The garden space is a large rectangular room in a warehouse-type building. It is dark and empty, except for two benches opposite each other and a large rectangular wooden frame in between. Inside the frame, there are five tons of soil, lined with ten tombstones, five on each of the long sides (facing the other side), with those on one side offset to the side of those on the other. Under each tombstone, there is a speaker, encased in a black pillow, and buried under the soil. Each speaker whispers one of the ten stories. The group is now divided, five people sitting on each of the two benches opposite each other with the garden in the middle.

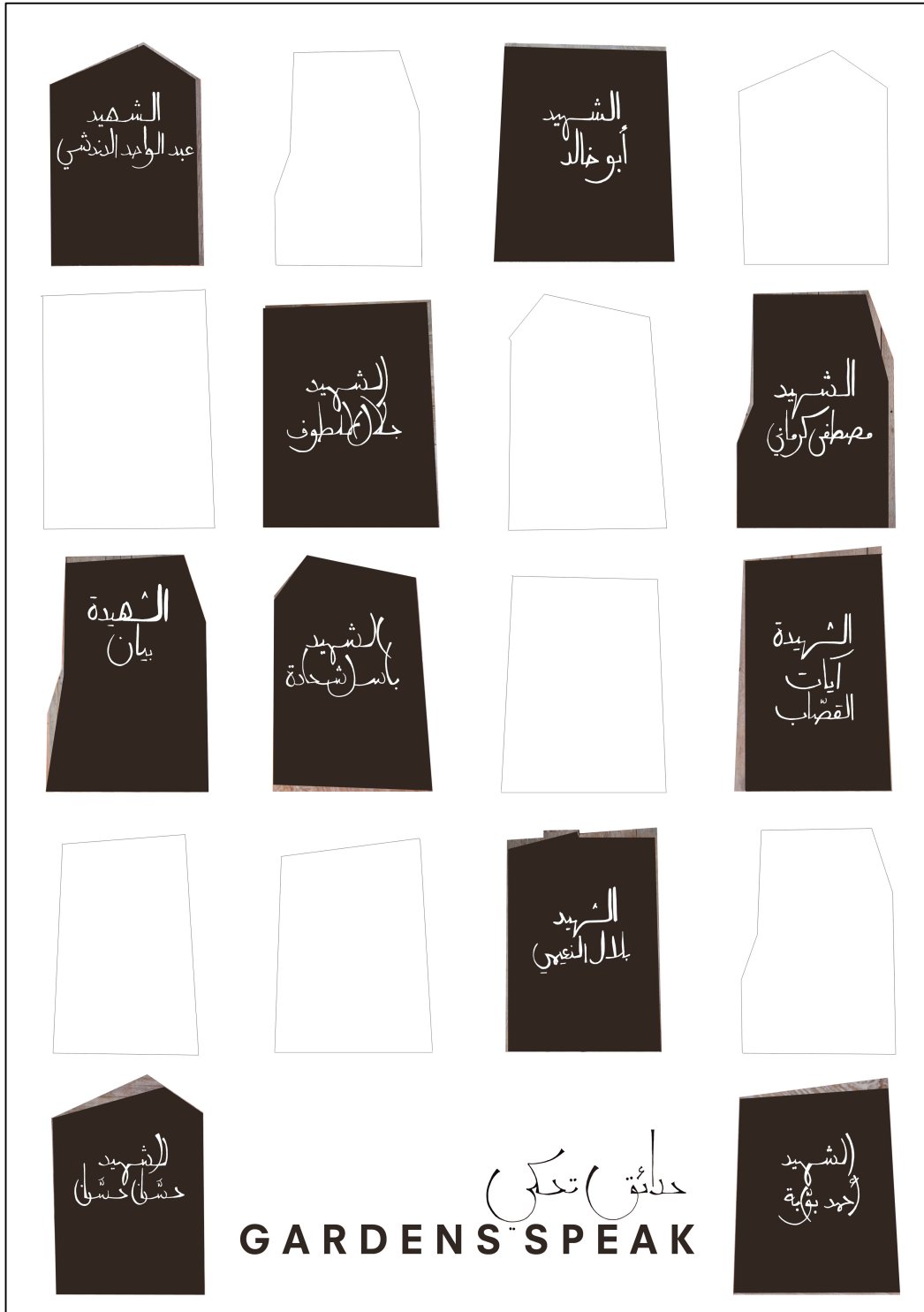
**The Performance Illustrated: Act 1**

I invite you to dig into the soil with your hands and to listen to the story that will be whispered to you from the ground. Kneel in front of the tombstone, and press your ear to the ground. When you dig, you will find written information about where the martyr is buried. When you hear the whole story, return the soil to its original state and lie on your back until the end of the performance.



[Fig. 7. Garden space. Set designed by Abir Saksouk and illustrations by Imad Kaafarani. Image extracted from page 4 of the book *Gardens Speak.*]

While seated on the benches, the audience hear sounds coming from the soil. It is a mix of different protest chants from Syria. The sounds are specific to protests in the areas where the ten martyrs are from or were killed. This is the cue for the audience to enter the garden. They each look for their designated tombstone. I commissioned Dia Batal, an artist who makes work using Arabic calligraphy, to design a unique tombstone for each of the ten martyrs. The names of the martyrs are hand drawn on wood, taking inspiration from the homemade cardboard or found stones that are often used as makeshift tombstones for those buried in gardens across Syria. The inscription, as is often the case in the garden graves, only mentions the name of the dead, preceded by the title “the martyr.”



[Fig. 8. Tombstone designs for *Gardens Speak*, each highlighting the name of one of the ten martyrs whose story is told. Tombstones designed by Dia Batal. Image extracted from *Gardens Speak* brochure.]

When the audience find their respective martyr's tombstone, they kneel in front of it and dig in the soil until they can hear the sound clearly. While digging, they discover an inscription, printed on black cloth that forms the case of the pillow. The inscription describes where each martyr is buried:

Abdul Wahid al-Dandashi was buried in the garden of his family home in Talkalakh. August 2012

Mustafa Karmani was buried with ten other people who died from the same regime missile on Aleppo.

Ahmad Bawwabi was buried in a stranger's home garden in Bustan al-Qasr.

Bilal al-Naimi was buried in a garden in Old Homs where he was killed. 26 July 2012

Jalal al-Lattuf was buried in the public garden of his town of Talbisseh. 28 November 2012

Ayat al-Qassab was buried in the garden of a relative's home in Karm al-Zaytoun. 14 December 2012

Basil Shehadeh was buried in a garden in Homs, the city where he was killed. 28 May 2012

On 17 December 2013, the family of Hassan Hassan were informed that he died under torture in prison. His body was never delivered.

Bayan (anonymized name) was buried in a plot of land belonging to her activist friend in a liberated area of Syria.



Abu-Khalid (anonymized name) was buried in his neighbourhood garden in Hama.

The chants fade away and the first-person narratives begin as the audience puts their ears to the ground and lie down on the grave. The lights dim, the only remaining sources of light are the lanterns positioned on the corners of the wooden frame. Keenana Issa, a Syrian activist and writer, led the process of transforming the varied interviews into the first-person narratives. We wrote the texts in Arabic using different Syrian dialects specific to the area where each the martyrs came from. While we originally collected more than ten stories, we decided to develop those ten that we felt we had sufficient information about, and that describe different experiences of people during the uprising. Some of the martyrs participated in the armed resistance. Others were non-violent activists. Some simply happened to find themselves in a war zone at the time of their death. Each of the ten people had unique dreams, loved ones, personal fears, political opinions, and hopes. We struggled to find more than two female stories out of the ten. The vast majority of the people who were buried in gardens at the time of research were in areas where armed conflict and shelling by the regime were taking place. Consequently, many of these martyrs were men engaged in the military fighting—though women were also involved in the armed fighting in Syria in various areas, especially at a later point in the uprising.

Once the stories end, and while the audience is still lying down (now in complete darkness), a song plays on speakers in the room. A Sufi singer named Abu Gabi performs the song. We recorded it spontaneously without music during

one of the recording sessions in Beirut. I had invited Abu Gabi to record the story of his childhood friend Hassan Hassan. Hassan was a young promising actor and director tortured to death by the Syrian regime after being detained at a checkpoint. It felt important to include the voice of a friend singing for the dead, especially that many were denied their due songs during their rushed or banned burials. In the case of Hassan, as in the case of many people who die under torture in the regime's prisons, his body was never delivered to his family. As of this writing, there is no indication of whether or not he was ever buried, how so, or where. During the song, the audience guide walks in the garden space and gently lays white gypsophilia flowers on the soil. Before leaving the space, the guide leaves a stack of notebooks and pens on each of the benches for the audience.

Once the lights come back on, the audience takes their time standing up and heading to the benches. There, they find the notebooks with the cover page instructing them with the following:

I invite you to go sit on the wooden frame facing the tombstone where you lay, just like a relative or friend would do when visiting their grave. Use this pad and pen to write a letter addressed to the martyr. When you're done, bury the letter in the soil at the foot of the grave, next to the wooden frame.

Your letter may be shared with their surviving family and friends. If you found another letter left in the soil and felt the urge to read it, you may do so. Take your time leaving the space when you're done.

Thank you.

Each audience has a choice to make. They can decide whether to stay on the benches and write the letter or go back to the frame and sit on its side as the instructions suggest. Some might decide to stand up, lean on a wall, watch others,

draw on a piece of paper, write a very long letter, make a shape out of the letter, or do nothing at all. When they are ready, audience members who have written something bury their letters and leave the space each on their own time back to the preparation room.

In the preparation room, the audience guide explains to each audience entering that they may wash their feet if they like. Ten water basins and towels are provided. Often audience members wash their feet standing side by side in complete silence. When done, they each leave on their own time.

### **The Book**

Oral history can be a democratizing practice of knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. It is often shared in an accessible or aestheticized language on open platforms such as websites, museums, or libraries. Both the digital revolution and Internet accessibility have made it possible for oral history to be shared with wider audiences. However, oral historians have found themselves struggling with the ethics of sharing their findings with wider audience. The Oral History Society offers legal and ethical advice about safeguarding participants' reputation and maintaining their trust. But as oral historian Zibiah Alfred has written, even by giving consent at the time of the interview, participants might not understand the implications of their personal stories being shared with unknown numbers of human beings on the Internet (184). They might not know, for example, that they can become victims of stalking or of racial or gender-based harassment and violence.

The stories in *Gardens Speak* were a subject of interest to many people, who—for various reasons—approached me for a copy or printout of one or more of the first-person narratives. Curators and programmers wanted to read them in

the manner they read a theatre script before hosting it. Journalists wanted to read ‘the scripts’ to quote material in reviews. Researchers wanted to use it in their analysis. Others were members of the audience who heard one story but were curious about the other nine.

My initial declining of such requests was rooted in the fact that I initially conceived these stories so as to be heard, not read—whispered from the ground. They were constructed to be listened to with the utmost attention to the details of the sound recording. I held on to them like treasures. I resented the idea that some curator might hear these stories while having breakfast at some loud café. As an advocate of creative commons and open source research, I struggled with my decision. I ultimately justified it as a need to maintain the ritualistic element of sharing these stories and paying respect to the dead. I also wanted to maintain the integrity of performance work that comes together as a whole rather than divided elements.

At a later stage, I was finally convinced to publish the texts in a book that could contribute to the writings on the early period of the Syrian uprising from the point of view of ordinary people and those who were victims of regime oppression. I worked with a designer (Nadine Bekdache) and an illustrator (Imad Kaafarani) to create a book that is inspired by the performance. Simply printing the ten scripts would not be enough, as it would betray the motivation of the project and care with which the narratives should be presented. Much thought was put into the physical features such as size of the book and the feel of the pages. I also included an introduction, the original designs of the garden space, illustrations of audience members in the show, and a selection of audience letters. The scripts were included both in Arabic and English. It was important to provide

the experience of reading handwritten Arabic texts as manuscript for those who could read the language, and to produce the feeling of being faced with a language that cannot be read for those that could not.



Fig. 9. From the performance of *Gardens Speak* by Tania El Khoury. Melbourne, 2014.  
Photo by Jesse Hunniford



Fig. 10. From the performance of *Gardens Speak* by Tania El Khoury. Melbourne, 2014.  
Photo by Jesse Hunniford.



Fig. 11. From the performance of *Gardens Speak* by Tania El Khoury. Melbourne, 2014.  
Photo by Jesse Hunniford.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **“When I Am Gone, Be Sure That I Did My Best to Stay”:**

#### **Oral History as/in Interactive Performance**

##### **I. Introduction: The Political Motivation**

I confess. I have an agenda behind using oral histories in *Gardens Speak*. My artistic choice is neither random nor purely aesthetic. It is a deliberate strategy intended to advance the narratives of those Syrians who risked everything to raise their voices against an authoritarian regime that ruled for decades. The use of oral histories is also closely tied to the overarching research enquiry of this thesis on the political potentiality of interactive live art.

I start this chapter with a confessional tone not to position my work as activism, but to reveal a self-understanding of my positionality as an artist. I intentionally reject the concept of neutrality and post-ideology. At its origins and core, what transpired in Syria—at least between 2011 and 2014—was the emergence of a popular uprising opposing dictatorship (Haddad). The authoritarian regime confronted this uprising by deploying all manner of violence to repress (or transform) it. In my view, there can be no neutrality with respect to that struggle. I do not deny the intervention of various (duplicitous) external actors into either side of this struggle, and the condemnable conduct of some of the political and military elites that emerged through the uprisings. Yet before we can debate the nature of the uprising’s transformation into what characterised Syria at the time of writing (2017), we must first acknowledge the reality of how and why the uprising began. I hereby confess my bias toward championing the voices, experiences, and memories of those individuals who began the uprising or were

early participants in it. In most cases, the regime intentionally denied the deaths of many of these individuals. In some cases, the regime denied its culpability in their deaths. Moreover, the regime actively targeted the funerals of those individuals.

The use of oral history in *Gardens Speak* emerges from a political position of wanting to listen to history being told by the oppressed, rather than the two sides of a struggle. Oral history collection and public sharing is a form of political engagement that enables the practice of people's history and challenges the grand narratives of states and the powerful. It is a writing of history that is not always found in dominant archives (Shopes, "What is Oral History"). In many ways, such an approach to oral history in *Gardens Speak* carries through the approach in my collaborative work as represented in Dictaphone Group. In the latter, we take on research and performance projects on contested spaces in Lebanon and the daily struggles surrounding them. We collect, and compliment with other research, oral histories that challenge the narrative of Lebanese state officials. In doing so, we seek to construct an alternative narrative of these contested spaces, or at least engage with those narratives that exist but are seldom recognised. Such narratives include those of fishermen forcibly removed from ports to make space for development projects (*This Sea is Mine*), Palestinian refugees denied their basic human rights (*Camp Pause*), and railway workers accusing government authorities of corruption (*Nothing to Declare*).

However, and for reasons discussed in the previous chapter, I do not present my artistic practice as a tool for merely raising awareness. Like many artists, I take inspiration from my political commitments. The commitment may be personal or collective, deliberate or unconscious, clearly presented or hidden.



This inspiration is tied to the political potential of the work, but is not synonymous with it. On the one hand, the political inspiration and commitment of artists can be voiced at an early stage of a project or might be where the genesis of the project can be traced. On the other hand, the political nature (and thus potential) of the work cannot be completely manifested or analysed until the work is shared with its audience.

One is hard pressed to find artwork that utilizes oral history but does not have a political motivation. Oral history has formed the basis for the content of a large number of productions in theatre, sound art, visual art, city/neighbourhood walks, installations, videos, and films. The shape that these oral histories take in such productions varies: field research inspiring the work, sound recorded interviews that make it into the work, talking heads interviews, verbatim theatre, re-recorded or fictionalised texts based on oral histories, and many more. In the discussion below, I discuss a number of examples of these projects. Academic analyses and art criticisms of these works typically focus on the political possibilities of such work. Writing about audio walks based on oral histories, geographer Toby Butler argues that this form prompts the audience to feel closer to the people that they are listening to and to the spaces they are passing through (891). In her book *Memory, Allegory, and Testimony in South American Theater*, Ana Elena Puga writes about the role of oral history-based theatre as one of several tools in “upstaging dictatorship” and preserving what she calls “memory-as-resistance” (67). These productions, according to Puga can “prod spectators to remember, speak, lament their inability to speak, meditate on their communal loss, laugh at the absurdities of authoritarianism, decipher covert messages of resistance, reconstruct collective memories, and devise their own covert ways to

communicate” (3). My practice has also been analysed from the standpoint of using oral history to advance certain narratives for political effect. For example, in reviewing Dictaphone Group’s *This Sea Is Mine*, political scientist Laleh Khalili notes our use of the juxtaposition between the narratives of the evicted fishermen and the information of the development plan on the site of the performance: “Reading these ordinary people’s account of their own displacement alongside the text of the planning permission for Mövenpick resort—with its litany of saunas, steam-rooms, baths, salons, showers, Jacuzzis, and the like—is a profound and visceral lesson in the workings of class configurations and consumption patterns in Beirut.” Indeed, *This Sea is Mine* was a project in which we engaged in exposing the dangers of development projects on the community of fishermen and the wider society.

In a forthcoming article on *Gardens Speak*, performance artist and scholar Chloé Déchery describes what she refers to as the practice of re-enactment performance and examines whether this practice “represents, exhumes or incarnates History” (9). She argues that *Gardens Speak* “constitutes an act of resistance to the prescriptions of forgetting and a political attempt to re-read and recover the historical event.” It does so by producing and circulating alternative narratives to the official ones and by implicating the audience both as “a witness and a stakeholder” (4). Déchery’s description of the audience as both witness and stakeholder seems appropriate as witnessing and responsibility intertwine and go hand in hand. I agree with her analysis on the notion of resistance against forgetting and on the circulation of alternative narratives. I would attribute such practices to the political function of using oral histories in performance.

## **Oral History, *Gardens Speak*, and Beyond**

The uses of oral history in the artworks mentioned above is suggestive of the political motivation as well as the political possibilities of the works—which do not always end up being the same thing. Important questions to ask include, what stories do artists choose to tell? Who tells these stories? Which voices are omitted when they tell them? Why are these narratives presented in juxtaposition with other information, and are oral histories of individuals linked to a contested historical event or a contested space? While ethics, the work process, research tools, and artistic forms vary, the political motivation seems to often be analysed as the advancement of a certain community's narrative. In his book *The Order Has Been Carried Out*, historian Alessandro Portelli narrates the stories of the forgotten 333 Roman civilians who were massacred by the Nazis. He does so through the collection of oral history interviews with their families. Portelli describes his writing as a 'ceremony' and a direct and active intervention in history. For him, the act of writing these narratives resists the anonymity of mass murder. His motivation is the creation of historical memory after the death of the protagonists.

I conceived of *Gardens Speak* within the context of a similar motivation. The work employs ceremonial elements in its dramaturgy and scenography that resonate with Portelli's description of ceremony. In both the collection and presentation of the oral histories of *Gardens Speak*, ethics of shared care and vulnerability are central. Key to this is an understanding of the power dynamics inherent to the collection of oral histories. By interviewing people, we enter their intimate environments, both physically and metaphorically. This requires the intentional application of ethics. The combination of Portelli's concept of ceremony and Mary Marshall Clark's ideas about the theatricality of oral history

contributed to my thinking on the notion of the collection of oral history as a performance in and of itself. Marshall Clark writes about the transformative power of oral history in the cultural development of communities (89). Oral history, according to Marshall Clark is “an academic, cultural and artistic practice that has many forms and richly intertwined histories in locations around the world” (ibid). It “originated in the attempt by social historians, sociologists, activists and others to recover memories that would otherwise be lost” (ibid). The recovering of memories resonates with both the process of making *Gardens Speak*, in which interviews relied on people’s memories of the lives of those who were killed, as well as the actual performance in which people uncover the earth to recover these memories. According to Marshall Clark, the social purpose of oral history is accomplished when interviews are framed as dialogical encounters (94). This can be achieved through the connection of oral history with art such as theatre. Marshall Clark relies on the examples of communities that managed to “build a sense of group identity” by publicly staging or sharing interviews and narrations of oral histories (ibid).

I share Portelli’s and Marshall Clark’s interests in the interview as a space for mutual learning in which we need to pay close attention to ethics and power dynamics. I apply this interest in my live art practice in general and to *Gardens Speak* in particular. In the remainder of this chapter, I reflect on this application of oral history to live art performance to elucidate the utility of oral history as artistic method and content. Alongside my own piece *Gardens Speak*, of specific relevance here are four Dictaphone Group performances: *Stories of Refuge* (2016), *This Sea is Mine* (2012), *Nothing to Declare* (2013), and *Camp Pause* (2017).

In *Stories of Refuge*, we record and share the oral histories of three Syrian asylum seekers in Munich, Germany. In this piece, the participants narrate their displacement in and from Syria, their illicit journeys to Germany, and their hopes for the future. The work took the form of a video installation that was screened in a shipping container, which was placed on a busy road in Munich. Audience members were invited to enter the shipping container, lie on one of the provided bunk beds, place headphones on, and watch one of the three videos that were shot by the three Syrian collaborators and edited by me with their contribution, advice, and comments. *This Sea is Mine* and *Nothing to Declare* are also significantly based on oral history as a method of telling untold stories about contested spaces in Lebanon: the privatised seashore and the abandoned railway infrastructure, respectively. The most recent Dictaphone Group project, *Camp Pause*, is a video installation that maps the routes and relationships between each of four residents of Rachidieh Palestinian Refugee Camp and the adjacent Mediterranean Sea. Their recorded oral history interviews form the soundscape of each of their four routes, from their homes to the seashore. I am interested in thinking through how these projects can intervene in the narrativisation of historical events through ordinary people's voices, placing them in the public domain in an accessible form and language, and—above all—using oral history as a site of interactivity, which I am exploring in this chapter.

### **Ethics in the Aesthetics**

Critics such as Claire Bishop have argued that in so-called 'participatory' or 'social work,' "artists are increasingly judged by their process" ("Social Turn" 180). Bishop takes issue with this formula as for her it means that governments and artists have consequently chosen ethics over aesthetics. By ethics, she means a

principled view of the world and of the art world. By aesthetics, she means clearly authored artworks abiding by a specific “artistic quality” (ibid). She does not, however, explain what she judges as quality in art and what are the standards she wishes for beyond the antagonising and troubling aesthetics she has advocated for in a number of publications that are cited throughout this thesis.

In response to Bishop’s critique, I would argue that just as it is difficult to separate process from outcome in some of these projects, it is also difficult to separate their ethics from their aesthetics. One way to appreciate this relationship, I propose, is to consider the ethics of the artist’s chosen aesthetic form for a particular artwork. This includes looking at the politics of interactivity—discussed in Chapter 1 (since interactivity is not merely an ethical/political choice, but an aesthetic one as well)—as well as, as I will explore in this chapter, the ethics of collecting oral history and its use in live art (which, I argue, is also an aesthetic choice).

The remainder of this chapter is divided into three additional sections. Firstly, I explore the debate on various performance mediums that employ oral history. In this section, I discuss how my practice relates to the notions of veracity and credibility emphasised in verbatim and documentary theatre. In the following section, I examine the collection of oral history during the creative process of an artwork. A number of histories have been written about the intersection of oral history with performance and memory, including the work of scholar Lynn Abrams (*Oral History Theory*). I argue for an exploration of oral history interviews as One to One encounters, as in effect performances. In the final section, I draw on my own work process to ask whose voice remains after the editing and curating of oral histories and how are we able to engage in ethical and collaborative editing.

To conclude, I will return to consider how the ethics and politics of oral history collection are similar to those of interactivity. I propose that the politics of making a performance are as fundamental as the politics of the performance itself.

## **II. Oral History in Performance**

This section highlights the main mediums in which oral history is used in performance. Looking closely at these practices allows us to view the process through which the political motivation of a work may be transformed into political potential. I position my work in this context asking what makes the oral histories narrated in *Gardens Speak* credible.

### **Verbatim, Documentary, and Tribunal Theatres**

According to scholar David Watt, it is Bertolt Brecht who started using the term 'documentary theatre' in 1926 (191). This form has also been referred to as 'theatre of fact,' a theatre that draws its material from real documents such as newspapers, official documents, and interviews. Earlier that same year, Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term 'documentary,' which forever transformed the practices and studies of film and media (ibid). In 1987, scholar Derek Paget coined the term 'verbatim theatre' in an article entitled "Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques." He describes it as a form of theatre constructed on the practice of recording ordinary people's accounts and then transcribing and editing them into a theatre script. The method of verbatim is to perform on stage the exact same words used by individuals who were interviewed by actors during the research process. Actors who have themselves collected the material through interviews later perform the texts produced in verbatim theatre (318). As a result, practitioners and critics saw the medium as

empowering for actors who assume all three roles of researchers, writers, and actors. Consequently, the work process complicates the often-hierarchical traditional roles in theatre making.

Until the 1960s, verbatim theatre was mainly concerned with representing local communities on stage in their stories, histories, culture, accents, and aesthetics. It is most often those whose lives were played on stage by actors that ended up being the audience—of a representation of their lives, since verbatim theatre was performed in the local communities it engaged with (Paget 317). It was not until the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s that verbatim theatre started to engage with national issues and wider political concerns such as wars and labour strikes.

I take particular interest in the discussions on the ethics and politics of representation in documentary and verbatim theatres. In trying to perform communities, verbatim theatre runs the risk of caricaturing communities in its quest for realism and authenticity. In trying to perform true stories that are someone else's struggles, theatre might present its audience an "aesthetic of injury" and erotics of suffering (Salverson 122). "Many of the images and tropes in performance texts that display 'true stories' of injury recycle scripts of melancholic loss," explains theatre practitioner Julie Salverson (124). When verbatim theatre performs marginalized (often rural) communities at big national theatres (often in central cities), it stands to be accused of reinforcing the victimhood of the poor and working class in order to entertain middle class theatregoers (Paget 329). Scholar Carol Martin warns us about documentary theatre and its claim that unlike other forms of theatre, it offers "bodies of evidence" (15). She bases her argument on the fact that the work process in such



performance is not always transparent. In fact, for her, “documentary theatre creates its own aesthetic imaginaries while claiming a special factual legitimacy” (10). Indeed, documentary theatre might utilise voice recordings, and naturalistic scenography as evidence of its authenticity, legitimacy and truthfulness.

In her critique of verbatim theatre’s focus on veracity, scholar Deirdre Heddon concludes that such “such close proximity to the real also encourages a realist mode of representation (including the recordings, videos and photographs) which risks masking mediation and construction” (120). Here, she is particularly concerned with the hidden role of professional scriptwriters who make edits during rehearsals. In fact, verbatim can be faked, and a significant part of the material in verbatim theatre could be invented. This raises ethical questions about what Martin calls the “theatre of the real,” which “can radically moderate complexity in ways that can either lead to change for the better or the worse or support the status quo” (190).

Tribunal theatre is another form of documentary theatre that utilised oral histories. It is a practice that started in London in 1994 at the Tricycle Theatre. Though it is based on a verbatim method (using the exact wording of a spoken evidence), what makes it specific is that it is a reconstruction of a public inquiry. These performances such as *Srebrenica* (1998) and *Bloody Sunday* (2005) take the form of a tribunal featuring testimonies, evidence, and the two sides of a contested event. It aims to uncover, as part of the performance, the truth about certain historical events and public inquiries such as war crimes tribunal. Scholars and theatre critics have debated the authenticity as well as the objectivity of such theatrical form. Botham argues that there is significant political potential in tribunal theatres. According to him, “By allowing the grieving voices from the past

to be heard again, tribunal theatre makes them part of our present and incorporates them into a more radical public sphere” (49).

The conversation on the ethics of editing and presenting documentary theatre is centred on authenticity and credibility. There is an ethical responsibility in presenting work as documentary while manipulating its content and mixing it with fiction. The agency of the represented communities or individuals is again at stake. I ask why is the writing and editing that extend in verbatim theatre to the actors, not also extended to the communities in question. By including communities are included in the editing process, interactivity would be engaged on various levels (community-actor; actor-audience, and community-audience.)

### **Veracity and Authenticity in My Practice**

*Garden's Speak* does not employ evidence to prove to the audience the authenticity of the work. If it were trying to prove anything, it would be the crimes of the authoritarian regime in Syria. Déchery describes *Gardens Speak* as a crime scene, one in which the crime (i.e., the killing) is evident, the audience are forensic scientists (i.e., their white coats), and the space is an archaeological excavation (i.e., the garden). She says that “the work thus reveals itself to operate at different levels of meaning: excavation, investigation, re-enactment of a crime scene but also a stele, funeral monument” (15).

Drawing on this image of the investigation and re-enactment of a crime scene, I ask: How does the audience of *Gardens Speak* confirm that the stories they are being told are real? Do they build their belief on a trust that they place in me as an artist, or in the venues and festivals that host the work? They could of course go back home and search the Internet for details and references to the people whose stories are narrated. Indeed, many of them have an online presence ranging

from Facebook pages to obituaries to YouTube videos documenting their funerals. But how many audience members are aware of this fact and act on it?

Perhaps the details we present in *Gardens Speak* about each individual's burial location, not to mention the day they died, did provide a greater sense of authenticity to the stories for the audience. If so, two of the ten people's names are anonymised for security reasons (their families were still living under regime-controlled areas at the time of the interviews). Such anonymity could raise questions of credibility. However, perhaps the audience does not care that the stories in *Gardens Speak* were real in every detail. Compared with the harassment and threats many of us who work on solidarity campaign with the Syrian uprising receive from regime supporters or apologists, *Gardens Speak* has—until the time of writing—not yet been accused of bias, faking stories, or simply of being revolution propaganda.

From its early days, the Syrian regime and its allies (both domestic and international) have accused the Syrian uprising and all its various groups of lacking authenticity and fabricating events. Early on, while the Syrian regime censored local journalists and banned international media from entering Syria, many local activists assumed the role of citizen journalists and sent reports outside Syria. One of these young individuals is Bassel Shahadeh, whose story is documented in *Gardens Speak*. The lack of journalistic experience and systematic presentation of evidence were often used as the basis for the political smearing of the uprising. The regime, its supporters, and those that questioned the reality of an uprising accused the revolutionaries of exaggerating and fabricating news. In response, activists in Syria organized to marshal the evidence—to the near point of an obsession. Local committees archived the stories of torture, death, and

disappearance. They did so by allowing people to register information themselves, along with various documentation (including photos). Another example that shows the obsession of the activists to prove their authenticity (and thus either proving their innocence or generating the sympathy they deserved) is a Facebook page entitled “A Photo But Not From Syria.” Their main objective is to study pictures that are circulating on Syria and point out the ones that are not authentic. Most of their interventions involve tracing the origins of such photos and identifying them as originating from a warzone outside of Syria.

Returning to my question, what made the authenticity of *Gardens Speak* not questioned? In her article on performance re-enactment that uses *Gardens Speak* as a case study, Déchery discusses the use of ‘reality’ in the work that she describes “close to documentary” (15). According to her, the archival research for the piece (e.g., collection of stories, sound, footage, and personal diaries) as well as the choice of using real names and locations produce this close-to-documentary effect. Déchery is not interested in whether what she describes as the elements of reality in *Gardens Speak* are in fact authentic. She does however examine the function of those elements. Déchery argues that the piece is “not merely a matter of seeking to represent (to eventually make or break History), but rather to ‘re-demonstrate,’ that is to say, in a single movement, to show what has remained hidden, obliterated, annihilated and practice “re-demonstration” (ibid).

Déchery’s argument led me to revisit the discussions on other works I had created which also utilised oral histories. In these cases too, journalists and critics often discussed the ethics and politics of the work but rarely the veracity of the stories told. In the work of Dictaphone Group in particular, there appears to be an assumption that we have earned the trust of our audience in Lebanon as both a

research and a live art group. Thus, the information is understood to be real, never fiction.

In the first performances by Dictaphone Group, *Bit Téléférique* (2009), I tell the audience three stories in a row while on a cable car ride from the mountains back toward the sea. When we get out of the cable car, I reveal to them that one of the three stories was made up without telling them which one. The three stories are not quotidian nor evident: the first is about two brothers one of whom, during the Lebanese civil war, killed the other by mistake during a brutal massacre that took place in the area and then shot himself; the second story is about a family from a different religion to the majority of the population in the area and how their teenage boys were perceived by the young girls in the neighbourhood as an exotic sexual fantasy and an impossible love affair; and the third story was autobiographical where I point at a mountain trail where people often go for religious pilgrimage as I confess that my first sexual experience happened there. Somehow, I expected the audience to assume that everything I told them was unreal. When asked for their speculation, the majority remarked that my sex story was definitely fiction, presuming that no reasonable Lebanese woman would publicly confess to such a scandalous story. Interestingly, no one speculated that the most violent of the stories about the two brothers and the massacre was untrue. Almost two years later, in a public artist talk held by Dictaphone Group in Beirut, I remarked that the audience who experienced *Bit Téléférique* remember all three stories as real.

Was the authenticity of *Bit Téléférique* linked to the fact that it was presented as a performance based on urban research? The piece maps the transformation of the seashore city from agricultural lands to a densely populated urban city. The

research and the performance employ aerial photos, other photos, maps, and the oral histories. I wondered whether the authenticity of the stories was linked to the way these stories were performed. The form of the piece took the shape of a cable car ride overlooking the city with myself in the role of a guide. Throughout the journey, I pointed at places and shared information both from research and from my experience as someone who grew up in that area. Although I had written a script that I would perform each time, it was done in the form of a conversation rather than a theatrical text that could not be interrupted by the audience. The audience members were invited to re-imagine the city, contribute to the conversation, and re-enact a scene from a classic Egyptian film that took place in the same cable car. The unquestioning of the authenticity of the stories told in *Bit Téléférique* has roots in the audience's perception of the work as a research-based city tour.

Returning to *Gardens Speak*, *New York Times* journalist Charles Isherwood reviewed the work. He wrote about being shaken, not by the story itself but by the experience of lying down on the soil to listen. He explained, "The story was a simple one, simply told, but the experience was nonetheless extraordinary, and emotionally wrenching." Talking about writing the letter, he says, "I was too shaken to think of anything to put down. I'm a writer by profession, obviously, but in the moment the words just wouldn't come." What the journalist expresses here is an experience that felt real and authentic to him. It is not necessarily tied to the veracity of the story he listened to. In fact, he seems unconcerned with this issue. Other than the reality of his personal emotional and physical journey, the only truth he seemed interested in is the fact that we have become numb to the political reality in Syria. With this thought, he starts his review saying, "It's a sad

truism, or maybe a sad truth, that even the most appalling statistics about the victims of war can over time have a numbing effect.” What this statement reveals to me along with a number of feedback and reviews that responded to *Gardens Speak* is that the veracity of the work lies in the experience of the audience: the listening, the letter writing, and perhaps the realisation that we have been (selectively) numb to certain massacres and war crimes.

### **III. Process: Collecting Oral Histories**

#### **Positionality and Identity of the Interviewer**

While collecting oral history for the aforementioned projects, I reflected on my positionality as an artist working with other people’s stories. I wanted to acknowledge the space between audience and performer, representation and experience, distance and intimacy, and solidarity and risk. In the context of the Arab uprisings, revealing my own politics to those I was interviewing proved to be crucial to gaining their trust. During the research period of *Stories of Refuge*, I waited outside a room in Munich for an interviewer while he and other men from different parts of the Arab world ran online searches on me. They later joked that they were trying to confirm that I was not an undercover agent of the Syrian regime. In reality, they wanted to check my story: that I am whom I said I was, an artist doing a project on newly arrived Syrian asylum seekers in Munich. They also wanted to know why I was doing this project. I responded that I come in solidarity. Once they confirmed that I have publicly opposed the Syrian regime and I was on the side of the revolution, I was treated as a friend. The interviewee and I became two people in conversation with an understanding that we are both on the same side.

A number of oral historians have reflected on the subject of first impressions and trust. Historian Sofie Strandén argues that the identity of the interviewer, including their race, gender, language, and age form the first impression left by interviewers on their interviewees (6). The first impression prepares the ground for a shared trust that the interview needs to further nurture. I would add that in the contexts of intense political polarisation and state repression, interviewers have a harder task to prove themselves to their interviewees. Strandén draws on another historian Charlotte Hagström's work on ethics that takes into consideration the similarities and differences between the interviewees and herself. According to Hagström, the interviewer can choose to either suppress or emphasize those similarities and differences (7). I find Hagström's process useful as it drives us to pay close attention to how similarities and differences are revealed and communicated during the interview.

In my case, sharing the same native language (though with a slightly different dialect) with Syrian refugees in Munich meant that I was able to understand intonations, notice their choice of words, and improvise freely without the presence of a translator. The latter point is crucial, as a translator's presence would have affected our encounter making it perhaps less intimate and not a One to One experience. However, some of my interviewees first perceived our shared cultural identity with mistrust and as a potential security threat to them. To those fleeing the Asad regime's persecution and violence, the more foreign I appear to them, the less likely it is that I would be a danger to them on behalf of the regime. From these various experiences, I concluded that whether I end up emphasising or suppressing our cultural and experiential similarities and differences, I would need to take seriously how my interviewees feel about these similarities and



differences. In many cases, I leaned more toward being upfront with them, explaining where I come from, why do I care about their experiences, and how personal or impersonal this subject and cause are for me. In other words, I allowed my interviewees to make up their own minds about my credibility and the level of trust that they can place in my work and me.

### **Ethical Exchange**

Marshall Clark reflects on the cultural and racial differences between herself and her interviewees (96). She explains that, when interviewing journalist Harriet Skye, the fact that Marshall Clark is white while Skye is Native American had set the tone of the interview. Skye was going to share her family history while Marshall Clark was going to listen. According to Marshall Clark, the difference in their racial identities imposed an exchange on them “in which her [Skye] responsibility is to tell the truth and mine is to hear it” (97). This is important as the oral historian here sets a scene for an oral history exchange in which her prime role is to listen and support. She therefore engages in an inverse of the dominant relationship in which white people control the writing of history of non-white people. This attention to differences and similarities in class, race, gender, other identities, privilege, and history helps ensure an ethical exchange during the oral history interview. Marshall Clark is an advocate for the political force of oral history in “promoting well-being and personal growth” on an individual level and in order to “build a sense of belonging” and “reshape public dialogues” in communities (94). She is also intentional about referring to her interviewees as “narrators” (90). Doing so, places the main focus of the encounter between herself and her interviewees on the narration of the interviewees.

Building on Marshall-Clark's ideas of narrators, my experience suggests that each narrator requires a different way of listening and supporting, depending on the person and the situation. While it is important to focus the encounter on the interviewees' narration, some people might be more comfortable in hearing from the interviewer first. In most cases, I start by introducing myself, my work, and my interests. Then, perhaps, we move to a more mundane conversation about the location where we are, the cities we live in, or the journeys we have made. Doing so allows the two sides of the conversation to get to know each other beyond the topic of the interview—to connect on a more personal level. I find this type of incidental conversation to be crucial in order to build trust and amicability. It also acts as a reminder for the interviewer that the person they interview represents herself rather than her entire nation or race. Crucial to remember here is that while we approach people with good intentions to listen and be educated by their stories and histories, it is important to note and navigate the risk of reducing them to their identity. Failing to do so forces on our interviewees the burden of representing an entire class, race, gender, or population.

Furthermore, in the context of political repression, war trauma, grief, and displacement, the challenge to the interviewer for facilitating an ethical exchange is heightened (Strandén 3). While interviewing people who have endured loss, torture, and displacement for *Stories of Refuge*, I came to the conclusion that I could not merely support by quietly listening. I could not expect narrators to take risks in speaking out without also proving to them that I was taking my own risks in working on this project. For example, being a Lebanese woman who was born during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) was not enough for my interviewee, a Syrian woman of similar age, to feel that I am able to understand her pain. She first

wanted to know that I support her cause, as a premise for sharing with each other any war-related trauma. Marshall Clark reminds us that ethical responsibility takes the form of caring for our interviewees' wellbeing in a dialogue that she describes as a "mutual exploration of a life" (96). I would add that such responsibility needs to be in the form of sharing vulnerabilities with our interviewees. Therefore, I next explore the notion of vulnerability and care in the process of collecting oral history. I do so by proposing to view these interviews as intimate performances.

### **Conducting the Interview**

What should one do when during an oral history interview, one is told sensitive information about abuse, human trafficking, war crimes, and other horrible injustices? Oral historian Leena Rossi argues that as interviewers, we should be neither moralizer nor informer (15). When interviewees disclose information about breaking the law or committing crimes, oral historians, she says, "should never accuse, reproach, or give therapy" (ibid). I agree with Rossi's ethics as well as with a number of tasks proposed by several oral historians to ensure ethical interviews such as respect, trust, and knowledge (Strandén 9-11). These include: arriving prepared; listening without judging or lecturing interviewees; being aware of the traumatic effect of certain questions; abiding by confidentiality; and cultivating trust (*Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*). As artists, we certainly can and should borrow from the work ethics of oral historians when conducting our research. Yet what happens to these ethics when oral history interviews are conducted with the goal of being transformed into artworks? The worry here is that the ethics and politics of artworks are solely discussed in relationship to the outcome (for example, a finished performance) as opposed to

including the work process and how oral histories were collected in the first place. There are of course unlimited ways for artists to collect oral histories for their projects. Depending on each project, individual artists may choose to engage in oral history collection through workshops, improvised conversation, or performance-devising exercises, among many other creative methods. Regardless of the process, artists need to engage in discussions about their work ethics during the process of working with other people or communities and in the lead up to their finished project.

In my own work process, I have found it useful to contextualise the collection of oral histories as a One to One encounter between an interviewee and myself. The ethics and aesthetics of One to One performances provide a useful methodology for conducting oral history interviews. For this purpose, I turned to and reflected upon my own One to One performances (*Fuzzy*, *Jarideh*, and *Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better*) as well as the work of key artists in the field such as the late Adrian Howells. The aim is to find tools that would be useful in understanding and practicing oral history collection in an ethical, collaborative, and creative way. Thus, my practice of oral history collection has been marked by my experience in devising and performing One to One works as well as being an audience to a number of One to One creations. As I will explain, I have also benefited from the writings of scholars and critics on intimate performances.

### **Oral History Interviews as One to One Encounters**

My research and performance practice centres around the encounter with the individual, whether a narrator (i.e., interviewee) or an audience member. I propose to view oral history interviews as One to One performances, not only between an interviewee and an interviewer, or between an artist and a participant,

but also between two individuals in a conversation at a certain time and in a certain space. Therein, they share their selves. Crucial to this analysis is to look at “the practices of exchange between selves enabled by One to One work” (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 121). The notion of practicing exchange leads us to consider the ethics and politics of interactivity during the collection of oral history. It also leads us to question what is exchanged and how. Beyond information and narration, intimacy, vulnerability, care, and co-creativity also need to be exchanged.

As discussed in the previous chapter, interactivity is both a process and an aim. Key elements to take into consideration for achieving interactivity are: horizontality and the balance of control between the two sides of the encounter; co-creativity and the ability for everyone involved to significantly transform the encounter; and, finally, the indeterminacy of the outcome. My experience was that like an interactive One to One performance, every oral history interview is different. Each depends on how it is literally performed by everyone involved. It can range in its nature, being at one point a story, at another a confession, and sometimes an exercise in remembrance of a certain event. Narrators sometimes rush the interview to avoid too much emotional investment. At other times, the process of storytelling is side tracked by the intentional and unintentional actions of the involved parties. From the moment of arriving to the space of the encounter, each person (i.e., the interviewer and the narrator) might have a different pre-set idea of how the encounter will go or should go. It is the responsibility of both sides to be open to other possibilities, and to allow transformations and off-script deviations to occur.

In One to One performances, the artwork is stripped to its core: the encounter. It is the medium in which we can closely observe the process of creating

an ethical exchange. Scholars Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan researched the specificities of One to One performances and what makes some of these encounters work more/better than others. In their article “Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance,” each of these researcher-spectators (i.e., Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan) describes the experience of performing the role of spectator in a number of One to One performances. According to them, the “generous and demanding work of collaboration” is what makes the relationship between artist and audience work (121). Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan conclude from their research that collaboration does not intrinsically induce dialogue. In addition, they argue that collaboration does not automatically diminish the authority of the artist in One to One works. In fact, some performances, while they invite audience collaboration, neither offer a place for a significant exchange nor do they give agency for the spectator to co-create (129). In such cases, the audience member finds herself in an already determined scene in which she is allowed to perform a dictated role but never to create that scene or her role.

Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan also draw attention to the tendency of some audience members to perform the role of a “good audience” (124). In such cases, the audience respond to performers in the way in which the former feel would please the latter—rather than in a manner reflecting how they truly feel. Accordingly, there is “a (danger) zone where practitioner’s assumptions meet the participant’s desire to ‘give good audience’” (ibid). Thus, merely inviting collaboration and participation through dialogue guarantees neither agency nor horizontality in the relationship. This analysis is in line with the dynamics that

make interactivity different from and a challenge to the myth of participation, as discussed in chapter one.

These insights are useful to consider during the process of collecting oral history. When conducting interviews, the openness of the narrator/interviewee is directly linked to the openness of the artist/interviewer. Maintaining the agency of the collaborator, whether audience member or narrator of an oral history, needs to be central to this relationship. Such relationships “seem to demand performances of trust, mutual responsibility, mutual openness and mutual receptiveness” (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 126). Once achieved, both sides of the encounter (whether in One to One performance or oral history interviews) are able to take their personal interaction into the wider society, “to reconfigure the One to One as One to Two to Three foregrounding social engagement through its ‘rethinking’ of intimacy” (Heddon, Iball, and Zerihan 127).

I feel that the methodology of One to One was present throughout the process of *Gardens Speak* despite the fact that the piece is not considered a One to One performance. I would argue, however, that the connection between each of the ten audience members and the story they encounter through sound is similar to One to One. In a recent showing of *Gardens Speak* in Italy, one audience member describes his experience as feeling that he was lying on the chest of the martyr listening to his story. Perhaps this feeling was perpetuated by how this audience member was lying on the pillow that contains the speaker. His description however also tells of the level of intimacy he felt to the person whom story he heard. In that sense, I envisage the audience experience of *Gardens Speak* as a collective of One to One encounters. Prior to the presentation of the work and beyond the form of its outcome, One to One also provided me with a methodology

of work, in particularly in the collection of oral histories. There, each encounter was a unique ethical exchange whereby notions of collaboration, authority, and the risk of acting as 'good audience' was negotiated, reflected on, and explored.

As artists, we need to practice such exchanges through a mutual sharing of vulnerability and through creating an indeterminate encounter. The One to One work of the Adrian Howells provides an inspiring methodology that could also be employed in oral history interviews. The care that was present in his work did not only travel one way, but both ways. In his work, as well as that of others such as artists Jo Bannon, Brian Lobel, and Deborah Pearson, the use of risk, humility, confession, kindness, and patience have made it possible for people to open up and feel safe to share their selves. Assuming a generous and non-hierarchical rapport during an encounter with the other helps create a safe space in which both parties interact selflessly without inhibitions. Crucial to this is our ability to place ourselves at risk in an indeterminate outcome that is waiting to be co-written with the other. On some occasions when there is conflict of politics, a balance of interest need to be achieved and control need to be negotiated.

### **A Mutual Sharing of Care; A Potential of Healing**

Both in One to One performances and oral history interviews, tensions might—and frequently do—arise. I have previously critiqued the romanticisation of intimate performances in an article entitled "Sexists and Racists Go to the Theatre Too." There, I argued that when interactivity is achieved, it exposes the broad range of the politics of the audience. As a result, the performer may find herself affected both physically and mentally, and often without suitable preparation or industry support. Based on my experiences, I explain my dilemma as an artist interested in discussing politics with audiences, but finding difficulties



in maintaining safety and wellbeing during intimate and One to One performances. Iball has explored the ethics of audience involvement in intimate performances in an article entitled “Towards An Ethics of Intimate Audience.” She shares evidence based on workshops conducted with Adrian Howells and theatre students and witnessed by a group of ethicists and psychologists. The article explores ethical care starting from artist self-care to preparing the audience before the performance, as well as initiating consensus between audience and artist. A striking part of her article is revealed in her description of Howells’ process. While the artist pushes the extent of intimacy with his audience, he constantly ensures that his audience collaborator maintains a level of agency. Howells ensures that his audience is aware that they can stop the performance whenever they want, once they feel uncomfortable (51). The audience’s safety and wellbeing are prioritized and are at the center of his exchange with them.

A concern for the interviewees’ safety is standard in all oral history ethical protocols. When collaborating with communities and individuals, artists too need to function on an ethical basis that allows for their project to be interrupted or stopped when it runs the risk of putting people in a situation contributing to their discomfort, manipulation, or abuse. I found the process of creating *Gardens Speak* particularly taxing on both an ethical and emotional level because of the weight of grief and loss that is palpable in the content of the work. During the process of collecting oral histories, writing, and editing *Gardens Speak*, we struggled with a paralyzing sense of loss. The sound recording process was therefore interrupted a number of times. It was crucial to prioritize everyone’s wellbeing and to remain open to the possibility that the project might be interrupted or cancelled. As an artist, I feel liberated by the thought that no matter how important the outcome of

an artwork is, the wellbeing of the collaborators, the audience, and the artist should not be compromised.

Several historians have discussed the healing potential of oral history narrations. According to Marshall Clark, oral history is a methodology used in museums and performed in communities to support healing, reconciliation, and development. This methodology is able to retrieve human dignity in the case of repression and marginalization, uplift communities, and build a sense of both pride and belonging (Marshall Clark 94). Healing in this sense is not only linked to the cathartic force of remembering and speaking out. Rather, it is intertwined with the act of sharing with the listener. In *As Far As My Fingertips Tips Take Me* (2016), I invite my Palestinian Syrian friend Basel Zaraa to share his family's story of seeking refuge in a One to One performance happening through a gallery wall. The premise of the show is an audience member inserting her arm into a hole in a gallery wall, and then Zaraa proceeds to paints on it. During that time, the audience listens to his story through a pair of headphones. The latter includes both commentary by Zaraa as well as a rap song that he wrote and performed. The piece is inspired by his sisters' long journey from Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria to Uppsala, Sweden. The piece explores, among several issues, the exchange of care, and how it can travel in both directions. The performer-narrator is being listened to, while the audience-collaborator is being gently touched and drawn on. In her review of *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, theatre critic Lyn Gardner writes in *The Guardian* newspaper,

While Zaraa's recorded story and song are played into my ears, I put my arm through a hole in a partition and he draws on my skin, delicately etching two queues of refugees on my forearm; my palm

becomes the site for a small, storm-tossed boat. His tale doesn't just touch me in a fleeting way – as the many stories and images reported in the newspapers do – it goes further. It marks me. For the next few days I will carry it around with me. It is part of me, not easily ignored or washed away. Every time I roll up my sleeves or wash my hands I am confronted by the images and rerun Zaraa's story in my mind. I can't get away from it.



Fig. 12. From the performance of *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* by Tania El Khoury. Performed by Basel Zaraa. Bristol, 2017. Photo by Tania El Khoury.

In *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me*, the notion of being marked has several connotations: being touched both literally and emotionally; being drawn onto; and being shaken. The gentle touch (perhaps reminiscent of a soothing hand massage) and the chilling reality of the refugee death toll (by seeing their etchings slowly disappearing on the audience's arm) are closely intertwined. As argued in the previous chapter, we can speak about a political potential of interactivity that both takes care of the audience (Relational Aesthetics) while asking uncomfortable

political questions (Antagonistic Aesthetics.) Put differently, as artists and researchers, we are able to ask, protest, point out, and reclaim politics while exercising an ethics of care and a sharing of vulnerability with our audience. In both the process (oral history collection) and the outcome (interactive performance) of *Gardens Speak*, it was important to discover in practice that we could ask challenging questions on death, revolution, and accountability while creating encounters based on care.



Fig. 13. From the performance *As Far As My Fingertips Take Me* by Tania El Khoury. Performed by Basel Zaraa. Ljubljana, 2017. Photo by Nada Zgank.

#### **IV. Process: Collaborative Editing of Oral History**

##### **Understanding and Accepting Memory**

One of the main elements of oral history collection that interest me is the multiple layers of historical significance: the overlapping of the personal and the political, the public and the private, the overt and the covert, and how individual trauma tells a great deal about the political context in which the traumatic events

occurred. The oral histories of ordinary people complicate the picture that is otherwise often painted by more traditional sources of historical recording such as official documents and mainstream press (Green and Troup 374-386). The narrators of oral history are able to pose different questions about the past. They are capable of depicting matters of urgency, inviting our intervention—so to speak.

Much of my own practice takes an interest in what people can (or chose to) remember about their own stories (i.e., *Stories of Refuge*) and the stories of their lost loved ones (i.e., *Gardens Speak*). Certainly, interviews offer the opportunity for interviewees to re-invent themselves. What about interviews about a dead lover, friend, or relative? How is it possible to remain loyal to the lives and values of those murdered while recounting what is in effect the story of their own encounter with and memory of that person? Will the partner of Bassel Shahadeh—one of Syria's iconic activists, a filmmaker killed in Homs, and one of those whose death is narrated in *Gardens Speak*—allow herself to be critical of her dead fiancé while she is still mourning his death? Her partner's story has been retold and rewritten hundreds of times through various eyewitness accounts, testimonies, reports, media stories, and works of art. She no longer owns the narrative of her intimate relationship with him. In fact, she is the audience of his life story just as much as anyone else might be. The interviewer/artist functions with a responsibility to understand and accept the complexity in which memory and remembrance work. As oral historian Portelli puts it:

To search out the memories in the private, enclosed spaces of houses and kitchens and – without violating that space, without cracking the uniqueness of each spore with an arrogant need to scrutinize, to know,

and to classify – to connect them with “history” and in turn force history to listen to them (1997, viii).

Indeed, it is in the meeting of the private (e.g., personal accounts and domestic spaces) and the public (e.g., media stories, research outputs, and performances) that we need to understand the oral history interview encounter as an exercise in compassion.

Some oral historians use the verb ‘remembering’ rather than the noun ‘memory’ as the former refers to an action that is still in motion rather than a fixed history (Portelli). This seems more accurate in my experience of examining the various ways narrators remember their past. Other scholars write about the entanglement between oral history and memory, and the impossible task of separating the experience from the telling of it (Hamilton). In *Gardens Speak*, both the creation and the rehearsal of a memory through telling it are fundamental to the consolidation of a long-term memory. Re-telling and re-performing stories can help people fix their dramatic events in their own memory (Thomson). Such interest in studying memory shifted the conversation from the truthfulness of oral histories to subjective realities (Shopes). History thus is not just a writing of events but how these “are experienced and remembered in the imagination” (Thompson 139). Remembering is therefore an on-going and ever-changing process that is affected by ideologies, culture, and the present. Each time we remember our past; we understand it and might consequently re-invent its meaning. It is a process that is affected by whoever we tell our past to. For example, the stories of *Gardens Speak* would have been narrated differently if another friend or family member had told it to us than those who did. It would have also perhaps been different depending

on whether they are telling it to us over the phone or face to face, and whether they are speaking to me or to Keenana who shares their Syrian dialect.

Narrators tend to compose their stories around key dramatic events. In their re-telling of history, narrators may judge it and express how it should have happened rather than how it actually happened. By attempting to make sense of their present, they emphasize regret, optimism, bravery, loss, and/or victimhood. As in any exercise of recollection and interpretation, some people might confuse events and dates, even situations. Accordingly, each recollection of a memory reshapes this memory. Memory recollection, like a performance, is never repeated exactly the same. It is directly linked to its presence, the space in which it takes place, the language, the audience and the current state of its performer. Scholar Michael Frisch's influential book *A Shared Authority* advocates for interpretation of meaning of the interview as negotiation by both interviewer and interviewee. In this sense, the process of editing oral history stories is already initiated during the recording of the interview. The role of interviewee is to collaborate in this narration by asking questions, shifting angles, and supporting the flow; but never by pushing a particular narrative. Below, I explore the ethics and politics of editing oral history narrations drawing from examples in my practice.

### **Collaborative Editing**

During the oral history interviews I conducted for *Gardens Speak* and other research-based projects, some interviewees chose to hide their identity, as they worried about their own security or that of those they care about. Many of those who hid their identities agreed that documenting their stories is a powerful political tool as it contests the grand narrative composed by those in power. In the case of Syria, that would be the Syrian regime. The shape these narratives

ultimately take once published, curated, or circulated cannot in themselves ameliorate or halt the violence to which they are a record of. However, they can help fight for ground in the battle over the writing of history. Starting from this belief, some narrators showed interest in the outcome of the interview, asking questions about the editing process or giving clear instructions on what detail needs be omitted and what needs to stay. Quite often, the editing process became part of the project itself (El Khoury, "Stories of Refuge").

In using oral history as both a political and aesthetic tool, I was inspired by the theoretical work of oral historians who advocate for a shared authority in working with interviewees as collaborators (such as Portelli and Frisch). Frisch discusses the notion of a "shared authority" in collecting and retelling of oral histories. Author Alicia J. Rouverol describes using the model of "shared authority" in her process of making a performance based on interviews she conducted in a prison (19). During her project, she had to negotiate the high stakes for the inmates involved while they tell their stories. To deal with this, she explains that she co-created with them the final product. Rouverol concludes that, "Collaborative oral history is based on the idea that power should and essentially does not reside solely in the hand of the interviewer, but is instead shared—a 'shared authority'" (25). More and more, historians are calling for and being encouraged to produce knowledge *with* communities rather than *about* communities (Frisch). According to Frisch, "A commitment to sharing authority is a beginning, not a destination. There are no easy answers or formulas and no simple lessons" (11). Frisch's approach could be read as a cross-disciplinary methodology spanning an unlimited number of ways of collaboration in which the collection of stories is not necessarily the end point. Rather, the key is the



relationship and the shared conversation that can later be transformed into a myriad of other conversations. Put differently, we can understand this method to be a relational performance in itself, an intimate One to One encounter in which the artist/interviewer and the narrator/interviewee share a moment when confessions, remembrance, and politics take place. In my own work, I tend to conceptualise the collection of oral histories as an interactive performance in which the interviewees are my collaborators. In such a context, both parties would set the rules of the encounter. Next, I explore how these ideas have developed through practice.

### **Examples in Practice**

*Stories of Refuge* documents the stories of three Syrian asylum seekers in Munich, who paid smugglers to get them out of Syria and into Germany. My collaborator Petra Serhal and I gave each of the three Syrian asylum seekers who collaborated in the project a small discreet video camera that they could take into their asylum camps. Our suggestion was that they film a day in their lives in the camp. We also asked them to take me to their favourite spot in the city. We recorded an interview with each of them, which serves as the soundscape over the footage that they had created. The footage turned out to be erratic, the image jumpy. Although I had suggested a few scenic shots to the participants, none of them showed interest in such suggestions. They all ended up producing videos that looked like the average YouTube videos that came out of Syria since the start of the revolution: often filmed by ordinary people using phone cameras, documenting everyday life and key events in their communities, with little to no subscription to the standards of what is commonly perceived as good cinematography.

The videos produced as part of *Stories of Refuge*, are not only a recording of three young people's oral histories, but also a representation of their own lives through their own lenses. Hiding their identity, the narrators represented their lives through their voices, their choice of material to shoot in their intimate spaces, and numerous intentional omissions. Some would film their feet while walking so as to place a part of themselves in the video. Some would keep themselves completely outside of the frame. During the interviews, it was particularly interesting to watch whether the interviewees would attempt to dramatise their already dramatic story, or whether they sound like they have been rehearsing the same story for several months. Some of the interviewees asked me if I wanted "the official story, or the real one." For them, what they termed official story had specific alterations in order to improve their chances of being granted asylum and residency in Germany.



Fig. 14. From the performance *Stories of Refuge*. Valletta, 2016. Photo by Tania El Khoury.

Using only sound in recording the oral histories turned out to be quite productive. In an audio interview, the voice recorder would often be forgotten by the narrator, registering stories that the interviewees might not want to share publicly such as a revelation of domestic violence, admitting to cheating the legal system, naming the smugglers, and identifying family members. When this happened, the narrators would invariably tell me what to edit out. When they felt that they had sidetracked the conversation from what they initially planned on telling me, they would simply demand that I delete that part. In this project, I played the role of a technical editor. Yet the editing process was collaborative, and my artistic choices were subjected to the collaborators' input and preferences.

The production process of *Gardens Speak* was similarly collaborative. In this context, the subjects of the interviews are dead before they even managed to tell us their stories. In order to write their stories using the first person, many people had to be involved: their family members, friends, activists who know about the context (i.e., place, time, and events) of their death, people who checked the dialect used in the writing of the script (to make sure it corresponded to the dialect in subject), and voice performers who could enunciate those dialects. Also important are two forms of audio material featuring those that were buried. The first is personal recordings given to us by relatives and friends of those who were buried. The second is video or audio recordings, identified and downloaded from the Internet, which were originally published online by unknown people who witnessed their deaths, helped bury them, or simply attended the funerals. The representation of each of the featured person's story has therefore been subjected to numerous instances of editing and editorializing, memory function, romanticisation of dead loved ones, and dramatisation of unjust killings. Crucial

to the writing process and perhaps most challenging was the decision to edit the interviews and consequently build the characters' oral history narratives as a series of events that do not inevitably lead to their deaths.

During this process, I was inspired by the argument that scholar Michael André Bernstein provides in *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* on the ethics and politics of foreshadowing in writing about victims of wars and massacres. Bernstein warned of attending to the ethical consequences of exercising 'backshadowing' (a term he coined) which means narrating people's lives from the catastrophic climactic end (their death) backwards (40). Bernstein explains that this practice is synonymous with "the rhetoric of victimization" (74). Taking as an example the writing of Jewish peoples' history, he explains the political and ethical problems of reducing long, rich, and complex histories of a people to the event of the Shoah and how such practice has been mobilised by successive Israeli governments (84). He proposes writing through 'sideshadowing' (a term coined by Gary Soul Morson), which defies the inevitability and determinism of foreshadowing often found in theological texts, determinist psychology, some literature, and political theories (95). In opposition, sideshadowing "expressed the ever-changing nature of that truth and the absence of any predictive certainties in human affairs" (4). Employing sideshadowing while writing oral histories of those who were killed highlights the richness of the individual and the power of their heritage, "without any sentimentalizing nostalgia" (78).

These are useful considerations when seeking to engage in the ethical writing of people's stories. In remembering those who were killed and attempting to write their stories, we need to make sure we do not narrate their lives as inevitably moving toward their murder—as if they knew all along what was going

to happen to them but could not do anything to stop it. I find this concept particularly useful in understanding what *Gardens Speak* does as a written (and performed) text. Some audience members remarked that, even though they knew they were listening to the story of a dead person, they still felt slightly surprised by their death in the story. This is particularly crucial as an ethical and political position in the context of the Arab uprisings, where regimes blamed the initial protestors for starting chaos in otherwise 'stable' countries. In this sense, our artistic and political choice in writing and telling stories in *Gardens Speak* derives from the belief that those protestors (some of whose stories are told in the piece) are innocent in their own deaths, and should/will not be blamed for causing mourning to their community, let alone the destruction of their country by the authoritarian regimes that killed them.

### **Private and Public in *Gardens Speak***

The oral histories that constitute *Gardens Speak* were subject to a number of editing processes. During the editing of the oral histories, we were in a constant negotiation between the private and public elements of the stories. On the one hand, the communities of the ten individuals whose stories constitute *Gardens Speak* name them as martyrs. In that context, their stories become collective rather than individual. Chapter three will examine the collective and national nature of this particular form of martyrdom. On the other hand, people intimately related to those that were killed (e.g., childhood friends, fiancés, fathers, etc.) told us most of the collected stories. This meant that private and intimate details were revealed and shared in the course of the oral history interviews.

In order to negotiate such tensions, we had to make decisions on what to omit and what to retain. In many cases, we went back to the narrators and asked

them to confirm their consent to share certain details through the performance and related publications. This process was difficult, especially when speaking with people who remain inside Syria and are dealing with surviving a war and mourning their loved ones. In some cases, the communication with a few groups had to be stopped because we lacked a means of communication, electricity had been cut due to sieges, or any number of changing circumstances. We were therefore forced to not include the stories of those individuals we were not able to complete the research on. This was the case no matter how interesting or moving we thought what parts of their story we already had would be to the audience.

As the creator of this piece, I negotiated the ethics of authorship in three distinct ways. Firstly, I made sure that everyone who collaborated on this piece (including the narrators/interviewees, technical team, and performers) were aware of how I intended to share these stories with the audience, and thus making space for reactions, suggestions, and objections. I shared details about the concept of the performance and its production (e.g., the design of tombstones and the recording of first-person narratives). Most importantly, I shared how the audience would interact with the stories (i.e., lying on the ground, digging up the grave, and writing letters). It felt particularly important to have everyone's consent around the issues of commemoration and death rituals in a piece that is inspired by the struggle of people to commemorate their loved ones and preserve their narratives.

The second way I negotiated the ethics of authorship was to push myself to remain open to collaboration and co-creation. This was necessary given that I was expecting people to be open in their collaboration with me (i.e., sharing stories and co-creating). My personal motivation and internal work process was to put trust

in people whom I never worked with before and to remain open to their suggestions that would ultimately transform the piece.

For example, it was in Beirut that I first met Keenana Issa, a writer and activist who fled Syria to Lebanon after the Syrian regime had her imprisoned for her activism. During this first encounter, I mentioned to Issa that I was looking for a research assistant for *Gardens Speak*. She expressed her feeling that the project seemed important to her and agreed to work with me on it. During the work process, Issa struggled with trauma and grief, both around her own experiences and those of the people she researched. This greatly affected the pace of the research phase. After a period of interruption, she came back to me and suggested that she would like to lead on transforming the interviews and other research findings into the first-person narratives. She asserted that the writing process would be cathartic and empowering for her. I accepted Issa's suggestion. We reversed roles, and I became her assistant as she led the writing process in her own time and through her own creative process. The texts received another layer of editing by a few of the voice performers, as well as some interviewees who checked them after they were turned into written texts.

Another example of an unplanned collaboration involved Abu Gabi. I initially approached him to talk about one of the individuals I was researching, his childhood friend, comedian Hassan Hassan. Abu Gabi suggested that he writes the narrative himself and perform it in his own voice. We agreed on that and eventually met up for the recording session. It was then that he started humming, and suddenly burst into a song about the Yarmouk refugee camp where he and Hassan had grown up. Up until then, I did not plan to use music or song in *Gardens Speak*. The experience of listening to Abu Gabi made me feel that his song has

become an indispensable element in the work, so I decided to keep it.

Finally, I negotiated the ethics of authorship by editing myself out of the performance. Before *Gardens Speak*, I often performed in my work. I had automatically planned to be the audience guide in *Gardens Speak*, giving audience members instructions and supporting them throughout. The decision of removing myself from the piece came after a work-in-progress showing in which I realised that the audience were also (if not initially more) interested in my own story. This ended up shifting the focus of the piece to an informal interview about who I was, where I came from, what was my work process, how did I collect these stories, and how I felt throughout. It was a difficult decision, as I realised that having such a conversation is important and it is some people's way of interacting with the work. What made the decision easier was when, during the work-in-progress feedback session, someone expressed that the audience members need a human face to relate to. I reacted by pointing out that the human contact of the piece is present through the remembered, those who were made absent, and those who were present to witness. It was then that I decided to remove myself, in large part to shift the focus of the audience inward, toward the work, as they searched for the humanity that the show itself tells the story of.

I enumerate these negotiations to reflect on and be transparent about my work process in collecting and using oral histories. I am conscious not to perpetuate an image in which I paint myself idealistically as an artist open for any collaboration and suggestion no matter what they are. The last point about cutting myself out of the show highlights a moment in which the implied suggestion was rejected and the work changed accordingly. While I strive for openness, which is a core element in achieving interactivity, I find myself having to draw certain lines



and trying to preserve the integrity of the work. The balance between refusal and openness is perhaps what I find to be one of the hardest tasks in the process of creating and presenting performance.

## V. Conclusion: Compassionate Historiography

Oral history is a practice used by many across various modes of knowledge production: scholarship, journalism, community activism, and art. As I have explored, it is often deployed in an attempt to practice history from below and to fill gaps around certain historical events that need to be understood beyond quantitative data and written records. In doing so, many believe it can democratise history writing by paying attention to the victims, the marginalized, and/or the ordinary people (Green and Troup 374-386). Oral history has not been merely told, recorded, and broadcast, it has also been performed, sung, filmed, acted, edited, and re-edited.

Oral historians Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes warn about oral history being metaphorically buried (viii). They advocate for needing to bring the practice of oral history from academic research back to the public domain where it belongs. The buried and unburied metaphor bears resemblance to the actions of digging out stories and burying letters in *Gardens Speak*. As Shopes and Hamilton remind us, oral history contributes to reflecting and shaping collective memory (ibid). It therefore needs to be unearthed from academic institutions and shared as publicly as possible. Looking at the construction of oral history and remembering as an interpretive exercise is what intertwines oral history with performance as I have explored here.

Yet it is not the therapeutic effect of telling stories or the reconciliation with the past that I am interested in. Rather, it is the activation/ mobilization of near-past events in order to change the present. *Gardens Speak* does not claim to offer a balanced report or a neutral account of all sides of the so-called conflict. The project's origins lie in an articulated political motivation, and engagement with what feminist scholar and curator Deborah M. Withers calls a "compassionate historiography" (80). A work based on oral history and exercising compassionate historiography is rooted in the belief of the subjective nature of oral history. It requires us to be sensitive to the reasons behind why certain political events are remembered in a particular way rather than attempting to be as true to reality as possible. In this sense, my practice is not concerned with proving veracity and credibility that are often the concerns of verbatim and documentary theatre. It is centred on the notion of interactivity. While it uses oral history records and historical accounts of individuals, spaces, and events, it is not offered as already determined historical evidence. The interactive nature of the work ensures that it is an ongoing project of research and interaction that is constantly evolving. Such work starts with political motivation and functions in solidarity with targeted communities and individuals, by advancing their narratives, and by collaborating with them on creating a site in which audience members can interact with their stories. It does not claim objectivity vis-à-vis two sides of the story.

In this chapter, I looked at the ethics and politics of collecting, editing, and sharing oral histories in performance. I did so by drawing from my experience in making and performing One to One performances as well as key artists in the field (Adrian Howells) and academics who have extensively analysed intimacy and sharing vulnerability in One to One performance (Heddon and Iball). Key features

for such encounters are indeterminacy, sharing vulnerability, ethical care, agency of the narrator/collaborator, and co-creativity. These are commonly used factors in One to One performances that are self-reflexive about its politics and ethics. I argue that similar factors need to be present in oral histories interviews and encounters, as well as their editing. Central to this is a collaborative process that starts with the interview and continues after the work is shared with the audience. This is a potential risky process in which stories could be manipulated and consequently the agency of the narrators compromised.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **“No Aesthetics Outside My Freedom”:**

### **Mourning, Witnessing, and Embodying**

In times of intensified political mobilization, many artists find themselves motivated by alternative imaginaries that defy the hegemony of the status quo. Yet this political motivation, however viscerally we feel it or transparent we make it, does not automatically result in our work transcending issues of ethical considerations and political efficacy. Artists who hold feminist, environmentalist, leftist, and/or progressive values do not necessarily (or automatically) produce art with the same characteristics. Here, we must return once again to questioning how the artwork interacts with the audience and vice versa.

The debate on the political potential of art must include a consideration of its encounter with the audience, as this is the moment when a performance comes into being (Fischer-Lichte). This is more so the case when the performance in question is centred on interactivity with its audience. I focus this third chapter on *Gardens Speak*. In order to discuss and analyse its political potential, I divide the chapter into three main sections, each corresponding to an element within the performance: mourning, witnessing, and embodiment. These three principles are intertwined in *Gardens Speak*, facilitating audience interactivity with the work and thus forming the artwork’s political potential.

In the first section focused on mourning, I discuss the political context within which *Gardens Speak* was conceived. The Assad regime’s brutal suppression of the Syrian uprising took on various forms. One such form was attacking funerals, waging a narrative war on the dead, and using the bodies of the

murdered as means to oppress the living. I engage with theories of mourning as a form of militancy in particular in the work of scholars Judith Butler and Douglas Crimp. I draw on these authors to look at the common practice of Syrians transforming funerals into sites of resistance and organizing—thus taking into consideration *Gardens Speak*'s setting as a garden graveyard.

The second section discusses the act of witnessing, which builds on the previous chapter's conversation on the use of oral history in performance. According to scholar Carol Martin, one of the methods of "the theatre of the real," is "acting as witnessing" and giving testimony (31). In tribunal theatre, the audience is also conceived as bearing witness rather than merely watching, listening, or receiving entertainment (Peters). In *Gardens Speak*, I intentionally use the word martyr to describe the dead. On the one hand, my decision to do so was based on the common use of the term by the relatives, friends, and solidarity activists of the deceased. On the other hand, the term martyr itself has connotations related to the act of witnessing. In Arabic, the word for martyr is *shaheed*, which derives from *shahada*, the act of witnessing.

The third and final section of this chapter examines embodiment in relation to audience interactivity with *Gardens Speak*. It is in this light that ideas and practices of interactivity materialise, as the interaction of the audience with *Gardens Speak* is grounded in an embodied experience. I look at the trajectory of the audience experience with *Gardens Speak* by examining their responses through the letters they wrote at the end.

## I. Mourning

In considering the political potential of the interactive nature of *Gardens Speak*, it is useful to engage with mourning as a political performance. Such engagement is directly related to the political context in which *Gardens Speak* was conceived. Between 2011 and 2014 in Syria, the act of mourning had become revolutionary and commemorating the dead effectively criminalised by the regime. This section will explore the notion of mourning as resistance, drawing from key theorists in the field such as Judith Butler, Athena Athanasiou, and Douglas Crimp. I describe the politicisation of mourning and its use in the context of the Syrian uprising based on a series of interviews I conducted during my research. I follow this conversation with an exploration on how the Syrian regime has criminalised the commemoration of the dead and end this section with a return to live art asking how we perform death.

### **Mourning as Militancy in the Syrian Uprising**

In describing the political use of death and mourning in Syria, I draw on personal stories, journalistic reports, and everyday footage. Most importantly, I conducted three interviews in 2012. One of these interviews featured Abu Odai, a local community activist from Homs whom I was introduced to in Beirut. The name Abu Odai is a pseudonym, and even I do not know his real name. Another interview I conducted was with Magda, a young female activist doing relief work in Damascus. I met with her several times both in Beirut and London. The third of these interviews was with Zahra, a female journalist embedded with armed opposition groups in Aleppo. Zahra played a significant role in sending me photos of gardens that were turned into burial sites. I interviewed her only once, but kept close contact over email while she was in Aleppo before she fled to Turkey. With

their consent and for reasons related to their own security, I have anonymized both Magda and Zahra's real names.

In the early days of the Syrian uprising, one of the activists' primary contributions to the growing opposition movement was to attend funerals of the first martyrs (See Appendix 1, Interview 2). Those activists in Damascus—the capital that remains heavily securitized—would travel to the city's outskirts or to rural towns where the uprising began. There, they visited the grieving families and joined commemorations, often without knowing much about the dead other than the fact that the regime had murdered them. Funerals offered these activists a space and place where they could meet, talk with like-minded people, organise, and let their anger out—all the while grieving the victims. They saw individual deaths as a collective experience, a symbol of the cost of the uprising. Families and communities in mourning appear to have known that the strangers among them were there in solidarity. They understood that they were not alone, and that their murdered loved ones were being perceived as the first martyrs of the revolution. The mere appearance of strangers in a grieving house transformed a murdered individual who was being grieved by his family into a martyr, a symbol in a larger community of dissidents. Public grievability activated people whom, up until that point, worried about the implications of joining the uprising. Collective acts of mourning provided them with both a reason and a space to take a public stand against the regime.

During the early days of the Syrian uprising, funerals were initially thought to be much safer than open protests. Organising protests in Damascus involved high stakes, often with a single arrest leading to the arrest of an entire chain of people. Magda explains that activists viewed funerals as a less risky space from

which to initiate a protest. There is no need for organisation or unsafe communication there, as there was an understanding that the day after the regime killed someone there would be a protest in his local area that anyone could join (Interview 1). As the Syrian uprising developed, death became an overwhelmingly public affair. This in turn transformed funerals into sites of public politics and dissent.

Later, the practice of showing up at funerals evolved into turning these funerals themselves into protests and taking them out of the homes and into the streets. Protestors would chant in front of the deceased's house, calling on their parents: "*bay al-shahid 'irfa' rasak*" ("Oh martyr's father, keep your head up") and "*'imm al-shahid, nihna wladik*" ("Oh martyr's mother, we are all your children"). These chants and protests are meant to remind the family that their loved ones did not die in vain, but represented a courageous stance in the face of oppression. The funerals/protests sent a clear message to the regime: killing one of us affects all of us; we are on the side of those who were murdered, and we are angry.

These funerals and the attendant protestors formed much of the very first events of the uprising that were documented and shared online. YouTube videos of funerals/protests circulated widely as a proof that Syrians too were revolting in midst of regional uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—to name the most significant locales. These videos challenged the regime's narrative that no real opposition movement was taking place in Syria, and that the government was concerned with reforms not repression. Funeral videos often clearly stated the name of the martyr as well as the area and date of the funeral, providing evidence for a national and global audience of the reality that the regime was killing protestors. These videos were also evidence that tens, hundreds, or—sometimes—



thousands of Syrians were taking to the streets in protest during a specific funeral. In this context, public grievability is a corporal practice, one of bodily exposure in public space, and a site for contestation of dispossession.

In his writing on the gay men community during the 1980s AIDS crisis, art historian Douglas Crimp proposes a reconsideration of the alleged incompatibility of mourning and activism. According to him, activists within the community had long dismissed mourning as too sentimental, indulgent, and defeatist practice (5). Consequently, some activists refused mourning and advocated for replacing it with organisation and public anger. Crimp proposes to avenge the dead in both activism and mourning. He is particularly concerned with the “ruthless interference in our bereavement” and how affects the community in its internalisation of their depiction by the media and the wider society as helpless victims and suffering from self-inflicted pain:

The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of our dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning becomes militancy (9).

As Crimp points out, mourning becomes militancy when gay lovers and friends are forced to hide their emotions in church funerals organised by conservative families, when they are taken by the guilt of remaining alive and the “impossibility of deciding whether the mourner will share the fate of the mourned” (10). When a community is faced with dispossession and death, and when that very community is being blamed for its misery—whether by accusations of unprotected sex, too much sex, or—in the case of the Syrian uprising—turning their backs on national

stability, mourning as an act transcends the pathological state of paralysis and melancholia. Mourning becomes a challenge of the quietness that ensures that more deaths are happening. In the words of Crimp, mourning becomes a political act performed in order “to deny the extent of the violence we have all endured; more importantly, it is to deny a fundamental fact of psychic life: violence is also self-inflicted” (16). What Crimp’s writing on AIDS activism helps us understand is the intertwining of mourning, militancy, and facing our own demons as activists. Conquering our own “moralizing self-abasement,” the survivor-guilt, and the state and media interference in our very act of bereavement are essential elements of mourning as/and militancy (Crimp 12).

### **Criminalising Mourning**

In Syria, as funerals frequently turned into protests, the regime began to target and attack funerals just like they would target protests. Security forces actively repressed attempts by communities to transform their dead into revolutionary icons. This repression took the form of shooting at funerals, arresting family members of the dead, and even confiscating corpses (see Appendix 1). Many families reported having to negotiate with regime officials over the release of their loved ones’ corpses. During such negotiations, the authorities regularly proposed a deal to the family of the dead: they would release the body in return for the family signing a statement that their loved one was killed by armed gangs—the implication being absolving the regime of its role in killing the person, either by shooting or by torture. This created a dilemma for many families: they wanted to bury their children—an important social and religious practice—but also did not want to betray the values and the cause their children died for.

When speaking about *Gardens Speak* with critics, journalists, and even audience members, many inquire about the reasons for which gardens in Syria turned into gravesites. The reasons are numerous, some of which are mentioned in this chapter. Yet the reason that struck me the most was the reality of contestation around the circumstances of death. Apparently, dying did not spare the oppressed from the violence of the oppressors. It actually offered another site in which the regime sought to exercise dispossession, oppression, alternation of reality, and further alienation. In response, communities challenged the regime by performing public mourning, by hiding their dead, and by telling their stories.

One of the first major funeral events from the early days of the Syrian uprising was the mass protest that unfolded during the funeral of thirteen-year-old Hamza al-Khatib in May 2011. He had been detained during a protest in Daraa, and his corpse was delivered back to his family after approximately one month of detention. His body showed clear signs of torture—both blunt force and electric shock. During his detention, al-Khatib’s genitals were removed. The regime was in effect using the little boy’s body to terrorise the community into refraining from joining protests. The regime even threatened al-Khatib’s parents against speaking to the media about their child’s torture and death. In response, thousands joined a mass funeral in Daraa chanting, “death, but no humiliation.” Thousands of others mourned him on social media on a widely visited Facebook page entitled *We Are All the Young Martyr Hamza al-Khatib*. This Facebook page drew clear inspiration from another page, *We Are All Khaled Said*, which many claimed was an important mobilising node for the 25 January 2011 Egyptian uprising. Said was a young Egyptian man who was also tortured to death while in police custody in Alexandria in June 2010. Syrian al-Khatib and Egyptian Said, along with Tunisian

street vendor Bouazizi, are three young working-class men whose state-imposed death ignited protests in their countries, across the region, and around the world.

The oral histories collected for and narrated in *Gardens Speak* (and later published in the book *Gardens Speak*) do not stop narrating at the moments of death of the protagonists. They carry on with the details of their funeral or the lack of, the garden they were buried in, and the circumstance of being laid underground. These oral histories give details about whether the families and communities managed to celebrate the dead or not. The decision to include these details was an intentional response to the reality that the relatives and friends we interviewed had much to say about the post-death period. The process of trying to secure the body and making decisions about the burial and funeral services—all in the context of constant regime intervention and manipulation—marked these relatives and friends.

Magda recounts the several attempts to mourn her friend Bassel Shahadeh, one of the people whose story is recorded in *Gardens Speak* (Appendix 1, Interview 2). She also tells the story of families waiting for the corpses of their loved ones that were tortured to death under regime custody (Appendix 1, Interview 3). Zahra, who reports from an area that has been targeted by regime shelling and barrel bombs, remarks that even having a body to bury is a privilege to some (Appendix 1, Interview 4). In one case, five close friends of a young activist transported his dead body to the mosque so his community could put on a funeral despite the regime's ban on this collective ceremony (Appendix 1, Interview 1). Apparently, they hid the body, transporting it from one house to another. Such stories reveal how the dead bodies of activists and protestors were a battleground over which their communities and the regime fought. What strikes me in these

stories is to what extent the living show readiness to die for the dead. Perhaps it is the survivor's guilt that Crimp mentions and that several of the interviews I conducted touch on (Crimp 10). From these accounts, the sense of guilt and duty toward the dead becomes apparent. Narrators spoke about owing the dead a number of things: telling their stories, avenging them, continuing their struggles, caring for their children and parents, and mourning them publicly. It feels as if those who survived did so in order to bring justice to those who died. Mourning becomes vengeance, confrontation, and a site of militancy.

According to Abu Odai, the fight is essentially over narrative: are the dead criminals or are they honoured martyrs? Are they worthless or worthy of dying for? He narrates stories in which the regime threatened families with arrest if more than three people attend the burial of the deceased. At the beginning of the uprising the majority of those killed were young activists who were organising or participating in protests. They were outspoken and led a public life, so had large followings. After each of their deaths, both their families and the regime were confronted with masses of people who wanted to attend their burial, chant for them, and celebrate their lives and courage. In some cases, members of the mourning family would be detained for allowing a funeral to take place. Of particular interest in this vein is the story of Abu Odai's thirty-year-old pharmacist friend named Jamal el-Fatwa. He was detained for organising a protest and killed under "monstrous" torture in regime's prison (Appendix 1, Interview 4). His family was made to sign an agreement that the funeral would not be comprised of more than three people. But for Abu Odai and other friends they felt that el-Fatwa was their martyr to bury and commemorate. He explains that they felt indebted to him, and that they would not be stopped from publicly mourning him like they

should (Appendix 1, Interview 4). According to Abu Odai, dying in/for his friend's funeral would be an honour (ibid).

It was in the midst of these types of stories, centred on the courage and contestation to publicly mourn, that *Gardens Speak* was developed. The soil of many gardens in Syria contains at least one of these stories, each unique, worth telling and listening to. I thought that one day those gardens would speak. When they did, wherever we were in the world, if we pressed our ears to the ground and listened with both our bodies and our minds, we might understand, feel, and embody those lives, what they witnessed, and how they were buried.

### **Bringing the Dead Home**

Zahra tells me about a twenty-four-year-old man from Latakia who was killed while in regime custody. His family was called in to receive his corpse. His father had to fill out and submit paperwork for nearly two weeks so as to obtain his son's corpse. The body was too precious for them, so they endured dealing with the very bureaucracy that murdered their son. At the end of the process, the security forces informed the parents that their son had already been buried but they would not say where and would not give any further details. It was "as if their son has vanished" (Appendix 1, Interview 4). Zahra explains that on top of being devastated by losing their child and not being able to bid farewell to him, his family was heartbroken by the lack of a physical place to visit.

When dealing with the loss of a close person, mourning has been regarded as an important step for what we call 'closure' or a return to participation in the city (Rose 36). We are supposed to mourn, grieve, and then reach a state of closure— ideally in this specific order. Laws and state institutions advocate for a linear understanding of death as an interruption of life, followed by mourning,

then life again. For many, closure starts with the symbolic act of closing a coffin or wrapping the dead, putting it in the ground, being there, experiencing the scene, knowing the fate of the dead body, and rationalising such a fate. Consequently, and as I will further explain below, looking at “life in death” and “death in life” is a form of resistance to and an interruption of the status quo (Stanley 8).

A number of scholars have focused on the intersection of mourning with national and global politics. The nationalisation and consequently politicisation of grief has in some cases justified militarisation and wars. States have treated their fallen soldiers as heroes worthy of national mourning while deeming their enemies unmournable and their death unworthy of being recorded or even archived (Granek 65). Anthropologist Antonius C. G. M. Robben has looked at the case of Argentina and how state violence employed disappearance - as in the case of the young man from Latakia—to terrorise the community. In trying to break the guerrillas, the Argentine military did not execute their comrades but instead left them in a state of waiting, unaware if their friends were dead, being tortured, saved, or simply deserted. Both in Syria and Argentina, the disappearances of corpses and the killings in state prisons “were so terrifying exactly because they were not public but intensely private. Violent death was taken away from the eye and control of the people, confined to the secrecy of the detention centres, and spread through society” (Robben 137). In addition, families and friends of the disappeared were unable to mourn as they cling to the hope of their loved one’s return and to obtaining justice. These families are effectively stripped from the right to mourn. While grief is personal and sometimes private, mourning is a collective practice in which a community is drawn together in solidarity expressing a certain loss “for a social collectivity under threat” (Robben 8).

In mourning, the dead and the living are temporarily joined in their removal from the society. The dynamics of mourning and remembrance bring life to death and death to life, after which both the living and the dead are supposed to depart each on their own way. This process is complicated when death becomes a collective sorrow and when it enters the everyday life of families and communities. Scholar Liz Stanley discusses the domestication of death in grief through the story of the feminist writer Olive Schreiner and her dealing with the death of her baby daughter. The body of the dead child was buried in the family's home garden in South Africa, and was later moved with the family to different houses as they themselves moved. The body of the child was always re-buried in the garden of the new home. Schreiner loved the landscape in South Africa so much that she herself wanted to be buried there. She thought that after her death, it would become 'hers' as though becoming one with the land (Stanley 5). She kept grief close to her domestic space, and in doing so she publicly and privately mourned her daughter as both acceptance and defiance of her loss.

As Stanley writes, to live beside the dead in the same property is "to bring the dead home" (6). To do so is to live among the dead and to accept the dead among the living. In domesticating death, mourning becomes something else. Schreiner refused "the life/death antimony" and understood the "corporeal dissolution brought by death (...) as rejoining this unity" (Stanley 7). In that sense, she rejected the law of mourning often set by state power, and refused that the dead person fully departs. "To routinise mourning in the sense of bringing it home by making it ordinary, homely, an everyday part of daily life" (ibid). The grieving mother as the vengeful mother that Stanley describes is the mother that refused that mourning becomes law.



I am thus once again reminded of the photo that triggered the idea of *Gardens Speak* in my mind. The photo was of a Syrian woman digging the grave of her son in her own home garden. I was never able to find this photo again. It was shared on social media sometime in late 2011, but is vividly marked in my memory. I still remember its colours, its composition, and what I felt when I saw it. It was to me a moment of realisation that *this* changes everything. The photo epitomised the situation in Syria: death was becoming quotidian but it was also being brought home, and would likely be avenged.

### **Syrian Gardens as Symbolic Spaces**

Having agency in where one is buried and the idea of becoming one with the land through burial is a recurrent subject in poetry and literature as well as stories of displaced people (for example, in the poem “Mural,” poet Mahmoud Darwish describes his own grave and how he would like it to be.) Lebanese who fled various wars and ended up settling around the world commonly leave instructions to their families to be buried back in their Lebanese village. They sometimes even designate a specific spot, like under a particular tree. It is as if the dead body will be taken care of and will never be disrupted while it lies on land historically owned or lived on by family. Writing on the significance of burial for Palestinian refugees, political scientist Laleh Khalili explains, “That the body of a dead person ends up engulfed in the soil of a place ties the body to the place and further territorializes a person” (“Memory and Mourning” 6). In the case of Syria, it is a struggle against displacement, a fight over both geography and the right to exist in a country while opposing its ruling regime. Magda recalls the story of seventeen-year-old Fadi from Hama, who challenged his parents’ ban on him leaving house because of shelling and went out to volunteer at the local hospital.

A sniper shot him while he entered the hospital. In his pocket, he left a letter to his mother apologizing for breaking the ban and explaining his need to help others. His mother asked for his body to be buried in her own garden. She sat next to his grave everyday and prayed over it until they had to flee the country. Magda commented that leaving the grave of their son in their garden is probably what will bring this family back to their home after the war. The burial of their son in their home garden has forever transformed their domestic space to another—one loaded with meaning, memories, and collective political struggle.

Domestic gardens are both private and public. Family-owned gardens offer the freedom that comes with ownership, while linking the family with the community and the wider world. In cities, domestic gardens are resistant to the growing urbanisation of our everyday life. Sometimes, they function as a utopian space, a source of food, a relaxing shelter, a breath of fresh air, and a direct link to the land and ownership over the territory. That is why digging a grave for a loved one in a domestic garden is perhaps both a prescription for eternal peace for the dead and an assertion that peace is forever disrupted for the living.

Public gardens were also being transformed from places of gathering for the lived to places where both the dead and the living gather. Zahra sent me various photos and stories of parks turning into graveyards. In these photos, I saw families mourn next to makeshift tombstones. I also saw children playing next to marked tombs. If death was domesticated through home gardens burials, it was entering communities' everyday life through public gardens burials.

Zaina Erhaim, a Syrian journalist who reported from inside the northern part of Syria, wrote an article about these garden-graveyards. She interviewed children in 2014 who were still playing in the Martyrs' Cemetery in Aleppo's Salah

al-Din neighbourhood. The space used to be a park, “but was turned into a graveyard as the death toll in the city spiralled” (Erhaim 2). She describes a small section of the park that has remained a children’s playground, with only one slide and one swing left. Kids who are fed up with waiting their turn to use the slide or the swing move on to play another game. They play a game called “war,” in which they divide themselves into two groups, the regime’s army and the opposing Free Syrian Army. They pretend to shoot at each other, stating exactly which weapons they use and what damage it does, and then pretend to die or treat the injured. These public gardens become symbolic spaces where life and death lie side-by-side, where massacres and child’s play intertwine, where social encounter and public mourning happen on the same day. They function as a reminder and a symbol that mourning has entered everyday life both privately and communally and has transformed people’s practices, priorities, and politics.

### **The Right of Mourning**

In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the main character asserts her position “I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living, for in that world I shall abide forever” (1.1.95-101). Like Antigone, many people in Syria—who stated their allegiance to the dead—paid the price with their own lives. Upon hearing about my concept for *Gardens Speak*, a Syrian monk told me a story about a man whose revolutionary act was to sing for his friend who was killed by the regime during the beginning of the uprising. The story resonated with the content of *Gardens Speak* so much that I obsessively researched the details of the man in question. I found few accounts online about him, mainly YouTube videos documenting his protest and his dead body.

His name is Mohammad al-Zu'bi and he was from Daraa—where the Syrian uprising begun in 2011. On the day of his friend's funeral, al-Zu'bi showed up bare-chested, wearing olive branches on his head as he walked past the very military checkpoint where his friend was shot. Using a megaphone, al-Zu'bi walked in front of a bewildered military while singing a hymn that celebrates martyrs: "You fascinated my soul oh martyr, you taught it the meaning of immortality. You made it long for leaving, you taught it the meaning of resistance."

Al-Zu'bi continued to the burial site of his friend while singing the mournful hymn. His persistence and deliberate bodily exposure to a large number of armed soldiers is what Judith Butler contextualizes as "the embodied demand for a liveable life that shows us the simultaneity of being precarious and acting" (*Dispossession* 153). In other words, Al-Zu'bi was resisting precariousness by performing it. His action is both vulnerable and resistant. His protest reminds us of the writing on the politics of visibility, especially in relation to protests in public space. Writing about the Gezi protests that took place in Istanbul in 2013, scholar Zeyneb Gambetti explains that protestors were challenging the "partition of the sensible," a theory she borrows from Rancière. According to Gambetti, "what was at stake in the Gezi resistance was not only the visibility of those whose lives aren't grievable, but also of the event itself." In this sense, the mere appearance of various groups of protestors (LGBTQI, football fans, etc) sent a message to the government that they exist and cannot be made invisible.

Like Antigone, al-Zu'bi knew that his defying act of bodily exposure and mourning the dead would result in his own death. Back home, he had dug his own grave in his garden. He told his family to place him there when the regime killed

him. The night of the encounter, Syrian regime soldiers stormed his house and shot him dead with two bullets to the head. He was subsequently buried in the hole he dug for himself in his own home garden.

Al-Zu'bi's defiance and assassination is a tragic story, bearing similarity to Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Antigone*. Those who are regarded by the state as enemies and traitors are dispensable, ungrievable, and (even) unburiable. Those who defy oppressive rules by burying the unburiable and mourning the unmourned will be brutally punished, just like Antigone who was buried alive. The story of al-Zu'bi as told by his community highlights the ways in which state power that dictates the specific reasons and conditions of death split the world between grievable and ungrievable. In her work on grievability, Butler argues that when a life is intentionally made invisible and ungrievable the aim is to no longer qualify it as life—because, “politics and power work in part through regulating what can appear, what can be heard” (*Precarious Life* 147). State power therefore effaces the existence of enemies as a bad memory by placing them outside the official and civil traditions and rituals that record their life and death. To resist said politics, public commemoration—of those who were made invisible—acts as defiance against the unjust distribution of grievability and worthiness. Butler and feminist scholar Athena Athanasiou discuss the political promise of performativity, public grievability, and the politics of memorialisation as practices that challenge violent dispossession in their book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (141). They describe the examples of Women in Black's and Las Madres de La Plaza De Mayo's performative commemoration protests to show how resistive practice of dispossession can be fought through bodily actions (143-145). Butler has also suggested in a number of interviews and talks that there is a need

to oppose the invisibility of the thousands killed in the Middle East by opposing the lack of information about them. She suggests doing so with performative commemoration practices, and making sure to educate ourselves on their names, faces, and personal histories.

In this context, and bearing the above theoretical frameworks in mind, I envisage *Gardens Speak* to be a performance of public mourning. *Gardens Speak* engages in grievability as resistance by creating a space of mourning for those deemed ungrievable by their killers. The work was created in the motivation of defying the Syrian state's effort of forcing ungrievability and invisibility of the first martyrs of the uprising. The oral history accounts challenge the lack of information and disposability of those killed by state violence. At the same time, the bodily presence of the audience creates a public act of grievability. In the third section of this chapter, I explore further the idea of *Gardens Speak* audiences embodying the dead. For now, I look into common ways of performing death in performance, theatre, and activism. I follow this conversation with a section on the notion and action of witnessing.

### **Performing Death**

When I was first drafting this chapter during the summer of 2014, another Israeli war on the Gaza Strip was underway. Having opened *Gardens Speak* two months earlier in Melbourne, and begun researching public grievability, my experience of the war—and in particular the solidarity movement with those on the receiving end of the war—differed from previous wars (e.g., 2012/13). During that 2014 war, a coalition of Palestinian women's groups wrote a joint statement asking people to wear black in solidarity with Gaza. Wearing black in funerals or for a while after the death of a family member (sometimes for a whole life) is a

traditional practice for women in the Middle East and elsewhere. Black refers to a widow, a grieving mother, or women in mourning. Wearing black during the Israeli war on Gaza was meant as a performance of protest and as a visual representation that we are closely tied to those killed in Palestine and thus mourn them as family members.

Solidarity during the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza took various forms. In a protest held in Beirut during that time, people sent a message of solidarity from the Beirut seafront to the Gaza seashores, throwing flowers to the living and hanging the names of the martyrs on a very long banner on the iconic Pigeon's Rock in Beirut. Protestors also took turns reading a list of every single Palestinian martyr's name and age from the ongoing war. It was a collective mourning of those killed, and an acknowledgment of the amount of loss. Protests in Stockholm also featured protestors displaying the names of the dead in Gaza. Ramallah protestors laid hundreds of coffins on the ground, turning a public space into a large symbolic cemetery (*The Electronic Intifada*). Around the world, people recognised the dead either by displaying numbers, photos, or names.

There were also the inevitable die-in protests, including in Washington DC, Los Angeles, and Dublin (Mahaskey). In the Dublin action, protestors wore white shirts over which they splattered red paint then they lay on the ground immobile with a paper on top of them stating the name and age of one of the Gazan martyrs (McGuire). On the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles, a female activist protested with a die-in. She lay on the ground, also using red paint over her white clothes with a sign that read, "Nothing to see here... Just another dead Palestinian... Keep moving" (MBD). Around the sign, she scattered a few torn-up US dollar bills, perhaps to symbolize the involvement of the US government (tax

dollars) in funding the Israeli military and its policies. Direct symbolism is in fact what makes die-ins effective as protest and weak as performance. Die-ins use infantile aesthetics (pretending to be dead, red paint) to interrupt passers-by forcing them to step in between pretend corpses, sneaking into their imagination hoping that the scene would be translated into empathy and solidarity.

Struggling with my own feelings of mourning and anger in relation to the war on Gaza, I looked at how performance has traditionally responded to war and trauma. A more sophisticated performance than die-ins with similar interest in fake corpses but real blood is Marina Abramovic's *Balkan Baroque* (1997). In the midst of the Yugoslavian war, Abramovic responded with a piece at the Venice Biennale. For six hours a day, for four consecutive days, she cleaned 1500 cow bones with water and a brush. She explains that it is about "cleaning out conscience" to be able to move on. The Serbian state did not agree to Abramovic representing the country in its pavilion when they found out about her idea. So she ended up in the basement of the Italian International Pavilion. People reported that the smell was horrible, but they felt confronted with the ongoing horrors. During her performance, Abramovic sang songs and told her audience stories about where she came from, effectively complicating the experience of audiences beyond direct imagery.

Imagery of death and the accompanying aesthetics communicate artists' own cultural and personal relationship to death. Butoh as a dance form that was born in Japan in the aftermath of World War II deals with the pain and distress of extreme situations. The body of the Butoh performer is the "universe dancing on the border of life and death" (Ohno qtd. in Fraleigh 35). Pushing the body into grotesque forms, this medium that is also known as the "dance of utter darkness"



communicates through powerful aesthetics and enduring performances. In their attempt to break away from the influence of Western dance on the rest of the world, and working in post-Hiroshima Japan, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo created dance aesthetics with performers covered in white paint moving slowly and painfully between the ground and above it. During my limited training in Butoh as a physical theatre student and performer, I experienced its imagery as a deep level of embodiment of political horror. It was both liberating and disturbing, touching on personal trauma and collective mourning. The image of traditional Butoh dancers is now strangely linked in my visual memory with images of victims of the chemical massacre in Ghouta, Syria on 21 August 2013 (Mahmood). Perhaps this is telling of the strength of Butoh to represent reality through powerful aesthetics. Perhaps this is also telling of the horrifying theatricality of present-day massacres. Wrapped in white clothes, hundreds of corpses mainly of children with pale faces unmarked by wounds form a painful scene that is both extremely morbid and visually different from the accustomed images of death. It is a state of between, of neither death nor life. In this scene, a Syrian child was caught on camera lying on a hospital bed in a state of shock (syrhura1). Her naked body was extremely pale; her eyes wide open, while her choking voice cried incomprehensible words. She moved her body as if she was trying to shake something off of her. She touched her face, chest, even pulled her tongue, unaware if she was dead or alive. A doctor tried calming her down, telling her that she is still alive to which the girl repeats, "I am alive, I am alive, I am alive" (syrhura1). Like in Butoh, one wonders if such scenes are about the dead being brought back to life to testify, or rather images of survivors who have encountered death so closely that they are now in a state of between: alive but marked by death.

Thinking about our aestheticized responses to death, one might perform death (die-ins) or use aesthetics borrowed from death and burial (the make-up in Butoh, the bones in Abramovic's piece, the tombstones and gravesites in *Gardens Speak*). These elements take representational forms and may offer a space to discuss—and perhaps challenge—politics. I am however more interested in the political potential of these responses. How do they actively challenge the dispossession of oppressed bodies? Going back to Butler and Athanasiou's writing on bodily presence as a site for activism against dispossession, I argue for audience interactivity and the notion of witnessing and embodying as crucial compliments to aestheticized responses to death. As in any interactive live art piece, the political potential of *Gardens Speak* needs to be viewed in what it does to its audience. The bodily exposure of the audience to the oral histories is thus contextualized below in a discussion on witnessing followed by a discussion on embodiment in relation to performance.

## II. Witnessing Lives and Deaths

### Our Martyrs and Witnesses

*Shaheed/a* in Arabic means both martyr and witness. The word martyr (whether in English or Arabic) has religious connotations in a number of religions and belief systems as a person who dies as a result of religious prosecutions or religious wars. Yet martyrs tend to be glorified, not grieved. They symbolise the absolute self-sacrifice to a cause (which is often religious.) They differ from 'victims' as they are not as innocent. Unlike passive victims, martyrs appear to have agency in their death (Portelli, *The Order* 197).

Scholar Alessandro Portelli remarks on the complexity of finding a suitable term to describe the dead while he was writing the oral histories of 335 unarmed

civilians killed in 1944 in Rome by the occupying Nazi forces (*The Order* 198). He asks whether we are able to find secular (rather than religious) words, “to designate these founders of our conscious, words that do not deliver them, in the very act of naming them, to the flag and to the cross, to the churches and to the armies, perpetual administrators of death?” (ibid).

There is certainly a need to find a term that moves us beyond the binary of victimisation and glorification as well as beyond the sanctifying position of martyrdom. However, it is also important to note that the political context in the Arab world differs from what Portelli is describing. There, the idea of martyrdom and the word for martyr has featured various transformations in their uses and functions. I will briefly explain these as a way of introducing my own use of the term martyr in *Gardens Speak*.

During the second intifada in Palestine, the use of the term martyr featured a shift beyond describing a political or religious fighter to including any Palestinian killed by the Israeli government. Martyrs are no longer religious or nationalist agents as was the case with—for example—the Iranian revolution, but all victims of an oppressive force. The Palestinian martyr is an occupied subject and a “sympathy-deserving suffering human” (Allen 162). Khalili gives an example of the politicisation of martyrs in Palestine by the Palestinian National Authority’s (PNA), established in the mid 1990s after long having abandoned the liberation struggle. The PNA reproduced the historic tradition of women visiting their relatives’ graves in cemeteries during the Muslim feast (Eid) holidays as a national holiday, thus turning a private ritual into a public nationalist event (Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs* 136). The appropriation of commemorative practices is therefore an appropriation of a wider national narrative. As Khalili points out,

“every commemoration, whether it is a ceremony, a monument, a mural, or commemorative naming, explicitly or implicitly contains a story” (*Heroes and Martyrs* 5).

In Lebanon, the attribution of martyrdom has also featured an expansion to include not only those that who were intentionally killed on one side of the Lebanese civil war, but also those who were killed as collateral damage beyond the civil war’s end in 1990. After the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, his popular title became “The Martyred Prime Minister.” Another assassination attempt in 2005 against the Lebanese journalist May Chidiac, resulting in the loss of her arm, granted her the title of “The Living Martyr/Witness.” The government and the media have also taken to naming those who happen to be near a car bomb explosion in an assassination attempt and were consequently killed as martyrs. The reasons behind such expanded use of the term martyr have not been discussed enough, neither in the press nor in academia. There is a implicit popular understanding however that granting the status of martyrdom in these cases is an attempt to give a reason for (and thus make sense of) an otherwise pointless death. The banality of the reoccurrence of violence and the over-use of the term martyr vis-à-vis civilians who were unwilling to die has actually become a subject of a campaign in Lebanon. After a series of car bombings in 2013, a group of young Lebanese spoke out on social media and through visual production, forming what they called the #notamartyr campaign. It was a clear statement from a generation that wishes to be relieved from the burden of martyrdom and any sort of politicized death.

## **Martyrdom since the Arab Uprisings**

Scholars Elizabeth Buckner and Lina Khatib argue that the Arab uprisings, which began in December 2010, helped materialise a new model of martyrdom in the Arab world. Their contemporary model of the martyr corresponds to shift in the locus of production and circulation of images of death state institution to everyday citizens (377). The Arab uprisings are said to have started with an act of martyrdom when Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire as protest against the brutality, corruption, and unjustness of the Tunisian regime and its economic development. Though his act was that of self-inflicted martyrdom, he has been regarded as the ultimate martyr of the discontent Arab youth. A statue commemorating his martyrdom was erected in his hometown Sidi Bouzid, and is visited like a shrine by people ever since. Other iconic martyrs of the Arab uprisings across the region include Khalid Said in Egypt and Hamza al-Khatib in Syria. While Bouazizi was the only one to kill himself, the other martyrs were directly killed by the violence of the authoritarian regimes they lived under, whether under custody, in the street, or in their homes. Their faces are stenciled on walls or painted as murals (Ganzeer). Their names are replacing the official names of streets and squares. Their iconic images were used as a mascot in the presidential electoral campaigns of Egypt that followed President Husni Mubarak's fall (Gibbon). In the case of Egypt, post-revolutionary regimes appropriated both the revolution and its martyrs, even though those who did the killing are drawn from the very regime that rules the country at present.

The moment of death of many martyrs in the Arab uprisings have been recorded, re-played, re-produced, and/or etched into the collective visual memory of the communities they came from. Hundreds and thousands of people

beyond the borders of the country where they died have also watched these visuals. Perhaps one of the most recent scenes that haunt the Arab public sphere is the day-light shooting of twenty-eight-year-old Egyptian activist Shaima el-Sabbagh in January 2015. Police gunned her down while she made her way to lay a wreath of flowers on the martyrs' memorial in Tahrir Square on the fourth anniversary of the 25 January 2011 revolution. She was martyred while paying her respects to other martyrs. In a commemorative action held in Paris, couples recreated the heart-breaking image of Shaima being held by her comrade moments after she was shot and just before she died. The panicked man kneeled down to help Shaima stand up, her bloody face in shock looking out in the distance. These images add conviction to Buckner and Khatib's arguments about this new wave of martyrdom. These martyrs are neither victims nor state-sanctioned nationalist heroes. Their representation is an empowered, citizen-produced image that evokes "universal values" such as dignity and freedom (Buckner and Khatib 369).

### **The Martyrs of *Gardens Speak***

Using the term martyr in *Gardens Speak* is neither simple nor innocent. One group's martyr can be another group's terrorist, criminal, traitor, or enemy—to play on writer Gerald Seymour's famous quote, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." I employ the term as an artist to publicise my solidarity with those who were killed during the Syrian uprising. Calling them martyrs makes transparent my position, which is not a neutral one (as discussed in chapter two). In *Gardens Speak*, my aim is not merely to document the stories of 'victims,' but to invite the audience to listen to 'martyrs' who were forcefully silenced.

In my deployment of the term, the status of a martyr sits between the ultimate victim and the ultimate hero. In this sense, I very much draw on the

Lebanese and other Arab contexts, which—as mentioned above—featured an expansion of how the term is used. A martyr did not die in vain, but neither did she necessarily die for a cause. A martyr is what the community calls her and what the future generations in her family—if not her wide social circle—will remember her as. As an artist, I wanted to be true to that context and legacy. It was these families and friends who shared the stories of their martyred loved ones with us so that the world would know. A dead person’s story is private. But a martyr’s story is public. Their photos cover the walls of streets and social media; they are shared, re-told, and interacted with.

Certainly, adopting the term runs the risk of romanticising the dead and rendering them otherwise invisible. Yet referring to the protagonists of *Gardens Speaks* as martyrs is done with the aim of contribution to the politicisation of their deaths. My interest is not to borrow from the celebration and commemoration of martyrdom used by many of the pre-existing hegemonic armed groups who often repeat the same aesthetics in their depiction of martyrs. For example, in his lecture performance *The Inhabitants of Images* (2009), artist Rabih Mroueh discusses “the mass-production of martyrs” describing Hizballah’s practice in simply adding the heads of its new martyrs on a pre-designed poster. In contrast, *Gardens Speak* seeks to challenge the dynamic of rendering anonymous and invisible those who were killed beyond the mass of dead bodies they get counted as part of. One of the ways of tackling this is designing each tombstone differently. This is accomplished by varying each of the hand-drawn calligraphy of their names on each tombstone.

Like Portelli, I admit a degree of failure of finding a better term than ‘martyr.’ When describing the ten individuals whose stories are told in *Gardens Speak*, I would have preferred to use a term that is secular, and unburdened by

religious, masculine, and nationalist connotations. Yet of all the existing terms, martyr seems the most appropriate. This is especially so given two contexts discussed above. First, with the Arab uprisings people have exercised their agency over the word martyr (Bucker and Khatib). Second, I choose to remain true to how the families and friends of the dead refer to the act of dying (i.e., *istishhad*, the act of dying as a martyr) during their interviews. Additionally, the meaning of the word shaheed being both martyr and witness seems suitable in the context of *Gardens Speak*. In this piece, I explore the notion of witnessing in both the writing of oral histories and the devising of the performance. The shaheed/a witnesses his or her killing, which epitomises witnessing the regime's oppression. The narrators of oral histories witness the lives and deaths of their martyrs. The audience witness as listeners of these oral histories, but also and importantly as diggers of graves. They witness through their ears, their nose, their touch, their minds, and their bodies.

### **Audience as Witness**

Playwright Karen Malpede refers to her practice as engaged in a new form of theatre that she calls "theatre of witness." This work, she argues, aims at revealing the "inner life" of victims of war and violence so that the "witnessing imagination" of the audience becomes resistance (129). "If violence is the attempt to turn a person into a thing, the witnessing imagination attempts to turn this 'thing' back into a person" (ibid). Witnessing for Malpede is therefore resistance against structural violence.

However, Malpede does not reveal how this resistance is achieved through witnessing other than "to increase our empathic strength" (123). While I agree with the sentiment of telling stories with the aim of challenging political violence, I



consider the act of witnessing to be a different order of phenomenon than the experience of empathy. This is because the act of witnessing creates responsibility to be accountable to what we witnessed and how we consequently react—something not intrinsic to being empathetic. Scholar Derek Goldman describes the social exchange that happens in performance art whereby there is “a transference of accountability to acknowledge that something substantive has occurred in which all those present are now implicated, and that can never be unseen” (3). While witnessing and empathy can be connected vis-à-vis a context of suffering, it is essential to perceive witnessing as responsibility. Bearing witness is to participate in accountability (Goldman 7). The position of a witness is also one of a survivor, “someone who has seen violence up close and lived to tell others about it” (Rentschler 297).

Scholar Carrie Rentschler provides a critical understanding of the act of witnessing, remarking on the binary between witnessing and suffering. By witnessing, we become aware that we are not the ones who are suffering. This of course reinforces the division of privilege and suffering across countries, communities, and classes. Furthermore, she argues that our identification with those whom we witness suffer can ultimately obscure our “own participation in state violence against others” (296). Rentschler is writing in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC. She is particularly interested in how citizens bearing witness end up supporting military action against others (296).

I find Rentschler’s observation to be one of the most important ideas to negotiate as artists working with stories of social movements, state violence, and mass displacement. How do we ensure that the stories we present remain true to

their narrators without succumbing to sensationalism and obscuring our own individual complicity in violence against others? I personally find answers in processes discussed in the previous chapter. These include, collaborative editing, interactivity, co-creativity, sharing of care and vulnerability, and maintaining the agency of narrators, while remaining aware of our own privilege and complacency.

### **Witnessing Performance**

What do we witness when we watch performances about other people's real lives? Do we witness their direct realities or do we witness a representation of it? Rentschler discusses the political effects of witnessing in real life, while other scholars discuss the act of bearing witness in theatre and performance. I am particularly interested in the discussion on witnessing in performance that goes beyond witnessing the content being communicated in those performances. Some scholars and artists have attempted to move the debate to a form-focused discussion. For example, Malpede discusses the act of witnessing from the angle of witnessing theatre itself, rather than the oral histories that the theatre is based on. She describes the process of engaging audience in the public act of witnessing through the collective experience of the theatre of witness (126). This collective experience, Malpede argues, is ultimately based on getting the audience to understand the effect that collecting oral histories had on the creators of the theatre piece (132). In other words, the audience in this performance get a sense of how the interviews affected the artists who witnessed them. Consequently, according to Malpede, the audience themselves become affected by virtue of second-degree witnessing. The audience "becomes not only witness to the testimony, but witness to the witness of the testimony" (ibid).

Scholar Paola Botham also examines the concept of witnessing, but in the context of tribunal theatre. Analysing the performance *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005), she explains that tribunal theatre transforms audience into conscious witnesses engaging them with issues that they are not necessarily aware of (36). As a consequence, the audience of tribunal theatre have the chance to be implicated in other people's stories and become witnesses to them. Botham, however, proposes to use the audience distancing effect (proposed by Brecht) to the act of witnessing through the "sobering view of theatre as theatre, a theatre that recognizes its limitations in the world beyond the stage and values rational debate over emotional propaganda" (41). In other words, the audience here is not witnessing the real events that the tribunal is about. Instead, they witness an edited and mediated version of the reality created by artists with political motivations. I view this as an honest realisation of the limits and the power of theatre: the audience witness various layers of the stories through a depiction of reality on stage. Consequently, it is this realisation concerning the act of witnessing in performance that I find to be the most useful in relation to my own work. For example, the installation space created in *Gardens Speak* was meant to appear to the audience as constructed, rather than realistic. The aim was for the audience to feel that they are able to keep a critical and emotional distance from the material used in the piece.

In Chloé Déchery's essay that takes *Gardens Speak* as an example to discuss the notion of re-enactment performances, she refers to the audience as "spectateurs témoins" (audience-witness) (5). Here, the witnessing act is not of real burial sites, nor of the moments of killing. It is more so what she calls a "re-enacted crime scene," in which both artist and audience are in mutual understanding that this is

a mediated, aestheticized, and a fabricated space for listening, commemorating, and reflecting (15). The audience witness what the artist has witnessed: the narrators witnessing people living and dying. The scene of *Gardens Speak* being described by Déchery as a re-enactment of crime scene positions the audience as witnesses in law with an inherent responsibility to speak truth.

There is a vast body of work on witnessing in performance art. Unlike theatre, where audience 'watch' acting, in performance art audience are invited to 'witness' a 'real' action performed by the artist. Performance art theorists often refer to audiences as 'witness' essentially deferring them from 'audience' or 'bystanders.' A witness in performance art is someone who was there at the time of the action rather than someone who saw a documentation of the piece (Auslander). Witnesses in performance art are "no innocent bystanders" according to performance scholar Frazer Ward. There are high risks involved in witnessing performance art as also described by art historian Kathy O'Dell in her book *Contract With the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970's*. Witnesses provide a proof that the action happened. They can also support the artist, contribute to their action, or intervene. On some occasions, witnesses can terminate or diminish the danger posed on the artists' bodies. For example, witnesses of Marina Abramovic's public performance *Rhythm 5* (1975) pulled her out from the flame when she was losing consciousness (O'Dell 102).

In *Gardens Speak*, audience do not witness the presence of the artist or of performers. They might instead witness the absence of the protagonists. They witness a number of other things, perhaps most importantly to them is their own embodiment of the stories and their own relationship to death and mortality. In

the following section, I look at embodiment as a politically activating potential in interactive performance.

### III. Embodiment

I conceptualise audience interactivity in *Gardens Speak* as a multi-sensory embodied experience. I aim for the oral histories that are shared as sound pieces with the audience not to be merely listened to, but to be deeply felt in both the body and the mind. To understand such a process, I explored the literature on embodiment by theatre practitioners and performance scholars. I also examined the letters written and buried by audience members during *Gardens Speak*. I viewed these written texts as evidence of the audience's embodiment or lack thereof. I remain conscious that embodiment is neither granted nor guaranteed. It is an invitation deriving from an artist's motivation. And it is where I place the political potential of interactive live art.

There is a broad literature on embodiment in relation to performing arts. Some of these focus on the body as a sociocultural and political entity like in the writing of scholar Valérie Morisson on feminist performance art in Ireland. Other scholars focused on the concept of embodiment in relation to the dancing body such as David Michael Levin. Philosopher Judith Lee Kissell and dancer Betty Block explored the philosophy of movement and dance in relation to embodiment and healing. Embodiment in dance is when movement becomes "movement-thinking" (Lee Kissell and Ann Block 11). In his book *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*, artist and writer Nathaniel Stern explains that, "interactive art is uniquely positioned to intervene in a continuous embodiment" (13). What interests me in Stern's position is although he studies

media and digital art, he focuses on the body's materiality, which is specific to performance art. The technological objects that constitute the interactive art in question are second to the materiality of embodiment. Stern suggests, "that we forget technology and remember the body" (6). According to Stern, embodiment in interactive art is 'per-formed' rather than 'pre-formed.' The body here is relational and in a constant and ongoing formation. It is "the practice of being and becoming" when we experience interactive art (7).

Understanding embodiment as an ongoing relational practice of being and becoming is helpful in the context of the audience experience in *Gardens Speak*. Besides embodiment in interactive art, I find the writing on embodiment in physical theatre appropriate as it looks at how embodying the other feels in one's body. This has largely taken the form of a debate on the actor's training techniques and performance delivery. Physical Theatre practitioners and theorists Eugenio Barba and Philip Zarrilli explore the psychophysical training of the performer, her embodiment of various methods of physical training, and the embodied awareness of her "bodymind" (Zarrilli 32). Embodied knowledge is thought of as an acquired heightened bodily awareness. In that sense, embodiment is seen as closely linked to the actor's scenic presence. Theatre studies scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte believes that embodiment produces both the scenic presence and the dramatic figure or role the performer is playing (7). She uses the concept of embodiment to bind the semiotic body to what she calls the "phenomenal" body. She defines embodiment as the "bodily processes by which the phenomenal body brings forth himself as an, in each case, particular body and at the same time specific meanings" (ibid).

Zarrilli has developed a theory that could help better explain this process of embodiment. His psychophysical approach to acting is built on both perception and embodiment. As a theatre practitioner, he trained his body and those of his actors using yoga and Asian martial arts. He advocates for the constant re-education of one's bodymind, "so that ones looks and sees, listens and hears anew each time one enters the training studio or stage" (1). His performance technique is not concerned with representation on stage but with an embodiment of a perceptual and sensory awareness. Such a state according to Zarilli is a "fully awakened energy" that is deeply felt while remaining subtle (4). In other words, we can think of embodiment as a subtler aspect of energy and performance. It is a deeper engagement with a different reality and a different culture to one's everyday reality. In this sense, I find it useful to understand the experience of the audience in *Gardens Speak* as engaging with people, stories, cultures, and languages often far from them (depending on where the piece is showing) while feeling physically and emotionally close to them.

It is in the subtlety and the meeting of various bodies that Zarrilli speaks about that I looked for embodiment in the audience experience of *Gardens Speak*. Zarrilli explains that the performer's bodily presence is a multitude of bodies, which he terms, "the ecstatic surface body," "the recessive visceral body," "the aesthetic inner bodymind," and "the aesthetic outer body" (67). The first two bodies perform with little awareness of the body itself. The second two bodies are forms of awareness that are developed on the link between body and mind and the outer world. The aesthetic body is both personal and representational.

In *Gardens Speak*, the bodily presence is that of the audience and the encounter of multiple bodies is between the audience presence and the martyrs'

absence. The quietness of the performer / audience energy is encouraged through whispered stories, dim lighting, and stillness of the body. “The body becomes all eyes,” as Zarrilli explains (24). In *Gardens Speak*, it also becomes all ears.

I see this type of enquiry about the presence in one’s bodymind and embodiment of the other as the basis of the encounter of audience with the work. In devising the piece, I spent a week in a studio in London lying in a white raincoat under a cardboard headstone over scattered fresh soil. I lay there for hours a few days in a row listening to my body becoming the image. I employed my own training as a physical theatre performer to devise the experience of the audience. I thought of the audience as both individuals (solo performer) and a troupe (collective). Their experience is both individual (listening to their own bodies) while at the same time collective (hearing each other and keeping each other in their peripheral vision.) Together, they form a scenic image: bodies visiting cemeteries and bodies lying in a mass grave. The audience-as-performers embody the image that appears through the skin, body and mind. Some audience have remarked how during the piece, they suddenly become aware of the image that their bodies create together. Here the encounter is not between actors and a training technique, nor between actors and audience. The encounter is between the audience and the dead, between the audience and their own bodyminds as evidenced by some letters, and between the audiences amongst each other. The process of embodiment travels from the physical body lying and listening, to the embodied awareness of another life made absent, then to the awareness of one’s own body lying on the soil along with other bodies’ closely felt presence. Lying on the ground in the dark, hearing sounds whispered into their ears—all the while touching and smelling fresh soil mixed with camphor—invite the audience to a



process of embodiment. It places them inside a tableau image if seen from a top view forms a chilling scene of a mass grave: ten bodies wrapped in white cloth over freshly turned soil beneath unofficial tombstones.

### **Transformative Aesthetics**

Fischer-Lichte calls for “transformative aesthetics” in which audience do not engage in reducing the work of art to merely understanding its message. To experience contemporary art we need to learn how to trust our senses. There is no way to understand the great art work of today just by perceiving it; you have to be open to the whole sensation of it” (Fischer-Lichte 2). Embodiment and interactivity are therefore achieved when both audience and artists accept the political potential of the work and take responsibility for achieving it. This is more likely to happen when the work is experienced beyond a mere rationalising and understanding. Rather it necessitates allowing oneself to be exposed to what the work offers and accepting embodiment as a responsibility on both sides of the encounter.

One of the most common feedback comments that I have received from audience members of *Gardens Speak* was about their experience of writing a letter back to the martyrs while knowing that these letters may be shared with their friends and families. Many said that they at first struggled to find the words. Many repeated the same pattern: They initially felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of sharing a moment with people in what they termed ‘real’ mourning. But as soon as they decide to ‘let go’ and begin to write, words were flowing and they were surprised by how close they felt to the stories. The letters confirm this; they are filled with incredible sharing of emotions and personal experiences. Many compared their lives, their personal decisions and their political views with the

lives, decisions and political views of the ten martyrs. People wondered how they would have acted if they were in the same position as the person whose story they just heard. Some wondered if they would have been friends if they had met in real life, if the person had survived.

What I learnt from reading hundreds of audience letters is that the lives and deaths of the ten people whom we tell their stories in *Gardens Speak* are not *understood* in the same way that news on Syria is consumed and interpreted. The letters reveal a connection to the stories and events that is much more connected to the audience's own bodies and lives. I list here a few patterns or themes that are repeated across the hundreds of letters I have read till thus far. First, the audience seem to be reflecting on their own death and the death of closed ones. Journalist Paul Mason wrote about this theme in response to the very first London preview of *Gardens Speak*. "El Khoury's work takes you beyond the specifics to a place where your mind wanders during every death in your own life. At some point, everybody has to consider what it would be like to be in their own grave; or to hear a buried friend speak to you from beyond theirs" (Mason). Second, the audience seem to reflect on their own activism or the lack thereof and their wider relationship to politics and justice. Third, they are introspective about their own empathy and solidarity. Finally, they make various promises to the dead. These include, I will not forget you; I promise you that Syria will one day be free; I shall carry you with me forever; I will pay more attention to what is happening to your people; I will tell people about you; I will retell your story. Naturally none of these four patterns of responses come as a surprise. As discussed in this chapter, bearing witness is directly linked to empathy, association, and

responsibility while mourning and embodiment offer a space for the dead and the living to be rejoined.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Embodied Knowledge**

The ethics of responsibility is a theme present throughout this chapter. It starts with the responsibility of burying and mourning as a political performance. It follows with the responsibility of bearing witness to the oral histories we are listening to. It ends with the practice of embodiment, which is achieved when audience members accept the invitation offered by the artist as made in *Gardens Speak*. The responsibility is on all of us: those who witness directly and those who become second-hand witnesses. To embody someone else's story is to make it ours, to carry it around in our bodymind, and care for it. It is in this bodily engagement of listening, burying, writing, and becoming that I locate the political potential of *Gardens Speak*. The piece is not simply political because it discusses what may be perceived as a political situation (i.e., protest, repression, and war). It is also not intrinsically revolutionary or resistant by the mere fact that its content recounts the early days of the Syrian uprising and the acts of courage and bravery of the ten martyrs and their many compatriots. It is definitely not activism simply because the artist sides with the uprising and supports a change to the status quo. The work's political potential of being an act of resistance, against the crimes of the Syrian dictatorship and the counter-revolutionary forces, lies in its form and design as an embodied experience. It is in the audience's embodiment of other people's lives and deaths that I look for the political potential of *Gardens Speak*. The witnessing does not happen through mere understanding of the political situation, but through witnessing one's own body becoming the other.

This chapter was concerned with the spaces in which the dead and the living are united. This happens through mourning where death enters life and life enters death through commemoration, bereavement, and public grievability. It also happens through embodiment in performance. I designed *Gardens Speak* to act as a mourning ceremony both to remember the lives of these ten martyrs but also to resist their death, anonymity and erasure that were forced on them by their oppressors. It does so by inviting the living to enter the worlds of the dead and by publicly and collectively mourning them as people in solidarity, as people from the same community, no matter how far and distant that community is from the audience's own reality. It is an invitation that is born out of my belief in the political potential of interactivity in live art. Most essentially, it is born out of the understanding that "the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body" (Das 47). The body is a territory where pain, empathy, and justice reside. The garden is also a territory, a stage for a performance that could be entered at any time but the performers are absent. Some are buried and others are disappeared, though their presence is felt in the space. The tombstones that usually tell the history of the community, the family and sometimes the nation, simply state the name of the killed preceded by the word 'martyr.' We look for our loved ones amongst the dead, we find people whom we never heard of before becoming our loved ones.

## CONCLUSION

### **“Despair is Betrayal”**

#### **The Question**

I conceived of *Gardens Speak* in the wake of the Arab uprisings. The work has toured extensively in the last four years, during which we experienced the hope of real political change in the Arab world transform into practices of mourning and despair. The preoccupations I had at the beginning of this thesis and continue to have today are closely tied to the current political situation. I began my research project with the following question, “what is the political potential of interactive live art and how is it achieved?” Over the course of the last four years, I spent time looking at the various practices and theories that are preoccupied with the notion of audience interactivity in performance. I paid close attention to the concept of participation in performance, and elsewhere. I also explored writings on immersion, both in performance and in gaming. Much of the artistic and academic debates on active spectatorship are concerned with the political function of audience interactivity. Questions are often raised about what does interactivity do to the audience. Does it build an alternative community (Relational Aesthetics) or does it shake and trouble the audience (Antagonistic Aesthetics)? In doing so, does it save the society from consumerism (Bourriaud) or does it ignore artistic quality for societal function (Bishop)? Importantly, is this kind of art used to reinforce neoliberal policies of governments and inequality in cities (Harvie)? During the course of my research, I attempted to answer these questions only to find out that the questions themselves are misleading. Drawing on my own art practice, I found that the politics of live art is a potential and a

process that transforms depending on who it interacts with whether in the making or in the showing. I proposed to look at the political potential of interactive live art in the context of the Arab uprisings, focusing on the use of oral history and mourning as a political and resistant performance. Such political context offers an ability to look at the ethical and political dimension of interactivity as an urgent and pressing tool. Assessing the power of interactivity within the context of the Arab Uprisings is to look closely at death, revolution, and oppression in order to embody life and preserve it. Unlike the political contexts in which relational aesthetics and other theories of interaction come from, the struggle here is of survival, of the ability and the right to mourn, and to fight historical erasure while it is occurring.

### **The Written Thesis**

In the above chapters, I argued to look at the political in the work process and form rather than claiming to do political work by merely dealing with political content. Searching for the political in my practice as well as in the context of the Arab uprisings more generally led me to focus on two specific interactions: first, oral history and its use in performance; second, mourning as militancy.

The very first chapter of this thesis directly address the current debate on interactivity. I drew from the critiques of 'participation' in the development industry (Rahnema) as well as in live art (Freshwater, Harvie, and Nield), to discuss the myth and risks of participation as an artistic and political tool. The risks at stake here were the manipulation of communities and individuals into thinking that they were making choices that were already made for them. Such stakes highlight the crucial problematic on how interactivity is achieved and negotiated.

I employed Smuts' theory of interactivity to draw conclusions on the need of randomness, co-creativity, and indeterminacy to achieve significant interactivity, rather than counting on the myth of participation.

In the same chapter, I discuss the ethics of presenting oneself (whether an artist or a community organiser) as a bearer of a higher conscious than the people who are made to 'participate' in one's project. Here, I conclude—borrowing from Rancière—that one's artwork does not automatically bear the same emancipatory politics as its maker. Recalling the example used by Heddon on the subject, a feminist artist does not automatically make feminist art. In order to understand and analyse the political potential of live art, we need to look at its interactivity with the audience. Bearing this in mind, I follow-up the first chapter with a brief interlude, describing and presenting my practical doctoral project *Gardens Speak*. This performance forms the basis of my research engagement with my question throughout chapters two and three.

In chapter two, I discuss the process of making *Gardens Speak*. I present the various positions advanced by historians on the ethics of collecting oral history. I find inspirations in the writings on the interview in oral history as a space for creativity, collaboration, and ethical exchange (Marshall Clark and Portelli). I propose to view the oral history interview as both a methodology (to collect the content of the work) and an interactive performance in itself. I employ the theories of One to One performances in the writings of scholars Heddon, Iball, Zerihan, Johnson and artist Adrian Howells. I argue that to achieve an ethical oral history, notions of co-creativity, randomness, and indeterminacy that were argued for in the first chapter need to be present. Furthermore, notions of ethical care, shared vulnerability, and shared responsibility between the artist (as interviewer) and the

narrator (as interviewee) need to be taken into consideration.

Carrying on the conversation on the process of making *Gardens Speak*, I consider the editing of oral history as an important phase in the collaborative process. Discussions on the veracity and authenticity of theatre and performance that use oral history and other people's stories such as verbatim, documentary, and tribunal theatre amongst others often fail to stress the importance of collaborative editing in insuring that people's stories are not misrepresented or manipulated for problematic politics.

In the third and final chapter, I directly address the political potential of *Gardens Speak* by looking at the concepts of mourning, witnessing, and embodying in interactive live art. The chapter addresses these three main elements that intertwine to form a potential for solidarity, activation, and resistance. The notion of mourning is discussed from various angles. First, the right of mourning one's martyr with an attention to the use of the word 'martyr' and its cultural and political implications. Second, the idea of mourning as militancy drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou on public grievability as a protest against violent dispossession of bodies. It also draws on the writing of Douglas Crimp in mourning as militancy. Third, mourning is discussed here as a site for political contestation in the wake of the Syrian uprising whereby protestors used funerals as protests while the Syrian regime used funerals as an occasion to oppress and silence the living.

The second preoccupation of the chapter is the notion of witnessing. Here, I carry on the conversation of the second chapter about witnessing other people's stories with what that entails as political responsibility. This section concludes that the act of witnessing oral history in performance is in fact the act of witnessing



performance itself rather than a representation of reality.

The third preoccupation of the final chapter is ‘embodiment’ in performance. Looking at the work of Eugenio Barba and Philip Zarrilli, I examine the various stages and functions of embodiment. In physical theatre, the idea of embodiment is useful for performers looking to embody characters rather than simply represent them. They do so by using their ‘bodymind’, stage presence, and processes of learning training techniques from other cultures. I propose to borrow the notion of embodiment from physical theatre to understand audience interactivity in performances such as *Gardens Speak* whereby the audience is invited to listen, understand, and ‘become’ the stories that are channelled through her ‘bodymind.’

### **Interactive and Collaborative Making of *Gardens Speak***

Both the writing and practice elements of this doctoral thesis fed into each other, affected each other, and pushed each other into a more critical and self-aware place. A significant aspect of the knowledge production was generated in the practice. The process of making *Gardens Speak* was a collaborative and interactive one. Just like *Gardens Speak* is an invitation to openness for the audience, it attempted to practice openness as a methodology during the process of making the work. The collection of oral history was conducted in the ethics of One to One performance methodology, paying close attention to ideas of trust, intimacy, shared care, and ethical responsibility. The recording sessions were similarly collaborative, responding to everyone’s wellbeing while dealing with difficult content and listening to creative suggestions and impulsive creative responses (such as Abo Gabi’s improvised singing).

The devising of the audience experience of *Gardens Speak* responded to various feedback sessions from early audience (during the pilot presentation in London), to other responses around the world. Alterations were made to the experience of *Gardens Speak* that involved the instructions both written and spoken. These were informed by the readings and my writing on the ethics and politics of interactivity and the desire to preserve the agency of the audience. For that reason, the role of the audience guide revealed to be crucial.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This thesis argues for an artist-audience sharing of risk, care, and authority in order to achieve interactivity. This is achieved through a conceptualisation of oral history interviews as One to One performances and through creating a space in which the audience embody the realities addressed in the work. This project advocates for devising performance from the assumption of the audience as an empowered political being, rather than a privileged art-goer who awaits to be saved by enlightened artists. Crucial to this interactivity is for both sides of the encounter to take risks in revealing their own politics. This is facilitated when artists refrain from controlling the outcome of the encounter and by that, they allow the politics of the audience to be revealed. It is important here to note that agency and openness are not preserved by merely allowed the audience to act freely, but by inviting them to become political agent. This can also be achieved with instructions-based performance such as *Gardens Speak*. The agency and openness I refer to throughout this text is that of an invitation for political agency, by baring witness, by embodying, by listening in one's bodymind, and by later deciding what to do with the stories that have been communicating to us.

This thesis takes issue with so-called political performance that reinforces the status quo. What this thesis advocates for is to look for the political in the process of making live art and in the form itself, rather than just the content. It also proposes to move the debate on the politics of live art away from technology devices and European galleries to the revolutionary streets in the Arab world. There, we would learn from collaborating with participants and audiences while functioning with an increasing level of political polarisation and incredibly high stakes. The political context of Syria, for example, teaches us about mourning as a revolutionary performance that could lead to the death of those who practice it. The collection of oral history in this context not only contributes to the revealing of the Syrian regime's crimes, but to witnessing and embodying those stories as a form of solidarity.

On a personal level, this thesis helped challenge some of the sensationalist writing that follows my work and those of my colleagues - in particular, the presentation of my work as useful activism and my interest in oral history as a practice that gives voices to the voiceless. Challenging this notion, I wish to advance in this thesis my understanding of oral history collection as a series of One to One performances, each unique, indeterminate, and an encounter of shared care and responsibility. In addition, I wish to present the narrators of oral history as empowered and resistant, rather than voiceless victims who needed me to tell their stories.

This doctoral project is in conversation with various fields. It speaks to the field of oral history especially in its intersection with art, suggesting to oral historians to use the methodology of One to One performances in order to practice shared authority and shared vulnerability through intimate interactivity. The

thesis also responds to the conversation on interactivity in performance, in particular its political potential. It points out the elitism of some of these arguments, while proposing to look at the Arab Uprisings as a possible context of interactivity. It does so by suggesting to focus on witnessing, embodiment, and mourning as elements of interactivity and as processes in which the political potential of interactivity is directly linked to the violent political reality around us.

The book of *Gardens Speak* is evidence of the performance itself, describing through text and illustration the experience of the performance (see Appendix 5). The ten oral histories that constitute *Gardens Speak* are published in the book both in Arabic and English. The book aims to historicize these ten stories from the early period of the Syrian Uprising. It acts as a reminder that what we now perceive as a brutal war in Syria began as a popular uprising against a dictatorship, that crushed the uprising, and killed and tortured dissidents. The book is a contribution to the various archival projects (mainly produced by Syrians) to preserve the stories of those who were killed and those who revolted. The form of the book builds on the ritualistic element of the performance. The small handwritten script in Arabic in the form of a manuscript evokes the effort of documenting oral history and preserving stories on one hand, and the effort of listening (reading) and embodying the stories on the other hand.

### **The Future of *Gardens Speak***

After twenty-six showings of *Gardens Speak* across five continents, I have ended up with boxes of audience letters in my home. These letters are insightful about how the stories were experienced, and how their writers feel about the political situation in Syria as well as in their home countries, about death and

loss—among other topics. They send messages of solidarity, hope, anger, or despair.

When I first had the idea of the letters to be shared with the narrators, I was imagining a small file of letters for each person. The number of letters I ended up with is overwhelming. I do not feel that giving a large box of letters from strangers is the most sensible action, especially that some narrators who survived lovers or siblings have mentioned attempting to move on. At the same time, I do not feel that I would like to keep these letters for myself. The growing pile in boxes is becoming a burden that raises questions of ethical responsibility. Are these letters confidential and do they need to remain that way? Or are they of public interest? Are they a proof of international solidarity with Syria that needed to be shared? From reading these letters while digitizing them, I sensed that they are perhaps more private than public. Archiving the letters has allowed me to reach out to some of the early collaborators in *Gardens Speak*, many of whom are Syrians who have left Beirut seeking a more stable life in other countries, while the situation in Syria remains unsolved. I shared the letters with those collaborators and we engaged in a number of conversations about the changes of the past few years, on both the political and the personal levels. The letters offered an occasion for us to connect, think together, and collaborate again.

The physical letters were collected from different places and have travelled between London, Beirut, Tunis, and Philadelphia during the digitization period. Two boxes of the letters were confiscated by the police in Tunisia who opened an investigation on the political nature of the letters to consider whether they constitute a security threat or incite violence. At the time of writing, the two boxes remain in police custody.

The letters' movement around the world as well as our ethical responsibility as artists and witnesses of the stories told in *Gardens Speak* is the subject of an installation I am currently developing, entitled *Tell Me What I Can Do* (2018). In this installation, the letters will cover the space mapping the network of movement of these stories. The work will also invite the early collaborators of *Gardens Speak* back into the project. Together, we will reflect on the last four years, and the changing political reality around us. When we started working together, the potential of politics seemed notably different from the current reality of despair and destruction in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Keenana Issa who researched and wrote in *Gardens Speak*, Khairy Ebeish who recorded and designed the sound, Abo Gabi who wrote and sang, and Mohamed Ali Agrebi who recently joined to digitize the letters and was interrogated by the police in Tunisia because of them, will contribute to the installation. Together, we will reflect on the ethical responsibility of artists and audiences, thus continuing the conversation that started in this doctoral thesis and attempting a closure to *Gardens Speak*.

## APPENDIX 1:

### **Excerpts from Interviews Referenced in the Thesis**

#### **Interview 1: Magda (conducted in London, November 2012)**

The first time I went to a big protest in my life was the funeral of a child in June 2011. When the coffin appeared, it was the first time in my life that I felt so much solidarity. I started crying. I looked around and realised that everyone around me looked like me. There was an older woman I did not know. She held my arm and we marched together chanting. The crowd was even attacking the president chanting: "*Yamo, yamo, Bashar al-Asad akhir ayyamo*" ("Oh mother, these are the final days of Bashar al-Asaad"). The Midan square was filled with people. When the small green coffin appeared, the women around me started to ululate. This is when I broke into tears. It was the first time I chanted to the martyr's mother, "We are all your children." I really did feel that we were all her children.

#### **Interview 2: Magda (conducted in London, November 2012)**

With Bassel's death, I began to realise how important it is for the family of the martyr to be able to mourn and be sad without worrying about being detained, because this is what is happening now. In the midst of someone's funeral, they would detain his father or his brother or a cousin who would be acting very angry and not careful about what he's saying or doing.

When Bassel died and we agreed on the day in which people will go to church to mourn him, there was such a movement in Damascus. Because people knew that I was one of his friends, I received so many calls from people I barely knew asking me if they can come with me to "the thing that will happen," because

they didn't want to mention what it was on the telephone. People who were usually very scared to join the revolution publicly wanted to go to Bassel's funeral. Women in my family who are usually terrified by the regime's oppression said that they will leave their kids somewhere and come with me to the ceremony. It was supposed to happen at two in the afternoon. On that morning, there was a strong civil revolutionary movement happening, to a point where I felt that Damascus would go crazy against the regime on that day. Soon enough, we heard that the regime closed off many roads leading to the church. After that, the coordination of the Midan in Damascus [the main urban square where protest happen] called protestors to join the funeral in an open event on Facebook. We knew then that the regime would never accept it. Soon enough, the regime demanded that the church's priest pressure Bassel's mother to cancel the ceremony. The mother was in shock and terrified so she cancelled it. The news spread through social media: security had cancelled Bassel's funeral. Some of his friends rejected this and decided to do a gathering next to his house. We went there and sat outside the church and started praying surrounded by security forces. They blocked the road leading to the gathering. I personally had to pretend that I live in the area so they let me pass and join the gathering. After a while, we were sitting on the ground and singing a song that we collectively created to Bassel, when a group of regime thugs ran towards us chanting for the president and attacking us. We ran and the security managed to arrest some of us and detain them. We then went to his family house and also there a group of regime thugs came and besieged us so we had to flee again. I wanted to stay with his family but couldn't. I wonder what would have happened if they let us just celebrate his life and martyrdom like we wanted. Something was bound to happen, people felt it,



they were shutting down stores in his neighbourhood; everyone was getting ready for something to happen.

**Interview 3: Magda (conducted in London, December 2012)**

There was a saying between us that Syrians don't get rid of the regime even after they die. There were corpses that were detained by the regime. After somebody dies, the regime forces will raid his house, steal the corpse from the family, and detain it for days. I remember on one occasion, we went to the [planned] funeral of somebody for three consecutive days, but the corpse would not be delivered so the funeral keeps getting postponed.

**Interview 4: Zahra (conducted over Skype in London, October 2012)**

Many Syrians understand that mourning has become a political act. By burying the dead, they are challenging their dehumanisation by the regime, and so they are challenging the regime itself. Similarly, to the Sophocles tragedy of Antigone, burying a rebel relative who is considered an enemy of the state would be punishable by the ruler. Zahra describes the tragedy that the Syrians are now living.

**Interview 5: Abu Odai (conducted in person in Beirut, May 2012)**

We took Jamal's body from his family and went to Bab el-Seba' in Homs. It was one of the biggest funerals that happened in Homs so far. It marched all the way from the mosque el-Mrayjeh through the Bab el-Seba' road to the cemetery of Bab el-Seba'. I remember local men and children crying on Jamal who was a distinguished young man. Of course, the regime came and fired at the funeral even

though it was massive with more than ten thousand people marching. People started fleeing and security forces were chasing Jamal's family members to arrest them. Later on, his family managed to flee to Egypt. I personally think that after a person gets martyred, they no longer belong to their families, but to the country that they were martyred for. So of course, people want to join their funeral. It is a form of challenge against the regime, telling them: "You have killed Jamal. Now we are all Jamal."

## APPENDIX 2:

### **Production History of *Gardens Speak***

1. Artsadmin, London: 5-6 March 2014
2. Next Wave, Melbourne: 1-4 & 7-11 May 2014
3. Fierce Festival, Birmingham: 2-5 & 9-12 October 2014
4. Forest Fringe, Edinburgh: 26-30 August 2015
5. BEAR, Bucharest: 16 October 2015
6. Spielart, Munich: 23 October - 1 November 2015
7. Festival of Questions, Lancaster: 4-6 February 2016
8. Battersea Arts Centre, London: 2-19 March 2016
9. The Building Museum, Washington DC: 7-13 April 2016
10. D-Caf Festival, Cairo: 15-18 April 2016
11. Spring Festival, Beirut: 3-8 May 2016
12. Fast Forward Festival, Athens: 25-30 May 2016
13. Holland Festival, Amsterdam: 16-19 June 2016
14. Belluard Festival, Fribourg: 23-26 June 2016
15. Festival de Marseille, Marseille: 30 June-16 July 2016
16. City of Women, Ljubljana: 12-15 October 2016
17. Under the Radar, New York: 6-9 January 2017
18. TANDEM Scène Nationale, Douai: 13-18 March 2017
19. Adelaide Festival, Adelaide: 4-18 March 2017
20. Kulturkirken Jacob, Oslo: 23 February - 6 March 2017
21. Moussem, Brussels: 3-10 February 2017
22. SAAL Biennial, Tallinn: 19-23 August 2017
23. Centrale Fies, Trento: 25-29 July 2017
24. Belfast International Festival, Belfast: 6-28 October 2017
25. Emerson Paramount Center, Boston: 8-19 November 2017
26. MDC Live Arts, Miami Art Basel, Miami: 6-9 December 2017

### APPENDIX 3:

#### **Interactive One to One Performances by Tania El Khoury Referred in the Thesis**

##### ***As Far As My Fingertips Take Me (2016)***

- London: Royal Court Theatre, 9-11 June 2016
- Santiago: Teatro A Mil, 16-18 January 2017
- Bristol: IBT, 10-12 February 2017
- London: Mosaic Rooms, 16 February 2017
- Lille: Latitudes Contemporaines, 16-18 June 2017
- Fribourg: Belluard, 27 June-1 July 2017
- Liverpool: Arab Arts Festival, 12-14 July 2017
- Ljubljana: Mladi Levi, 19-22 August 2017
- Copenhagen: 17-18 November 2017
- Miami: MDC Live Arts, 4-9 December 2017

##### ***Maybe If You Choreograph Me, You Will Feel Better (2011)***

- London: Battersea Arts Centre, 29 March - 9 April 2011
- Edinburgh: Forest Fringe, 22-27 August 2012
- Vienna: Tanzquartier Wien, 7-11 December 2011
- Glasgow: The Arches, 12-14 April 2012
- Bristol: MayFest, 25-27 May 2012
- Toronto: Summerworks Festival, 9-11 August 2012
- Dublin: Fringe Festival, 12-16 September 2012
- Lisbon: Culturgest, 17-19 February 2012
- Ljubljana: City of Women, 10-13 October 2013

##### ***Jarideh (2010)***

- London: Battersea Arts Centre, 6-18 July 2010
- Edinburgh: Forest Fringe, 9-13 August 2010
- Bristol: Arnolfini, 13 November 2010
- London: Shunt, 10 October 2010
- Liverpool: Bluecoat, 2-3 July 2011
- London: ICA, 13-15 July 2011

- Ipswich: Spill Festival, 1-3 November 2012
- Bangkok: Scala, 7-9 February 2013
- Athens: Bios, 5-7 April 2013

*Fuzzy (2009)*

- Edinburgh: Forest Fringe, 27-28 August 2009
- London: Southwark Playhouse, 17 December 2009
- London: Shunt, 5-6, 12-13 February 2010
- London: Battersea Arts Centre, 2-3 April 2010
- Glasgow: The Arches, 16-17 April 2010

## APPENDIX 4:

### **Dictaphone Group Projects Referenced in the Thesis**

#### ***Camp Pause*** | Video Installation (2016)

Artistic direction by Tania El Khoury

- Dar El-Nimr, Beirut: 5-31 October 2016
- CounterCurrent, Houston: 18-22 April 2017

#### ***The Topography of Descent*** | Guided City Tour (2015)

Concept and text writing by Tania El Khoury

- From Sursock Museum to Karantina, Beirut: 10 October 2015 - ongoing city tour.

#### ***Stories of Refuge*** | Interactive Video Installation (2013)

Concept and video editing by Tania El Khoury

- Spielart Festival, Munich: 15-30 November 2013
- Pergine Festival, Pergine: 4-12 July 2014
- Bo:M Festival, Seoul: 1-6 April 2015
- Krisis, Nottingham Trent University: 28 October - 9 December 2016
- La Bellone, Brussels: 15 September - 15 October 2016
- CounterCurrent, Houston: 18-22 April 2017
- Valletta 2018, Valletta: 23-25 November 2016

#### ***Nothing to Declare*** | Lecture Performance (2013)

Research and performance by Tania El Khoury, Abir Saksouk, and Petra Serhal

- Watermill Centre, 4 May 2013
- George Mason University, Fairfax: 22 April 2013
- Fusebox Festival, Austin: 25-26 April 2013
- Tanzquartier Wien, Vienna: 21 June 2013
- Forest Fringe, Edinburgh: 16-21 August 2013
- Ashkal Alwan, Beirut: 11-12 September 2013
- Mucem, Marseille: 4-5 June 2013

#### ***This Sea Is Mine*** | Site-specific Performance (2012)

Artistic direction and performance by Tania El Khoury

- Live Performance: 28 August - 8 September 2012.
- Sound Piece Tour: ongoing

#### ***Bus Cemetery*** | Installation Performance (2011)

Concept and text writing by Tania El Khoury

- Mar Mkhayel Bus Station, Beirut: 18 December 2011
- DiverCities, Beirut: 12 December 2013

*Bit Téléférique* | Site-specific Performance (2010)

Artistic direction and performance by Tania El Khoury

- Cable Car moving from Jounieh to Harrisa: 8-11 June 2010

## APPENDIX 5:

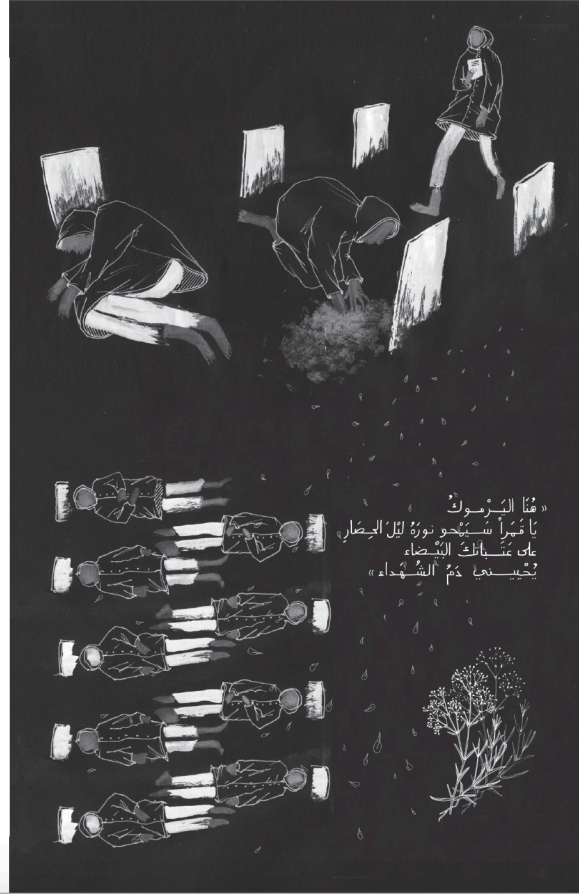
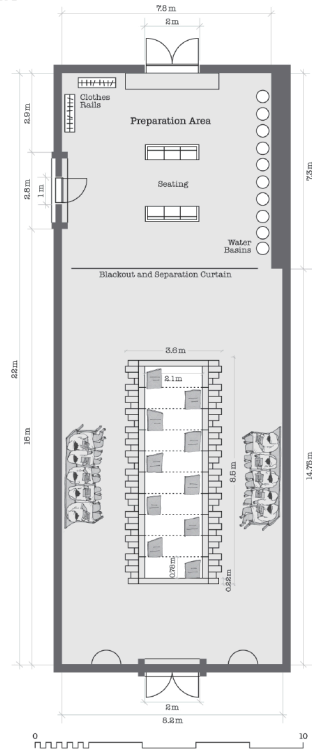
### Extracts from *Gardens Speak* Book

في سوريا، تخفي الكثير من الحقائق جثث القتلى من الناشطين، وتحمي من بقي حيا منهم من الضربات العنيفة للنظام. في تلك الحقائق تحكي المدافن المنزلية، ثمة تعاون تانيا الخوري **Tania El Khoury** مسستمر بين الأحياء والأموات. الأموات يحمون الأحياء من خلال عدم تعريضهم للمزيد من الخطر على يد الدولة، والأحياء يراعون أمواتهم ويحفظون هوياتهم وقصصهم في باطن الأرض، رافضين أن يتحوّل موتهم جزءاً من أدوات النظام في التلاعب بالتاريخ. الحقائق تحكي هو عرض فني تفاعلي يجول العالم، ليروي التاريخ الشفوي لعشرة أشخاص دفنوا في حدائق سورية. رُكبت هذه الحكايات بعناية مع أصدقاء القتلى وأفراد أسرهم، لنروي قصصهم كما كانوا ليرووها بأنفسهم. يحتوي هذا الكتاب على الروايات العشر باللغتين الإنكليزية والعربية المحكية. مع مقدّمة للفنانة ورسوم تصوّر تجربة العرض الحيّ.



The Performance Illustrated: Act 1

I invite you to dig into the soil with your hands and to listen to the story that will be whispered to you from the ground. Kneel in front of the tombstone, and press your ear to the ground. When you dig, you will find written information about where the martyr is buried. When you hear the whole story, return the soil to its original state and lie on your back until the end of the performance.



## The Story of Ayat al-Qassab

*Ayat was buried in the garden of a relative's home in Karm al-Zaytoun.*

I remember very well the first time my mother asked me to prepare food for my older brother. I fought with my entire family that day. When he died, I wished that I had not prepared his meal then. I wished I did not listen to my mother, my father, or anyone else in the neighborhood. If I had not listened to them, I would have stayed free. Then, maybe, when my brother died, I could have been fighting next to him. Then, I wouldn't have died before I had the chance to resist those who killed him.

It is not really my mother's fault. This is how she was raised, how her parents taught her things should be. Though I hear that there are women in Homs who do not prepare food for their brothers. They are able to be revolutionaries just like their brothers and husbands.

My mother and I were raised in Karm al-Zaytoun. It is a poor neighborhood in Homs. Even though it is only three kilometers from the center of Homs, you feel like you are entering an entirely different town. Karm-Zaytoun used to be the olive orchards of Homs. The impoverished children of this little neighborhood that nobody knew before the revolution have today all become martyrs and heroes.

Forty-seven of the eighty-seven martyrs in the massacre of Karm al-Zaytoun and al-Adawiyya were women and children, just because they wanted to live in a country that loves them as much as they love it. They no longer wanted ignorance. Even my brother, before his death, used to tell me that because of the revolution my daughter will live the life I always wanted to live.

Everyone in Homs went out to protest. Even the women protested. Me too. I was able to go out to three protests. But when the madness

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of Asad's thugs began, I was imprisoned at home by my brothers' fear. I tried everything to go out with them. But stories of the rape and humiliation of female activists were exposed and left no room for any of my brothers to even consider the idea. My dad used to always tell me, "None of you knows the regime's oppression like I do. If you knew what happened in the 1980s you would forgive my fear. You would know that I am not doing you wrong by telling you to stay home. If only you knew what happened to our relatives in Hama, what we heard about the torture in prisons, and the letters we received from imprisoned women telling us that their jailers impregnated them. Let us get rid of Asad first, and then you can do whatever you want."

Every time my brothers went out to protest, I'd go crazy in the house. I kept thinking, maybe they'll let me go with them this time. I just wanted to fight oppression like they were doing. All that I ended up being able to do is produce this short film the revolutionaries put on YouTube. I wrapped the revolutionary flag around my shoulders, raised my hand with the victory sign, looked at the camera lens, and yelled, "I am a Syrian, not a terrorist." Once I saw the video on the web, I felt I had contributed to the revolution.

This one time, my dad took me to an area away from the shelling. He gave me a gun, and let me practice shooting. I felt alive when I held it. Its bullets, though, have the smell of death. I used to see myself in the shot: the warmth; the power; how it knew its way. But the difference between the shot and I is that nobody ever came to pull the trigger and set me free.

I know that my dad knew this deep inside of himself. He was trying to make me feel that I wasn't weak just because I was a girl. Even though he used to be an officer in Asad's army, he was just like me deep inside. He was free.

Please don't tell me I was young and unable to be part of the revolution. Pain has left no more children in our country. We all grew up too quickly; faster than the sniper bullets that killed my brothers Ahmad and Abdallah.

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The pain which I was feeling, has kept my existence tied to men. It's the men that are able to go out and confront. I married a revolutionary; someone like my brothers and me. I thought that maybe by being with him I can continue to be part of the revolution. And I thought that maybe tomorrow, if I have a little girl with him, she can live freely in the country that I hope the revolution would build.

Before the revolution, I used to dream of becoming a teacher. For a girl from my area, it was the only acceptable profession that would let me contribute something to those around me in hopes of creating a new voice.

I got married at the age of fifteen, during the second year of the revolution. It was about a year after my brother Abdallah was killed. My mother was sad on my wedding day because I wasn't able to have a big wedding party. She tried to explain to me what marriage is, what it means to have a husband waiting for me to be nice to him. And just like she taught me to do for my brothers, she taught me to prepare food for my husband.

With the little money that she had, she bought me some jewellery, pretty dresses, and a makeup box. She had no idea that day that she was preparing me for a wedding in the skies.

While she was visiting on Friday, I put on my red pajama that she liked. As she was performing her midday prayer, a shell came into the middle of our home. There was a lot of dust, and a sound that made your heart tremble. I heard my mother screaming and wailing because I wasn't next to her then. She couldn't see anything.

Slowly, the dust started to clear. My mother saw two bodies spread out on the floor. One of them was my father's body. The other body was mine; the one with a fetus hiding in it. My dad got up, but I did not.

I admit that I had hoped for martyrdom hundreds of times in the past. I thought that maybe I'll find my freedom up in the sky. But once I had another soul in my belly, I began wanting to live.

There were only men at my burial. My mother wasn't there. Nor were my friends. Three men dug my grave in the garden. Other men wrapped

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my body in a blanket. They prayed and carried me quietly as the sound of shelling could be heard from afar.

I wished they said something; anything. Or sang a revolutionary song, turning my burial into a protest just like what happened the day my brothers were buried. Just like they sang for the other martyrs.

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

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## The Story of Basil Shehadeh

Basil was buried in a garden in Homs.

Am I the only person that died in the revolution? Or does being a young artist and filmmaker who comes from a religious minority group make me the PR face of the revolution?

I used to have a really good job as an engineer with the United Nations before the revolution. But maybe because of my diabetes, I always felt that my life was short and that I didn't want to spend it sitting at a desk.

At the age of twenty-eight, I decided I did not want to reach the age of thirty without having done everything I dreamt of doing. I started with a cinema club that my friends and I organized. It was a cozy little club in a cafe in old Damascus. It was a place for people like us to watch independent films that we would discuss.

Even our little cinema club could not escape the eyes of intelligence agencies. They'd pop in on the owner of the place every few days. They'd ask him all sort of questions. Eventually, he got so tired of it all and asked us to leave.

I then decided to begin a project I had been thinking about for a long time. I wanted to take a motorcycle trip from here to India. I actually bought a bike that was quite filthy. I cleaned it up and called it Lenin. I returned to my country both exhausted and happy.

Once back, I looked for my friends to tell them what happened on my trip. But they were the ones with news to share with me. They told me about the protest they held at the Libyan embassy in solidarity with the Libyan uprising, and how it turned into a protest demanding freedom here. The security forces attacked and beat them. They told me about Dara', and how the children of Dara' had their fingernails pulled out because they wrote, "The people want the fall of the regime" on a wall.

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My friends had started meeting up, each one of them identifying someone they trusted. They started working together based on these circles of trust. When I got back from my trip, I joined them.

I remember the first time I went out to flier with my friends. It was the first time I saw her. A free young woman, crazy like me. Her name was Rand, and she had long black hair and dark brown eyes. She was laughing the entire time, as if there were no security forces and not soldiers. It was as if we were on a first date, and the leaflets were rose petals that I gifted her. They were falling as we were walking.

Rand was like that hope that all of a sudden sprang up inside of us. The hope that made us all free after we had been dead inside. It was the first time love tasted freedom. It was the first time freedom tasted love.

The demonstrations in Syria kept going. But the bigger they got, the more beatings and shootings there were. The world was turned upside down in Homs, Baryas, Dara', and Rif Dimashq. My friends and I were trying to get people in Damascus to come out with the same force. It wasn't long before it happened. Demonstrations in Midan, Barza, al-Qaboun, and Rukn al-Deen, all chanting, "Freedom forever whether you like it or not Asad!"

They arrested me at one of the protests. The thug that detained me asked if I wanted freedom. I couldn't lie, and so I nodded my head up and down. He started beating me and stomping on me as if I had cursed his mother.

I reached the station with my clothes torn up. My friends were outside trying everything to get us out. I was sitting in my dirty cell staring at Ahmad, more popularly known as the Spray Can Man. He was a young man from Barza that used to graffiti the word "freedom" on the walls. He got beaten so much that he lost the hearing in his left ear. He might still be in that station.

I, on the other hand, did not stay inside for very long. I was part of a group of "intellectuals" which the media attacked the regime for imprisoning. So they didn't torture us. Nor did they keep us for long.

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In the middle of this mess, I got a scholarship to study filmmaking in the United States. I decided to go. Before my flight, I took Rand to the Saint Mousa Monastery in the mountain. I used to always go there to visit Father Paulo.

I told Rand that I loved her on the first step that leads up to the monastery. On the last step on the way back down, I carried her as we went to celebrate our love in Hama. There were a million protesters, and I wanted us to live some of the best moments of the revolution together. It was our last chance to experience the beauty of Hama. On our way back, regime tanks were headed to level the city.

I did my first film in the United States on the revolution. But there was very little to do other than download clips from YouTube and interview well-known US-based activists and intellectuals to record their solidarity with the revolution. But this wasn't the filmmaking I wanted to do. That's why I decided to leave everything and return to Syria.

When I got back to Damascus, Rand was working with her friend to prepare for "Freedom Christmas." At the time, half our friends were either detained, just getting out of prison, or missing. Entire cities and villages were being shelled; their civilians dying.

The revolution in Homs would enchant me, as did its people. They could laugh in the face of pain, even when living under constant shelling. With every joke they popularized, Asad's anger toward them seemed to grow: their homes would be destroyed. I just wanted to go there. I couldn't envision filming except in Homs, the capital of the revolution.

At the time, my brave Rand would put me to shame with her strength and sensitivity. She wanted to go to Homs to train some youth in filming. She asked me to come with her if I liked. And I, of course, did.

We went to old Homs together. The revolution had taken up arms by then. Some armed groups would protect the demonstrations from security forces. Other armed groups would protect the area from incursions by Asad's army.

The training took place in a simple home. It had nothing but two chairs. The excitement of the participants and their faith in what they

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were doing made it the most amazing place on earth. During this time, I appeared on several international news channels. I felt it was important to tell our story to the world.

I made three short films, and collected material for two feature films. One of the short films was about the one-year anniversary of the revolution. I decided to film in more than one city that joined the revolution. Rand and I went out to film in Dara', Hama, Homs, Silmiyya, and parts of Damascus. We had another friend helping us as well. She had filmed women in Douma, who played a much more important role than the men.

While I was editing the film, the computer crashed and I lost all my material. That day, the world shut its doors in my face. I wasn't too upset about the work that I had put in. I was more upset about the work my friends put into the film. Even more, what about the voices of the people that won't reach anyone? I promised them that the entire world would hear them. I went back to Homs even though my diabetes was causing me complications. I was afraid I was going to go blind and become paralyzed.

That day, Rand didn't want me to go to Homs. She and I had started talking about getting married. I was scared just like her. But I had to go because there were people waiting from me to complete their training. I went to visit Father Paulo on Holy Thursday before I headed on from there to Homs.

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

Despite all the shelling, the day of our funeral the people of Homs insisted on taking me to the Umm al-Zinnar church so that my body would be prayed on before I was buried.

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and hit me with sticks. Then there was the electrocution. Their dirty cells were full of lice and scabies.

None of this was important. I was thinking of my mother's face the entire time. I was afraid she'd cry when they tell her, "Madam, Abd al-Wahid died." She could run from plot to plot not knowing where her son was buried, if he was buried at all. They might even make her sign a statement saying that I was killed by a terrorist gang. They did that with a lot of mothers.

In the end, they decided they had enough of me. I have no idea why. So they returned me to the sunlight. I came out all swollen. I had scabies. My teeth were broken, and one of my eyes was shut. I was only thinking about my mother. She was in Lebanon at the time. I headed out to her to get treated there. I was in Lebanon for four whole months. I kept hearing news of Talkalakh. It was so bad it made your hair go white: raids, shelling, and children dying. Young men in their prime took up arms to protect their families.

All of Syria rose up. I started thinking that maybe it was time to go back so I wouldn't leave my family and neighbors alone over there. While I was thinking about what to do, I received the news that my brother Mujahid was killed. I couldn't even look my mother in the eye. She looked immobile and couldn't utter a word.

My blood was boiling. I couldn't see anything in front of me, and I found myself heading back the Talkalakh with a gun in my hand shooting at those dogs.

After my brother's death, I didn't have anything left to lose. All I was able to do is defend his name. I decided to form the Mujahid Cell in the western neighborhood of Talkalakh. It was right next to the Air Force security checkpoint and the Basil al-Asad Hospital, which was turned into a military base. They were up high, on the mountain, controlling the area and the people in it. We had clashes with them every few days. Everyday, we expected death a hundred times.

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I was trying to sleep one night in August, while the army was laying siege to Talkalakh. I wanted to rest a bit. Then a friend ran over to wake me up and have me come join the fighting. The army had intensified its attack. I ran quickly. I was in such a hurry that I wore my t-shirt backward.

I carried my rifle, and then before I could use it I was shot ten times from afar. I fell to the ground. My friends called out but I couldn't respond. I followed Mujahid much faster than I expected. But thank God, I died a martyr.

My brothers wrapped me in white cloth like they do all martyrs. They didn't wash me, so I could go up to heaven with the smell of martyrdom on me. They put me in a coffin and prayed on me. They took me quietly and calmly to my house. Usually, the funeral of a martyr turns into a protest and all the people chant in his name. But the war conditions we were in didn't leave room for any noise that would let the security forces know where the burial was taking place.

I wasn't upset that they didn't sing for me. I did get upset about the flowers in our garden. They picked them all so they could find a spot to bury my body. They dug a small hole (two meters by half a meter) in our home garden. They put me under the pomegranate tree my mother planted for me. There was no noise other than the sound of shelling and that of the soil falling on me. Bit by bit, it covered all of me.

Through it all, the only thing I was thinking about was my mother's face as they were telling her: Madam, Abd al-Wahid died.

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## The Story of Mustafa Karmani

Mustafa was buried in Aleppo.

I remember being attached to books and films as a child. I always thought that I would grow up to be a writer or director. It didn't occur to me then that I would struggle to survive.

I started working in an import-export office immediately after graduating from college. It was a very boring job. The hours in the office passed so slowly. My manager's voice always felt so cold. Every time he spoke, it was like he was reminding me of the dream I didn't achieve.

The internet was my only entertainment. I'd work a little, then chat a little. I knew that something good might come from the Internet, but I didn't think it would be that good.

That day was a particularly long one. I needed a break. I also needed to talk to someone I didn't work with. All of a sudden, she appeared in the chat window.

It started with a hello. She was curious about me because my chat icon was a picture of Che Guevara. And from there, the conversation went in a lot of directions: dance, music, books, and more. We had a lot of things in common. We even discovered that we had gone to the same school, and grew up in the same neighborhood.

I remember the first time we met in person. It was very hard to stay calm. I was mesmerized. She was talking the whole time. Her eyes were sparkling. I'd be listening, but her eyes would take me somewhere else. It was so bad that she thought I was bored or had changed my mind after meeting her. The truth was that I fell in love with her right then and there.

We started going to concerts and dance parties together. We dreamed together.

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It wasn't long before we started hearing the news. There was one dream we never dared to dream. But suddenly, it too seemed possible.

Zein al-Abidine Ben Ali was gone. I was out of breath telling her the news on the phone. We were both jumping up and down like little kids. Not long after, Husni Mubarak followed him. I remember how we were just staring at the television screen watching the news. We knew Syria wasn't too far away from all this. Change was contagious and it was moving from country to country.

The revolution started.

Demonstrations were popping up everywhere in Syria. But Aleppo was still quiet. Maybe it was because it is an industrial city and was looking after its interests. Or maybe it was because of the suffering it experienced under the rule of Hafiz al-Asad when the Muslim Brotherhood rose up in the 1980s and the security forces killed hundreds. Or maybe because one in every three people walking in the streets of Aleppo is probably a security agent.

I remember when Hamza al-Khatib died. He was a twelve-year-old kid from Dar'a that the regime arrested at one of the checkpoints. They returned him to his family dead, with clear marks of torture all over his body. His penis had been amputated. Hamza died on my birthday, 25 May 2011. The regime later claimed that he was going to rape the wives of officers. My god how fucked up this regime can be!

The number of martyrs of the revolution grew. Maha and I used to count each one of them. We met a group of young activists in Aleppo. Together we formed a non-violent group called "Checkmate." I used to always say: "Checkmate, Syria is going back to being a republic." We organized campaigns to talk about the martyrs, and why we were coming out against the regime.

We were some of the first to join the demonstrations when they started in Aleppo. They said only the religious leaders could get Aleppo to rise up. But it was the university students that accomplished that task.

I used to always go out to demonstrations with my love, Maha. We would always be holding each other's hands when protesting. Even when

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we would run away from demonstrations, we'd hold hands after getting out. Plus, it would make us look as if we had nothing to do with the protest. Security forces would see us, and we'd tell them we're newly weds taking a walk.

Only once did we not hold hands. It was during the funeral of a martyr where the men and women prayed separately. The security forces attacked us after the first chants. Then the tear gas and bullets started coming at us from every direction. I ran quickly. I don't know how, but it was like her scent was pulling me toward her. Two seconds later I heard her voice shaking from afar, "Mustafa!" I took her hand and we ran under a spray of bullets. That day, we managed to escape. But ten other people died.

When more and more people started dying, including our friends, we decided we didn't want either of us to die before we were married. So we got married. At first, we were worried her parents wouldn't approve because I was Shi'i. But the truth is that her parents are like the revolution we dreamt of.

We couldn't invite our relatives to the wedding because the roads were closed and there was heavy shelling.

I didn't approve of the revolution taking up arms. I was a non-violent activist from the start. I believed that arms would be the death of the revolution. That didn't mean that I didn't understand when people decided to take up arms. I was happy when the Free Syrian Army liberated Bustan al-Qasr in Aleppo because I saw how much integrity the revolutionaries had.

I lived in Bustan al-Qasr for twenty-two years, and I never saw anything similar to when the revolutionaries took control. The youth of the neighborhood met to organize everything. The streets were cleaned, and publications were circulated to everyone to motivate them and prove that our country is better off without Assad. I cried so much then. Even though I didn't like armed men, more than once I thought about hugging the men of the Free Syrian Army.

Bustan al-Qasr became a liberated area. We'd go out to demonstrate against the regime, or any wrongdoing by the revolution itself.

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But there were snipers surrounding Bustan al-Qasr. There was also constant shelling. Sometimes things would quiet down, and other times they would heat up.

It was Friday 16 November 2012. The demonstration was really massive. As Maha held my hand, she told me that we had never taken a picture together at a demonstration. I left her for a bit to talk to a friend of mine. I don't know what happened next. But the ground started shaking and stones falling from every direction. There was dust and debris everywhere, bodies on the ground. Some people had no head and others had nothing left of them. I saw her walking around, but she didn't find me. They were giving me medical attention at the time.

I was hit in the chest, stomach, and liver. While in surgery, I could hear her. She filled the hospital with her screams. They took her aside and gave her a sedative. I just wanted to tell her that I loved her, and that she would be a part of me no matter what happened. But death was faster than the both of us. I heard her crying. Then I heard her chanting.

My friends gathered around me, covered me, prayed on me, and put me in a coffin. While they were carrying me, the shelling started again. They couldn't give me a funeral procession or a demonstration like we did for all the other martyrs. I was buried very quickly with ten other martyrs who were killed by the same shell.

Death took me away from a lot of things. I never saw the school that Maha and I worked on. She named the school after me. Nor did I ever know that in the north of Syria there was something called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. The only difference between it and the Assad regime is that one rules in the name of Bashar and the other rules in the name of God.

I left Maha alone to see all the pain and death. Maha was my revolution. When I see her every morning, trying to pull herself together to help the people who have been harmed by the shelling, I just wish I could hold her. I wish I could tell her, "Oh Maha, you're not alone. Mustafa, your Mustafa, will always love you and will always be by your side, even after he's gone."

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## The Story of Bayan

Bayan (a pseudonym) was buried in a plot of land belonging to her activist friend in Aleppo.

My friends say I'm stubborn, and that I check everything big and small. Maybe they're right. Or, maybe I just can't keep quiet when I see something wrong.

I used to believe that a revolutionary should be exemplary, without flaws. I used to feel that the revolution must purify us, and bring out the best in us. I was convinced that people who speak out against the regime must raise their voices in the face of any wrong. That's why I took on the name of the revolution: Bayan. It means "statement."

When the revolution started, I heard the news of the children in Dar'a that the regime arrested and tortured just because they had written anti-regime slogans on the walls. Something inside of me boiled up.

Then, after a bit, Banyas, Homs, and Rif Dimashq all rose up. But Aleppo stayed quiet. I felt like all of Syria was waiting for Aleppo. But what happened to Aleppo in 1980 made Aleppans think a hundred times before doing anything.

In the 1980s, there was an opposition against Hafiz al-Asad. There were communists, Nasserists, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Using the Brotherhood's taking up of arms as an excuse, the army came in and spared no one. Entire families were executed in front of everybody. People were beaten and persecuted. A lot of the people that were imprisoned and executed actually had nothing to do with what happened. Then the news of the rape of women started reaching us from the prisons and camps. In short, everything having to do with the name Assad was terrifying to Aleppans.

But the youth, we could not take it any more. Even with all the security precautions the regime took in Aleppo, we started to form small

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groups. Some groups were organizing information campaigns, while others were distributing leaflets. We also formed relief groups to help the refugees from Homs. They had fled the shelling of their city with nothing but their children and the clothes they were wearing.

Even helping those refugees was a crime according to the regime. A lot of the activists working on relief were arrested. We had to ask about the refugees and provide them with supplies in secret. It was as if we were committing a major sin. But even so, we didn't just stop at relief work. We organized protests at the university. And like that, Aleppo joined the revolution.

Just like in other cities, the security forces attacked the protesters and shot at them. On the Friday named by revolutionaries as, "Forgive Us Aleppo," there was shooting at the protesters like there always was. Six martyrs fell, and many more were wounded. We tried to give them first aid. We all followed them into the hospital so that the security forces would not come there and arrest them. Little by little, our numbers grew. Eventually, there was a human barrier surrounding the hospital.

Once it got dark, some people came with candles and gave them out. We stayed put, standing.

They didn't shoot at us, and they left the wounded alone. Maybe it was because we were on a main street, or because we were all young men and women. Maybe it was because we weren't chanting, just standing there holding candles in our hands.

After what I saw that day, my activism was no longer limited to protesting and relief work. I joined a medical team to help provide medical care to people. In the beginning, I used to just smuggle things for them, like cotton, and other first aid supplies. After some time, I learned how to care for the wounded. I went with them to all the protests, and reached out to the injured people.

After a while, the regime was no longer just shooting people. It was now shelling us. Then something new started to happen, something that we had never heard of before: big barrels filled with explosives dropped on top of us from warplanes. Once they hit, they burn everything around them.

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I'm not sure how, but those things didn't scare me; quite the opposite. Each moment made me stronger. Even though bullets used to fly by me quite a few times. And once, a bullet grazed my shoulder.

I never imagined that the revolution would make me change my career from teaching to medical care. Nor did I imagine ever seeing so much blood or being able to come that close to it.

The blood and death that I saw became ingrained in my mind. It was no longer something strange. Nor something I turned away from when I saw. I could open my eyes really well and look at it. That way I didn't miss a single detail of what was happening. That way I could see the people dying next to me and try to do something for them.

One time, a hundred barrels were dropped on Aleppo in the span of ten days. During that time, we heard news of a barrel being dropped on a nearby neighborhood. We went to help out the wounded. As I was helping someone, a second barrel was dropped. I didn't even have time to finish taking a breath before knowing it had dropped and exploded.

It is a weird scene when you see an explosion from that close up. Everything lights up. You don't know if that light is that far away like you're supposed to see when going up to heaven, or if it is just the explosion happening in front of your face. Even the airplanes, you're not quite sure if they are really there or if it's your soul that is flying around.

It's strange, but after hearing the sound of the explosion I couldn't hear anything else. I didn't hear the sound of my mother as she was crying. Nor did I hear the sound of the coffin as it was being closed above me. I didn't even hear the voice of the imam who was praying on me. What I know for certain is that there was no marker for my grave when I was buried. I was buried in the cemetery of a friend of mine. The tombstone atop my grave had the name of someone from that friend's family.

That's where I was buried. When a comrade from the revolution gave me a spot in his grandfather's grave in the liberated area of Syria, he told my family, "Bayan is in the revolution. She's become closer to me than family. Bayan is a revolutionary, and she won't be buried under the rule of the regime."

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They took me and buried me in a quiet funeral. There wasn't a single sound other than the sound of shelling coming from afar. I would have definitely preferred to hear the sounds of chants on my way to my burial just like the other martyrs. But the two barrels that fell didn't leave anyone around able to breath normally, let alone to be able to chant the day of my funeral.

My family left me in the liberated area and went back to our neighborhood, which is still controlled by the regime.

You don't know my name, but the name I died with was Bayan. I changed my name three times during the revolution so that the regime wouldn't discover my identity. Not even my death could bring back my real name. My family could be arrested and tortured if they spoke about me or let my friends tell my story. Others met that fate when they tried. Another girl, a martyr, was an activist like me. When her news got out on television and Facebook, the regime arrested her father and he's been imprisoned since then.

It's strange that even when we die in this revolution against the Asad regime, we remain imprisoned. It's strange that people can't know who we are, even after we die. My activist name is Bayan. I'm twenty-four years old. I died, but my soul was free. My real name, however, remains imprisoned by Asad.

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## The Story of Ahmad Bawwabi

Ahmad was buried in a stranger's home garden in Bustan al-Qasr.

Even though I was a good student at school, I never listened to my dad.

For some reason, he used to be very annoyed with bicycles. He'd shout at me every time he saw me riding one. Sometimes, he would let the air out of my tires or he would break my bike. But still, I'd just pump it back up or manage to get hold of a new one.

We moved to Qatar after I turned fifteen years old. My dad wanted me to finish high school there, and then attend a good college somewhere outside of Syria. But I went back to my city of Aleppo the minute I finished high school. Instead of majoring in medicine or pharmacy like all the other high-scoring students, I majored in geography.

My dad never asked me why I picked that major, even though he wasn't happy with my choice. But he knew that from the moment I first went to school in Qatar, and saw the difference between their schools and ours, I would want to return to Syria and improve our educational system.

The world turned upside down during my second year in college. The regime arrested school kids in Dar'a just because they graffitied the wall with, "The people demand the fall of the regime." The regime tortured the kids by tearing out their fingernails. That's when the protests started in Dar'a. After that, Banyas, Homs, Jabla, and Rif Dimashq joined the demonstrations. The protesters were met with beatings and arrests, and later with bullets.

When all the beatings, arrests, and bullets couldn't stop the protesters, there were the tanks, airplanes, and missiles. Entire villages and cities were shelled. Lots of people died.

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Aleppo couldn't keep out of this. We, the university students, couldn't watch all of this happening and keep quiet.

If you don't know Aleppo, then you don't know how difficult the security situation is. There are the police, security forces, popular committees, and more. All of them are afraid of the people and the people are afraid of them. Add to this our parents begging us not to go out and protest.

Aleppo lived the agony of the 1980s. In those days, large parts of the city fell. I never heard these stories except through whispers. People kept silent because they were afraid of Asad's intelligence units and his torture prisons. All I know is that back then opposition movements came out in Aleppo. Some people were executed in public for this. All this was done to scare the community out of being politically active. Our parents' generation experienced the fear of the 1980s. But we, the youth, didn't understand it as we never lived it. All we knew was that the security forces were always everywhere in Aleppo, and that after any small action such as distribution of leaflets, the roads would get closed, students would get searched, and our whole world would flip upside down.

Despite all the fear from the regime that we inherited, Aleppo eventually rose up in protest.

I quickly joined the movement. At each protest, the regime's thugs would attack, beat, or detain us. I don't know how, but I managed to get away every time. I was never detained, but I took a lot of beatings. After a while, the regime started shelling the area I was in. It is called Bustan al-Qasr.

Bit by bit, the protests got less frequent and armed activities began to replace them. I was really happy about this at first because the Free Syrian Army was able to take on the regime and liberate Bustan al-Qasr. With that liberation, we were able to have some space to think about the future and how we wanted to build our country. It was a special stage in the uprising. We were all working together for Syria. We were living under constant shelling, but it felt like it was our liberated space.

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When Bustan al-Qasr was cut off from the rest of Aleppo, the school closed and the kids stayed at home. That's when we, the university students, started organizing ourselves to do something for these kids. We didn't want them to stay without school and miss out on an education. This is when something beautiful happened.

We were all young men and women, with new ideas and a genuine desire for change. We were working from our hearts to help these kids. I spoke to my neighbor, Abu Kifah. He was a specialist in modern educational techniques and had gone to Homs to fight in the revolution there. He came back and helped train us for the work we wanted to do. We felt like it was our chance to work together on building a foundation for a new and revolutionary education system in Syria.

Just as we were starting to organize the community, we learned of something called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in nearby places like al-Raqqa and Dayr al-Zor. They started to try and control the situation in the liberated areas, harassing the community and attacking civilian activists, just like the regime did.

But even with all the shelling by the regime and the serious threats from ISIS, it was still the happiest time of our lives. We had big dreams for our country and future. We were slowly working on making them come true.

On our way to the workshops, I used to argue and laugh with Abu Kifah about who should go first when passing through the regime's sniper area. We agreed that we'd rotate each day.

One day, it was my turn to go first. We got by the first sniper, walked a bit, and got to the second sniper area. For some reason, Abu Kifah wouldn't let me go first. But I ran in front of him. I managed to get halfway across to the other side, when two sniper bullets hit me straight in the neck and dropped me to the ground.

Abu Kifah didn't know what to do. He kept ducking and trying to move closer to me so that he could pull me toward him. When he finally managed, he carried me and started to run in all directions. He didn't know if he should scream or cry. His clothes became soaked with my blood and his tears were falling on me.

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He stood in the middle of the street, devastated, not knowing where to go or what to do. He wanted to bury me somewhere, but there was shelling everywhere, and it was too dangerous to be out. An old man in the neighborhood saw him and brought us into his home. He told him, "This is my home garden. You can bury your friend here."

Everything happened so quickly. They wrapped me up, prayed on me, dug a grave in the man's garden, and buried me in a hurry. Just like that, I was left alone, away from my home in a garden that I never visited before. I didn't have a funeral that turned into a protest like what happened for other martyrs. No one sang for me. Nor did the neighborhood gather for my sake and chant in front of my home in one voice: "Oh martyr's mother, we are all your children." Very few people knew that a twenty-two-year-old man called Ahmad was killed by a regime sniper, and was being buried in a stranger's home garden among dead flowers and neglected plants.

My death was quiet, just like me. Nobody witnessed it other than the sniper and my good friend Abu Kifah. I died very early, before I managed to help Syrian kids get the education they deserve in a free and just Syria.

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## The Story of Bilal al-Naimi

*Bilal was buried in a garden in Old Homs.*

They say that the Syrian people rose up for freedom, not for bread. It's true. But it doesn't help to speak of the two separately. When you are forced to leave your children, your home, and your country because you need to feed yourself and your family, then you know that freedom and bread can't be separated.

I left everything behind me, even my kids who are what I value most in the world. I went to Lebanon on the basis that it was better for me than Syria. Why should I have to leave my family and country for the sake of the cost of diapers and food for my children? My biggest dream was to get married, have kids, and be able to raise them. I wasn't allowed to dream about anything bigger than that. We live in a country ruled by a regime of alleged safety and stability, one that stomps out all your dreams. It beats you with one hand so that you stay quiet. At the same time, it robs the country with the other hand. It doesn't care if we starve or go to hell.

I remember being very smart at math. But I also remember repeating the fifth grade three times. It wasn't because I was stupid or lazy. I just didn't have time to study. I had to go to work straight from school. My concern then was to contribute to my family's income. People who tell you freedom has nothing to do with bread are like people who say politics has nothing to do with the economy.

Have you ever come to Rif Homs in the spring? If you did, you would know that Homs is a heavenly place. You might not believe that there are people with bare feet and worn out hands when you see the wheat fields shining under the sunlight. You might not believe that there are villages without electricity when you watch the television programs that

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bombard us with talk about the modern state, poverty alleviation, and mandatory education. Today, there are a lot of kids not going to school and whose parents can't even make enough to pay the rent. If anyone dared to speak of all of this, they would disappear. Their entire family might disappear with them. So don't ask me why I left everything and returned to Syria when I heard that change was coming.

I remember first hearing about it on Al-Jazeera. If only you knew how my heart started beating. I kept flipping back and forth between believing and not believing what I was hearing. My blood was boiling and I wanted to come back. Can you imagine being able, for the first time, to scream in the middle of the street in front of a group of people and not have someone kill you? And people would actually join you in calling out against oppression? Imagine being jealous of the people in Tunisia and Egypt who were able to call for freedom, wishing that you too would get this chance. Wouldn't you join if it finally came to your country? Wouldn't you start imagining what life would look like once the regime falls? Imagine the gang in control finally gone and Syria is finally yours instead of it belonging to Assad?

I left money, work, and Lebanon without telling anybody and went back to Homs. I was praying the whole way back that the news would be true. When I got back, there was a demonstration in the neighborhood. I dropped my bags and joined the demonstration before even seeing my family. Honestly, I still couldn't believe it then. Suddenly, the young men carried me on their shoulders and I started to lead the chants.

If only you could know what a demonstration really meant. Do you have any idea what it means to sing from the top of your lungs, to be carried by protesters on their shoulders, and your voice reaching across the skies? The revolution turned me from a worker to a singer. I might have even turned into a philosopher if it wasn't for what happened next.

I was chanting at a demonstration the day the shooting started. My neighbor got shot in the leg and fell right in front of me. I never once imagined that our protest would be responded to with bullets and death.

When my neighbor fell in front of me, I covered my eyes because I

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couldn't look. When I realized how his pain was much more important than my shock, I tried to cover his wound while my hands were shaking. There are things that you don't understand until you live them. Sometimes seeing the pain that others are experiencing is a worse feeling than you experiencing that pain. I know because I've experienced both these types of pain. There were so many injured and dead from my family and neighbors. I carried my first rifle to protect the protests in al-Khalidiyya, in Ghouta, in Homs, and in Bab al-Sab'. My two brothers were with me.

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

Do you know how many martyrs died in Homs? Do you know why they died? Homs was known to everyone as the revolution's capital. Homs was where people made fun of pain, and where satirical videos were produced—all while being shelled. Homs made all of Syria laugh at Asad's rifles and tanks. Asad punished it by leveling all its homes.

Death kept taking us one by one. We had no choice but to continue until Bashar al-Asad was gone. We had nothing to live for. We lost everything. Our only hope was that people didn't die in vain. Our hope was that our blood that was spilled would help sprout freedom, love, and a better life. I was never a tough person. I always cried easily. Have you ever seen a crying brigade leader? I was in charge of an entire faction. I killed officers, soldiers, and regime thugs.

Some people say we made a mistake. That we shouldn't have let Asad and his criminality push us to such ends. But you know what? Try putting yourself in our place. Try to live what we lived, and then tell us you would have done better than us. Even my wife and kids, who I used to go to Lebanon for to make enough money to feed—Even they don't care about hunger and poverty anymore. They don't want anything else from this world other than seeing Asad go.

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We were forced to leave Karm al-Zaytoun after the second military raid on the area. We were worried that the army would torture my family in hopes of capturing me. We moved to old Homs. I would go out with my brigade on raids and then come back to my family. It never occurred to me that the Mig fighter jet would start bombing old Homs too.

There I was, in old Homs with my wife and kids. I was looking at them and thinking about how their future is worth me dying for a hundred times over. All that mattered was that they lived a free life. After lunch, I left the house for a bit. While in the street, the bomb from the fighter jet dropped right next to me. The ground below me shook and I no longer knew where I was. There was dust and dirt everywhere. People were screaming. All of a sudden, people were screaming my name. Even if I wasn't dead at the time, I wouldn't have been able to respond. There was so much debris on top of me. I might have even been on my last breath when someone realized that I was underneath the rubble. The guys ran over and pulled me out. But it was too late. They started saying, "May God accept him as a martyr." And just like I cried over my first and second brother, my third brother cried over me.

They wrapped me up, put me in a wooden coffin, and prayed on me. They lifted me up on their shoulders, and their voices filled the air. They drowned out the sound of bullets, shelling, and everything else. My funeral became a demonstration that the entire neighborhood participated in. They buried me in a garden in old Homs. I was honored that the hands of my friends, who like mine were sweating to bring freedom, are the same ones that dug my grave.

After two days, the same fighter jet that killed me attacked my home. My kids were caught under the rubble. Our neighbor was hiding in our home because a shell had already hit his home. It's usually safer during shelling because there is a cellar-like structure. But he found that the house collapsed from the inside. Amid the shelling, he started to look for my kids. He pulled them out from under the rubble of the walls that collapsed on top of them. By some miracle, they were alive. Maybe the life that was taken from me helped give them a new life.

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## The Story of Abu Khalid

Abu Khalid (a pseudonym) was buried in his neighborhood garden in Hama.

My child, what do you want with my story? I really don't have it in me, neither to speak nor to complain. My heart aches for my country and its children. My heart aches for Hama, which after everything it had been through saw the return of Asad as he chokes its children and crushes their hearts.

I would have preferred to be sitting in my shop right now, selling children potato chips and cola rather than lying here telling you my story. Or I could be enjoying a cup of tea with my neighbor, Abu Ahmad, just before we both head out to a protest.

I would have preferred if my dad, my uncle, and many of my neighbours had not died as martyrs in the 1982 Hama massacre that Asad committed.

I would have preferred if I didn't have to think about the martyrs that might be lying under my shop where I am everyday. Wondering whether the sound of children coming in and out of the place is bothering them or comforting them. I would have preferred to be in your place, listening to the spirits whisper in my ear.

But never mind.

The short version is that my name is Abu Khalid. I'm not going to tell you my full name, nor give you information that would reveal my identity. I still have four children in Hama. The eldest one is ten years old. If Bashar al-Asad's people know that I'm telling you my story, they will disappear them and their mother. Not even a genie could find them then.

Do you think that those who die under oppression rest in peace? The tyranny follows you even to your grave.

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I'm not addressing you as my child because I'm old. I'm forty years old. But this is what I call everyone. I don't know. It's what shopkeepers do where I come from. I'm not an activist, nor a revolutionary, nor do I even know how to talk about politics. I didn't even get beyond a sixth-grade education.

My whole life, I've tried to avoid confrontation and hoped that God would help us. But to see your country's children dying in front of you is something that would make a stone speak.

Like others, I was very afraid at first. What our city has seen since the day that damned father took power cannot be comprehended. What you are seeing today, our families saw much worse in their days. Today, the Internet and phone cameras are letting you see what is happening. But what happened to us during the 1980s wasn't talked about except in whispers.

Nobody really knows how it all started in Hama. But it certainly didn't start in the 1980s. Long before, since 1963—when the Ba'th Party came to power—nobody accepted the party and its domination.

Syrians, my child, were not used to being silent in the face of oppression. Those before us would come out every few years and say they rejected what was happening. In the 1980s, that damned father said that all of Hama was Muslim Brotherhood even though his jails were filled with communists and Christians. The blood that soaked the ground was not only of Muslims. There isn't a home in Hama that doesn't have a prisoner or a martyr.

After that damned one, the father of the current damned one, was able to get control of the city, and kill whoever stood up to him at the time, he demolished and built as he pleased. He built entire new neighborhoods on top of mass graves as if nothing ever happened. It felt like the walls of homes were the only witnesses.

But what happened lives inside of all of us my child. Every hour and every day. Those who were orphaned don't suddenly forget that they are orphans, nor who it was who made them so.

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Residents of Hama are the only ones who knew what this regime was capable of. That's why we thought about it a hundred times before we went out into the streets. But even with all our fears, memories, and dripping blood, we could not remain silent.

We went out my child, and we protested. When we saw Assad's soldiers far away and not approaching us, we thought that maybe this time it would be different. Our hearts trembled inside as we wondered whether it was possible that we could finally get rid of this nightmare and no longer be afraid.

In the end, it turned out the damned one was letting us all come together, protest and sing in the streets, so he could squash us all together at once.

But from today until kingdom come, the million-man rallies of Hama and their videos will remain. It shows the word what Syria could have looked like when it belongs to us, not to Assad.

All of Hama participated in the protests. Some would go out and chant, others would organize them, and others would distribute food and drink to protesters. After the protests, we all got together to clean the streets. During Ramadan, we would even distribute food and sweets to Assad's soldiers during the time of breaking the fast. We felt like we were all united.

But the joy did not last. The army came in, and set up checkpoints inside of Hama. You could no longer reach a nearby neighborhood. Even with this my child, the protests did not stop. Instead of all of us gathering in the al-Assi Square, we started going out to protest in our individual neighborhoods. We chanted as loud as we could so that we would warm the heart of our Hama brothers in the nearby neighborhood, so that they would know that—despite everything—the revolution continues.

I never once asked my neighbours why they were going out to protests. But I knew deep down inside that they, like me, were dreaming that Assad would leave and that our children would have the life that we were all deprived of.

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In response to our protests, the shelling started. Artillery, tanks, and airplanes were shocking and awing the neighborhoods. But the protests kept happening. And I kept going to my store to sell potato chips and cola to the kids. I kept drinking tea with Abu Ahmad and Abu Adnan before we go to prayers or to protests.

Then, one time, at seven in the evening on a Wednesday, I closed the glass door of the store and placed a sign that read: Will return after evening prayers. I tightened my belt, dusted off my white shirt, and headed out to the mosque with our neighbour Abu Adnan.

Now every Syrian expects death at any moment. But it didn't occur to me at the time, not for a second, that my turn was coming that day. Thank God I died quickly. Shrapnel from a Hawn mortar went straight to my heart. Without feeling any pain, it sent me to where my father is.

My child, if you knew what my neighbours told me as they stood by my grave, you would know that the lucky ones among us are the dead. The day of my burial, I was searching for my kids. But I didn't hear any of them. I heard the voices of my four sisters. There were also a few voices I recognized as my neighbours. There were other voices I heard for the first time. I wish my kids had the chance that I didn't have—to attend their father's funeral and say farewell. But the shelling was shaking the ground that day. They wouldn't let the kids come.

When they took me out of the coffin to bury me, I could tell from the smell that I was in the neighborhood garden. I could also tell from the bird that I found next to me. My kids buried it there after it died, like me, under the shelling.

My God! My kids cried so much over the bird that day. I wonder what they did when I died. I wonder if they will always remember that their father died a martyr. Or maybe they won't know anything at all while they live under the rule of Hafiz, the son of Bashar al-Asad. I fear that they might be told what was registered in the government documents: that I was killed at the hands of a terrorist gang.

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## The Story of Jalal al-Lattuf

Jalal was buried in a public garden of Talbiseh.

Half of my family live outside the country. So when the shelling started in Talbiseh and my siblings and I joined the revolution, we begged our mother to leave the country. We wanted her to get away from the fear and pain that we were living. But she refused. She told us, "If I leave and then try to call you while the lines are down, I'll freak out. At least here I know that I am going to see your faces at the end of each day. I love you so much. I want to cook for you so you can stay warm and full. I want to wipe your faces when you cry from the pain."

She never once asked us to leave the country. She knew that the children she raised on love and dignity would not leave behind their country and people in such a state.

May my father's soul rest in piece. He was an officer in the army. But he resigned once he realized that the army, which he had dreamed that one day, it would liberate the land that Israel stole, was nothing but a personal army for Assad.

I wish my dad could have seen us in the revolution as we are protesting, and chanting against the regime. He would have been proud of his children who have nothing in this world other than this country and its people.

Syria is not like any other place. And Talbiseh; our Talbiseh! It is very small. But you know what? It is heaven on earth. I wouldn't have preferred to live or die anywhere else.

The first time we protested, we were dreaming of a country that belongs to us. Of a freedom that was wider than the sky. For me then, the sky seemed beautifully massive. And I held its image like I held my mother's face with me at all time.

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When the raids began, they would come after each one of us. But the sky seemed to be getting even bigger.

We felt that our voices were shaking the oppressive entity. We felt that we had to keep on singing so that perhaps one day our songs would bury the voice of the dictator underneath the ground and lift us up to the seventh heaven. This is why I started to sing.

I don't know why the beatings and massacres increased. Mom, why did the regime send our neighbors instead of its army? They came from the nearby village with tanks so they could crush us. After the first two incursions, we just couldn't take it anymore. So the village rose up and took up arms.

I kept singing the whole time. I kept believing that protests not arms were the basis of the revolution. I'd gather people around, set up the megaphones, and raise the independence flag atop the building near the mosque.

When a protest would start, I'd stand in front and chant for freedom. Mom, you know that we sang while being beaten and shelled? I thought that maybe our singing could be louder than the sounds of death that was coming from them. But death was everywhere, mom. Your son who was studying management so he could one day direct projects for the country was now running around chasing after the injured and martyred of this small town. Some I'd carry to get treated, others I'd bury. Some I'd take pictures of, and others I'd sing for. I saw so much death that I started wishing it upon myself. Maybe I can take someone else's place in death.

It wasn't long before death found me. When the tank came, I was fighting on the frontlines with my friends. We were preventing the army from entering Talbiseh. They knew we were there. Then: boom! The shell hit. With one tank shell, the house we were in exploded and the roof crashed down on us. When the tanks started moving, my friends ran to get me out from underneath the rubble. But they were too late.

Mom, I didn't die quickly. I died very slowly. But I was thinking of you, and my brothers, and my country. I didn't cry. With all the pain that

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came before death, and all the rubble that was covering my body, I was looking at the sky and declaring my faith. I though maybe you'd sing for me and that God would count me a martyr.

My little brother Muhammad, my calm sensitive brother. He kept standing in front of my corpse, wiping my face. Maybe I would feed the presence of someone next to me. I could then go on my peaceful journey to my new country in heaven. And you mom, you cried so much the day you saw me dead. I was screaming inside, "Mom, don't cry. Be proud that your son is a martyr." But you couldn't hear me.

They wraped my body and put me in a coffin. Then they prayed on me. They carried me to the Talbiseh garden, where they dug a grave for me. It was the same garden we had to pull the grass and flowers from so that we could bury the dead ever since an army check point was set up between us and our cemetery.

They didn't sing for me the day of my burial. The funeral never turned into a protest. Most of the young men were on the front lines. But they were chanting for me the entire time, "God is great! God is Great!" I could hear them on my way to my final home beneath the soil.

After a little while, my friends in Talbiseh gathered for a protest near my house that was destroyed. I would have cried if I still had eyes to see them. How few of Talbiseh's residents are left. Anyone who wasn't imprisoned is now dead. And anyone who didn't die is fighting on the front lines. No more than ten people gathered to remember me with the protest.

I didn't know that I would not be the last to die. I thought my death would spare my brothers of their deaths. But the tyrant who lives off our blood would not be satisfied until he saw us all dead; one after the other.

I died. My brother Muhammad followed me two months later. Then my uncles, Muhammad, Ahmad, and Omar, were next. And you mom, you were left all alone. You could neither leave Talbiseh nor stay in it.

Oh mom! You stayed in Talbiseh for our sake so that you could mend our wounds and warm us up when you felt we were cold. But you were left all alone once we died. There was nobody to wipe the tears off your face and hold you when the pain is breaking you inside.

إنّا حسان حسان، يعرفنا انه في ممكن كثير ما عرض غير ليهب ما استشهدت، تلقى مثل الكثير من الشهداء، إنّا فلسطيني سموري، عمري ٢٧ سنة زيت بالمخيم على شعر محمود ريش وريش وطني، جدي العلي ومولات حسان كنفاني وعلى حكي. سعتي عن فلسطين. كلّا حلمي وأنا صغير انه امير لاصب، كرة قدم مشهور والعام تقول هاد الاسم فلسطيني وبارح احمع فلسطين، وبها انه عننت مكان مثل المخيم. مخيم اميرك كان طبيعي يتبدل الاحلام وتغير وتتعد، يبس كل الاحلام كلها كان فيها فلسطين. لك صون يا بعدة تجتبر يكون عمك حلم انه تعبه ولد وتكلمين عن فلسطين وعلى قد ما كتبه احبنا فلسطيني كتب احب المخيم. عاد اليه يبي باره سحر وخصوصية، انه موجود على الخطوات وصوتك بقصد الريف المصطفى العتي، مخيم اميرك، اميرك مثل ما رسد مسجدي العتي، هو عظمة ابرار هيراثنا من كالكات ما كزين المسكن من مخيم اميرك، اني مثل طرف راغ يقدر يوصف عاد. لك انك جيتي للمصم وراسد المالك ونوس واوب خليل التانين والناوما وكتر عدلون الناس يبي جتوري بالمسرح وحيثين. لما انجنت بالانكار يا درست جودت نتجاري، يعبزين رحمت فدحت على المعهد العالي للتونن المسرحية بس، ما هيلت بوجهها ما بالقوي. الحارات والتغللت مسرح الحلي واكثريت وهملت واخرجت افعال مسرحية على قد المخيم. كان علمي وثقها اكون علمي مثل انتر من على يبي، يعني يعني انه كل نسخة اشغل مسرحية ومدنا وارضها بالمخيم. وما يدي امير مشهور وما يدي حد يعرف فيني. عادي يعني عادي. مثل انتر من مادي. نا بيلشت القوية سوريا ما عمتنا في. كناطينين كثير رعا علميان ودوما ودرستا ملغنا مع الناس. كنا طيبينين بشو طيبين. عمتنا فو اخواننا عمتنا ليهين البسجعية والعربية والهدالة عمتنا فون عم بويتوا. ودرساين دعا دم بديعا وحسن وحرستا وايد. دعنا دم ولادوية عمنا التاني الطيبين يبي اني حدا عنيه سوريا انسانية بالعام بيهمة. كنا طيبين. سامدنا اخواننا على. من يوم ٢٠١٥-٢٠١٦. يوم الانقاذ الى فلسطين في الكونن القوية. اني استشهدت فيه اسداني سميرة وبشار وقبس، ورمضان اميرك، الخليل اللغنية، على. رحمت فهو المجر جنين اميرك ٢٠١٢-٢٠١٢ واستشهدت فيه. رات ولدموج خيال الله ناس، بس طاعة مثل طيارة اميرك، حكي صين طيارها ايد يدي بعدة طيارة ونزوح ولامتخما بصفحات الارض وحوول الجيش، احدر علمين. اما ورس من الناس اننا كانت خيالي محسومة انما ما يدي انتر المخيم. ما كنت اتخيل خيالي بركان ناس، بيلت بالمخيم مع العتيرات من القصابين واقفنا كل شن قدر عليه ما كنا لادين نطلع من المخيم باره من انه كان في مفارح كثير لاطلع انبل الشهاب، يبي كان مفروض عليهم يلعوا اعتقلوا واستشهدوا تحت التعذيب. ولما انتد الصنار على المخيم اكثر من القليلة العامة والشبيحة. صبار شغلنا اكثر وما مركنا الجسم وما تركنا اهلنا كما ما يبين حمارين حصار من نظام وحصار من جوارنا كان في كتائب من امر وضعت عليها كثير واقفنا اكثر من مرة والكتائب الاحادية. بالتجديد كان مضموننا كاتبت هيراثنا كاتسطينيين بيشغلوا انا واعموم وعم نفسي وادروس وبارة وقتو ما داك. كانت خيالنا عمتنا، عمتنا الفت كانت مسجور حامي، عمتنا به يبي كتبه فيه من فغان يبي استشهدوا انما ما كتبه هيراثنا الفوت حلع. ما بمانا، ايو سمون صبيبي حيو انه اعتر حاله بيت حلو بشو عمتنا جاورته انه انما ما شت ولا يدي اميرك. اهل الشهاب على ماها ودفندا، وني اقباء كثير بحالي اسمنا ما بويتها. واذا عمتنا الفمن احرص بالمخيم. في كثير ناس فارقوا الحياة فداهن، عاد الناس كل واحد مات فيهن عنيه كتاي، كتنت امس انه انا بصحل مسؤولة انا حكي حكاية عاد الشهيد. الناس بس ترمع علمين. حكايات كثير تايقنا وضغطها احسها لولدي كل حكايا كانت اسطرة بعد نأتمنا. حكاية شهبه. ما عرت انه اطلع من المخيم، لطعت لانه لمخيم كان عبقف انعامه الاثيرة كنا عمتين حور، واكت احسن بوي الهالوي انجل. زوجتي وعد انه ترم اميرها امير ارفان. قبل ما اطلع من اديت صورتي، ساعة تديرو، صورتي الصان طرفه امي ووليبي وقريني انا وعد. بيني الصغير على المسطح يبي ظلت امر فيرمين وسهرا فيه انا عز. يا وصات منه. حازر مسجدة. نظرو اميرك، انا وقته على جنب وطلقا فردي، وني حركها انا عباد الله. زوجتي انه ساعة من البسجعية وطلعت. حيو اومد كرم انا ما ماتت وعد. طلعتنا انا كل رايه كيون خبيرنا، انا تحت تحت المخيم. انا كاتبت على كالم لا مكيه ما كان عني، غير اظم كل ما الفتش التهديب، بكت احلم اكثر واكثر واكثر واكثر. حتى صبح ايد انا الناس تونن من شان اميرك احدا اديم تعيبن من شأن اميرك. وعد انا ما ودمتلك حيا جز لانه رايه جوج يوم ورجع لتلقي، ما يعرف كيف يولد وين. بس يعرف انا راج لتلقي.

## The Story of Hassan Hassan

Hassan's family was informed of his death under prison torture on 17 December 2013. His body was never delivered to his family

I'm Hassan Hassan. I know that many people only became aware of me after I died. That's what happened with a lot of the martyrs.

I'm a twenty-seven-year-old Syrian Palestinian. I was raised in a Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, the political cartoons of Naji al-Ali, the stories of Ghassan Kanafani, and my grandmother's tales about Palestine. My dream as a child was to grow up and become a famous football player so that the world would recognize me and bring pride to Palestine. But growing up in the Yarmouk Refugee Camp, it was only natural for my dream to change several times. Though all my dreams had Palestine in them. I mean, even when one of us gets married, they dream of having kids to tell them about Palestine.

As much as I love Palestine, I loved the camp. It had its magic and charm, especially as it was located on the outskirts of Damascus. As my French friend put it, Yarmouk Camp is a piece of land out of a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel. No words are able to describe that place.

My love for writers such as Sa dallah Wannous, Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, and al-Maghout made me fall in love with theater. When I graduated from high school, I studied at a trade school. I then attended the Higher Institute for Theater Arts. But I wasn't accepted. I tried to go about it alone, and so I worked in theater, training, acting, and directing plays for the camp. I wanted to be a normal guy, nothing more. I was content working one play a year, and showing it to people in the camp. I wasn't looking to become famous.

When the revolution started in Syria, we acted normal. We went to Midan, Douma, and Harsata with the people. We saw our brothers

protesting and making clear and simple demands for freedom and justice. We saw them dying. The wounded in Dar'a, Homs, Harsata, and elsewhere needed blood. They needed blood and medicine.

We did the thing that anyone with a bit of humanity would have done. We helped our brothers as best as we could. We started on 15 May 2011, the day of the march to Palestine commemorating the Nakba. It was then that Israeli bullets killed my friends Abida, Bashar, and Qais. We kept trying, from then until the moment a Syrian Mig jet fired on the Yarmouk camp on 16 December 2012. That day, tens of people died and many more were injured. But this time it wasn't an Israeli jet. The pilot of the Mig was from the same country we live in. After that strike, tens of thousands of residents were displaced, and the Free Syrian Army came into the camp. My choices were limited. I didn't want to leave the camp. I couldn't imagine my life somewhere else. So I stayed with the very few others that did. Together, we did our best. Even though many of our friends left the camp, we weren't planning to do so.

The Syrian regime arrested some of the young guys who didn't leave. They later died under torture. When the Palestinian faction in charge of the camp partnered with regime thugs to tighten the siege on our camp, we had more work to do. We didn't leave the camp, and we didn't leave our families. We were living under two sieges: one from the regime on the outside, and one from the inside. The Free Syrian Army brigades inside the camp were pressuring us, and they arrested us more than once. The Islamist contingents were a big burden.

Our choices as activists were becoming more limited by the day. We were able to work in media, education, relief, and first aid. During that same time, I made a stand up comedy video about the siege of the Yarmouk camp, laughing at well-known Palestinian figures who—like the Syrian regime—were stating that we have foreign rebel fighters living in the camp to justify the siege and the starvation of its people. Then I made a short film titled *Coverage*. It was inspired by real events that happened to us as part of our situation inside the camp. I wrote and acted in the film. A friend of mine directed it. I called it *Coverage* because

there was only one place in the camp where I used to be able to catch mobile phone coverage. I used to go there to be able to call my friends who fled the camp and update them about our situation inside the camp. In the film, I mention how each person in our group of friends is now living in a different country and has been made a refugee again. The film ends when I get asked about my friend Ahmad Koussa. He was martyred at the hands of the regime.

I did not expect to die then. My friend Abu Samra once asked me while we were filming to consider myself dead. He wanted me to tell him what I would be feeling or what would I want to tell my friends. I quickly refused to do that exercise. I told him I wasn't dead, and that I didn't want to die. I buried most of the young men who died in the camp. There are many things that I haven't accomplished yet. While giving medical aid to people in the camp, many of them died in front of me. Every one of them had a story that I felt responsible for sharing with the world, and with people of the camp when they return to it. I memorized so many stories so I could tell my kids. Every martyr story is worth telling. When my friend insisted that I pictured myself dead, and asked what I would want to tell my friends, I said that if I die, I wouldn't want them to be sad about my death. I would want them to smile, and not be in such a shitty mood. They all laughed when I said that.

When I finally decided to leave the camp, I had to leave because the camp was on its last breath. We were dying together. I felt a responsibility towards my wife Wa'd. I had to get her to safety. Before I left the house, I shot about an hour of footage. I filmed the living room, my parent's room, and my and Wa'd's place. Our place was a small apartment over my parents' roof. It took me years to build. It was there that I spent so many nights with all my friends, some of who later became martyrs and others who have disappeared in the war.

It was a long way from the camps to Sbina, where the checkpoint of the Syrian regime is located. When I arrived to the checkpoint, they quickly asked me to park on the side. They then told my wife Wa'd that she could go on and that I would have to stay with them. She was scared

and didn't want to leave me. They told her not to worry because it was a routine check. They said I would be in interrogation for only an hour and then out sometime tomorrow or after.

I didn't say goodbye to Wa'd. I tried to reassure her that everything was going to be ok.

Two months after my arrest, I died under torture and interrogation. I had nothing to admit to my jailers. But they kept beating me. I had nothing inside of me but dreams. Every time the torture got worse, I dreamt more and more.

It's not right that people should die for their country. We should live for our country.

My body was never released to my family. Until today, some of my friends believe that my body parts were sold like what happened to others who died under torture by the regime. Others believe that I was buried in an open stretch of land where a mass grave of tortured political prisoners is located.

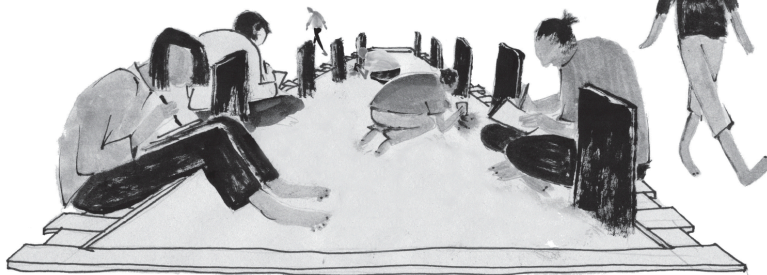
Wa'd, I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye to you at that checkpoint. Always remember what I told you there: "My love, there will come a day when we meet again. I don't know how or when. But I know that we will meet."

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The Performance Illustrated: Act 2

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



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