

A Long-wounded Land: Its Indigenous Orchids and Their Caretakers

Nour Shantout and Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll in conversation

8 March 2024

Khadija Von Zinnenburgh Carroll (KC) We're driving through the deepest arms-building pit of Austria, the area of Steiermark where Steyr Arms build weapons – a land full of military sites – and we're also driving under and through these salty mountains of the Salzkammergut where in the Second World War the Nazis hid a lot of the looted art, along with arms, inside the salt mines.

Nour Shantout (NS) The city of Vienna doesn't reflect its history. Some cities I walk in present their histories, or you see that something happened there. And so much has happened here, but you only feel it through the energy. The energy of this place is very heavy. I feel like there is a lot of hiding going on.

K C It reminds me of Dishar Barmaken's recent title in response to the news from Palestine, 'enjoy your war captain Tom, for your peace will be horrible'.¹

The Studio

N S I stopped going to the studio or producing artwork after 7 October 2023.

K C You told me, and I thought that was a really strong decision. What kind of refusal are you practising, as there are many nuances to this act when it is not 'blank'? It can be a refusal of certain invitations to represent, a refusal of contexts of symbolic and often instrumentalised representation, and, of course, a refusal of particular institutions and their funding sources.

N S For me, it is obvious that when there is something that is very big or violent, you need time to understand it and to grieve and feel what's going on. If we are doing politically engaged work and there is a genocide and siege in Gaza, I think one has to leave the studio and go to the streets and organise with other people in order to do a different kind of work. Some artists can work in the studio in times of crisis or revolution, it depends on the kind of work they do, but for me, it

¹ See 'dishar.barmaken's post on Instagram: www.instagram.com/p/C5HHdhdr9Mp/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D

didn't make any sense to do that. At the same time, I was actually writing a lot, which is very surprising. But writing is a different format.

K C It is interesting to think that both writing and embroidery can accompany the process of grieving in different moments and in different ways. You would almost assume that something manual and repetitive and slow would be more therapeutic?

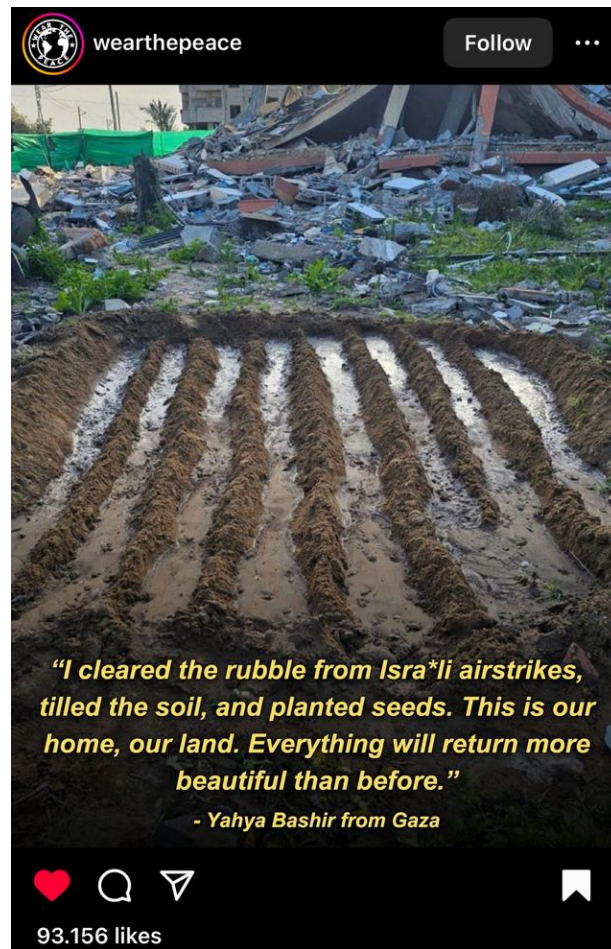
N S It was a specific kind of writing for me. For example, that I published my journals was a way of making meaning,² collectively, of this enormous grief that I am going through, and also a way of documenting it somehow – the moment, and how I deal with it with my friends, with my community, how we are organising regardless of the violence, censorship and racism we experience here in the diaspora. So, it was very helpful to write. But I also embroidered; I did finish an embroidery banner. It was stitched by the participants of a workshop I held with BDS Austria in 2022, 'Feminist Embroidery for an Ongoing Protest', and I put it together using the 'Managel' stitch. We raised it today at the Decolonize the 8th of March demonstration in Vienna that the Palestine Feminist Movement (PFM), which I am part of, organised together with different Global South communities, BIPOC-run groups and comrades in allyship. My work was very repetitive, I was putting the pieces together, so it is the only artwork I did during this period. I did not do most of the work in the studio, I did it on the way: on public transport, at the university (at work), or at home. Working on this piece was possible during the last months because it has to do with protest, it was meant to end up in a demonstration.



The embroidered banner (right, hand-embroidered cotton on cotton) on the Decolonise the 8th of March demonstration, Vienna, 8 March 2024

² See 'Nour Shantout – October 21–29, 2023', her diary for those days published in *Close Distance* <https://closedistance.org/diary-5-nour-shantout>

10 March 2024



from *Wear The Peace* Instagram page, source X: NourNaim88

NS I saw a very powerful image on Instagram, an image of a small piece of land in Gaza without people in it, but it tells the story of a man who went back to his destroyed home and cultivated the soil of his piece of land. His name is Yahya Bashir. I don't usually share violent images on social media – and there are lots of discussions about this at the moment. But also, after the Syrian Revolution, we were thinking about violent images and representation, and what it means to be confronted by them. On the one hand, we need these images for records and as archives, but, on the other, we should always question what they do to us when we share them, when people consume them. But then I saw this image of the land and how this man worked in the midst of the siege – because this is the season. His image shows what is happening in Palestine – sometimes, such an image can show this even *more* than the violent images. And this says a lot about indigenous people's connection to land.

Or, I think about the images of the 'mallow', a wild plant which became Gazans' only food due to the siege and forced hunger. Abboud, a child from Gaza made a few reels about foraging this plant.³ In one of them, he says: 'Give us *Khoubayzeh* (mallow), and take *Sumoud* (steadfastness).'

³ See 'abod_bt77's posts on Instagram
www.instagram.com/reel/C32whl8NULz/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA%3D%3D

Before social media, there were some kinds of ethics of representation in images. Now, everybody can document and there are no rules or ethics around how these images circulate afterwards, and I am often thinking about the families of the martyrs, the families of tortured Palestinian men who are filmed with no clothes on. There is no consent whatsoever, and we should be very careful with these visual documents. I also remember a woman standing in Rafah refugee camp and how she was looking into the camera, saying: 'Don't film us'. Palestinians should not have to share these horrific images of the genocide in order to convince the world to be in solidarity with them. I think the place of these images is the court, not social media.

K C To say 'don't take from Palestinians what we cannot control ourselves', I think that is really important because once images go out on social media, they take on a life of their own that you can no longer control. The debate is old, about whether one should use spectacular but unethical images – because you then continue consumption of that image.

N S Right; it is scary, actually. But people get used to it, and they shouldn't. A lot of times, Palestinians in Gaza are filming themselves because they are experiencing a genocide and they feel like nobody is listening. People there are filming and sharing, but it's about how we re-share these images as well; how we consume them... I am thinking a lot about this, how we should not normalise it.

K C The field in Palestine is also an image of the wretched earth which you can't really see from afar. You can't see the neglect spreading so quickly on a bit of land. Somehow we imagine that the land is not articulate about its own suffering, grief and neglect. About that image – 'I cleared the rubble from Israeli airstrikes, tiled the soil, and planted seeds...' – I was thinking about what you were saying about ideology here, and how the ideology of a cultural landscape is not evident unless you know it.

N S There are generations of the Palestinian diaspora that know this, without even having the right to visit their stolen land.

K C The land and plants do have a way of registering their own trauma and we just don't know how to read it – we are poor at being able to sense it. Just like that image of Yahya Bashir's piece of land shows the duty of care. Even these landscapes of war that we are talking about are traces of what happens on and in them.

I think a bomb was once dropped where my son goes to kindergarten. It's a great garden now, but there's also a hole in the ground, and you can, I think, feel it. It is a nice garden, but it has also clearly been 'excavated' by some extreme force.

N S And you choose this, there are people who choose to feel the land and people who have a different relation to land, a relation of control. I think indigenous people, in their practices, are one with the land, and while caring for the land, they don't have this power relation to it – for instance, owning it and treating it like property. But here in Austria, where we are, it is a different story, how we inhabit places.



Nour Shantout, *Walk in the landscape with Khadija*, 2024, courtesy of the artist

K C From playing in bomb craters to trying to force order with this monotony of forestry here – monoculture through farming. I was just connecting what you said about dark heritage/dark landscapes with the sad ways in which people have stopped their cultural practices of grieving here, by too quickly turning to this question of how war will be memorialised and how the economy will be repaired, how the land will be made whole and ‘productive’ again. All of that is also so discursive – rather than going and preparing your fields annually, staying with the cycle. Just as you said, this gesture of returning to the land in Palestine and preparing it for the next season should be the most celebrated gesture by the media, because it gestures to neither just the destruction nor the post-destruction horrors.

N S What I liked about the image is not its optimism. It’s like a cycle. Colonial violence didn’t start now. This has been happening for generations. When you have this relationship of care to land, it’s just what you *do*. If your child gets sick under the siege, you take care of them, you would try your best to take care of them under any circumstances... It’s just a cycle of life that continues. And for me, this is kind of taking care of a wounded land.

K C You are about to go back home. What shifts for you then from being at such a distance?

NS It's hard for me to say this, even though I am supposed to go to very difficult places such as Beirut and Damascus, where I am much closer to the violence, even geographically. Israel is constantly bombing Syria, every couple of days. It is bombing Lebanon, and I was supposed to go to both places. Being in a diaspora in a state of grief can sometimes be hard in a different way too. The violence there is easier to identify than here, because here there is *so* much gaslighting and censorship now against Palestinians and people of colour who are politically active. And sometimes this violence can be exercised by people who claim that they are on the right side of history. If we think about academic censorship, there are scholars I know who understand exactly what is going on in Palestine but say that they are scared to speak. *Their silence won't protect them*, because sooner or later they will also be affected by this censorship. This individualism that is happening here – which is related to capitalism as well – makes me scared. And these people are the people in power, but they expect the marginalised to do all the work for them, and then some years later, they will speak about us in their lectures. It is very interesting how the capitalist colonial machine affects knowledge-making. I am seeing this here, in Austria, very clearly: people who are in vulnerable positions are more vocal than people in power who are scared of losing this power. But for other people, the world has changed forever after Gaza. And this also relates to what you said about taking images and speaking *for*. I mean, you should speak *with* and against, not *for*.

So, in other words, this place is making me really tired. I am experiencing what the great Françoise Vergès calls the 'politics of exhaustion'.⁴ Even though I have a lot of support from my community in Vienna, things make more sense when I am closer to home. Also, being with comrades who understand the amount of grief one is dealing with is very important. Here, I don't have time to grieve.

KC Hmm. Why?

NS Because there is always something to do against this Western Empire [laughs]. I'm working against this narrative that supports Zionism and against all the censorship and what is going on... not just me, we are *all* in this together... My comrade said that here, in Austria, 'we don't have time to sit and grieve in peace as Palestinians'. And there, I can grieve in peace. But it is very hard as well, on a different level: knowing that I am in a very privileged position – I mean privilege has layers, the same as my life here. On the other hand, I see things *clearly* because I frame them, I know from where they come and I know the history of this place, I know why people behave in this way. Still, it is a lot to deal with when we are not able to stop a genocide of our people until this point: it is just a lot. I didn't expect to witness something like this in my lifetime – not to this extent.

⁴ See Françoise Vergès, 'On the Politics of Extraction, Exhaustion and Suffocation', *L'Internationale Online*, 8 November 2021 [https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/research/politics of life and death/195 on the politics of extraction exhaustion and suffocation/](https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/research/politics%20of%20life%20and%20death/195%20on%20the%20politics%20of%20extraction%20exhaustion%20and%20suffocation/)

I know that the road towards liberation is very violent and bloody, but I thought because of all the efforts of writing on the history of Palestine by Palestinians that it is impossible to witness a genocide at this moment in time... because I knew about all the massacres that happened before. But I didn't expect it to happen now, when people are watching live on their phones. This is actually the basis of my work, as someone who is interested in counter-archiving. I always think that if we work towards countering the dominant narrative, such atrocities won't happen again, as if our counter-history would protect and liberate us, and this is why Palestinians are really interested in archiving. It is a lot to see this killing of Palestinians continue for months and how the world lets this happen, giving complete impunity to Israel.

Stolen Doors

K C When you go back to the studio, do you have something that you feel has to be made now?

N S Yes. I was supposed to work on a commission/project that I postponed after 7 October. And I want to go back to it. I want to build a monument – actually, it's a dystopian monument. Its working title is *To Stolen Doors*. I want to build a monument in Turkey dedicated to stolen doors. It will be out of steel and it will carry some of the Syrian and Palestinian embroidery motifs I saw and documented in Beirut, Damascus and Istanbul. I would like to continue working on the sketches – this project actually fits this time. When I was at the Gate 27 residency in Istanbul, I saw many beautiful *fer forgé* doors while walking around in the city, and they reminded me of home, especially the fact that often these doors stay open, but the motifs on them looked very much like embroidery motifs. And I was also reminded of a personal story; it is from *years ago* and it happened in Syria: our door was stolen (and this is not a metaphor).

We have a summer house in Syria, in Khan Al-Shih, from where we can see Jabal Al-Shaykh (Mount Hermon). I always thought about this mountain as the only natural barrier between my grandparents and their homeland, it feels so close to this house. The Syrian regime army raided it and stole everything – the rebels, too, stole some of our belongings before, the small stuff they needed – but when the Syrian regime came, they stole *everything*, even the electricity cables from inside the walls. They really stormed the whole place. They left some artworks, which is interesting: the artworks were standing alone there. Anyway, they also stole our doors, metal doors.

K C They dismantled them? To melt them down?

N S Yes. And the doors of houses usually have a lot of metal, so they wanted to sell the metal. But they discovered a way to profit even more from them... people designed their doors *specifically* for their houses. So, people wanted to get these doors back even if they would have to pay for them. My grandfather told me that there was some kind of system to *track* these doors that were travelling from hand to hand and buy them back. He really tried to get our door back [laughs], but he couldn't. But some people *did*. They would track them down in villages kilometres away and buy them back – from middlemen who would publish about the doors on Facebook. And I



Nour Shantout, 'How Fabric Protects Our Home', Polaroid photograph, from *Searching for the New Dress*, Khan Al-Shih, 2022 ⁵

found this very interesting: how people have this connection to their doors, and how this story says a lot about what's going on also in Syria: to really, literally, steal someone's door – and then sell it back to them.

K C To sell you back your own door that they looted – the ironies of restitution!

N S Because doors are important. And then, there is the other aspect of doors being open all the time.

K C Or a threshold, too, between two places, inside and outside.

N S Yes. A place between two places. But it is very fluid, the opposite of a border. Doors carry a lot. So, I want to dedicate a monument to all the stolen doors. The situation in Syria and Palestine now is far from the usual situation, which is already very difficult. And to do this work in my studio could also connect me to *home* in a profound way.

⁵ See <https://nourshantout.com/Searching-for-the-New-Dress>

NS I am thinking of this in relation to Austria. Do you know Günther Anders? He was Hannah Arendt's husband for a while. He wrote a book on the anniversary of Hiroshima. It's called – I read it in a French translation – *Hiroshima ist überall / Hiroshima est partout*, and he says 'reconstruction is the destruction of destruction'.⁶ And I always think of this. He wrote it after his visit to Japan in August 1958. He went to Hiroshima and he saw that the place, the monuments, didn't reflect Hiroshima's history, that they were insufficient. And then, if we think about this question of monuments and cities in relation to Austria and its *memory culture*, there is a big problem of... of registering what has happened, but in a critical way, in order to really learn from history and work towards a *Never Again for Everyone*, and not just instrumentalising the 'guilt'. So, here they hide this history, but it is registered; I feel it when I walk in Vienna and now I feel that it is registered in the landscape, and then it affects the way people *move* in spaces politically and it affects all aspects of life, not only knowledge production.

If we think of this image of the land in Gaza – it is, actually, the other way around with people who are indigenous to the land. They are aware that they don't want to go back and rebuild Palestine as if nothing happened. They are aware of these processes. And then I was thinking about Austria. This affects the politics of Austria. Because people there, they didn't properly deal with their horrific history.

KC Clearly not. It's called 'the lie of victimhood'.

NS Victim liars?

KC *Opferlüge*, as in they lied (to themselves also) that they were victims of National Socialism, when really they were perpetrators and welcomed the annexation in 1938 with open arms in Vienna.

NS Yes, exactly.

KC Which I guess is something happening again, actually, as a kind of *syndrome*. One can see it happening.

NS Now?

KC In the clamouring claim of victimhood.

NS Austrian and Germans actually have something to do with it – I mean, directly with the colonisation of Palestine. So, I don't understand: who is the victim? They had better not bury their histories by standing on the wrong side of history again. And we can connect this to art-making, because we make images all the time, we produce images as well, we archive and we work towards a counter-memory. But there is always a problem of representation.

⁶ See Günther Anders, *Hiroshima ist überall*, Beck, Munich, 1982

K C We are back to the topic of refusal – is the refusal of the studio a refusal to make images? Or is it about shifting the practice to making political images rather than making images for the gallery? Rather than sitting embroidering a piece for a museum or gallery, making a banner for the protest?

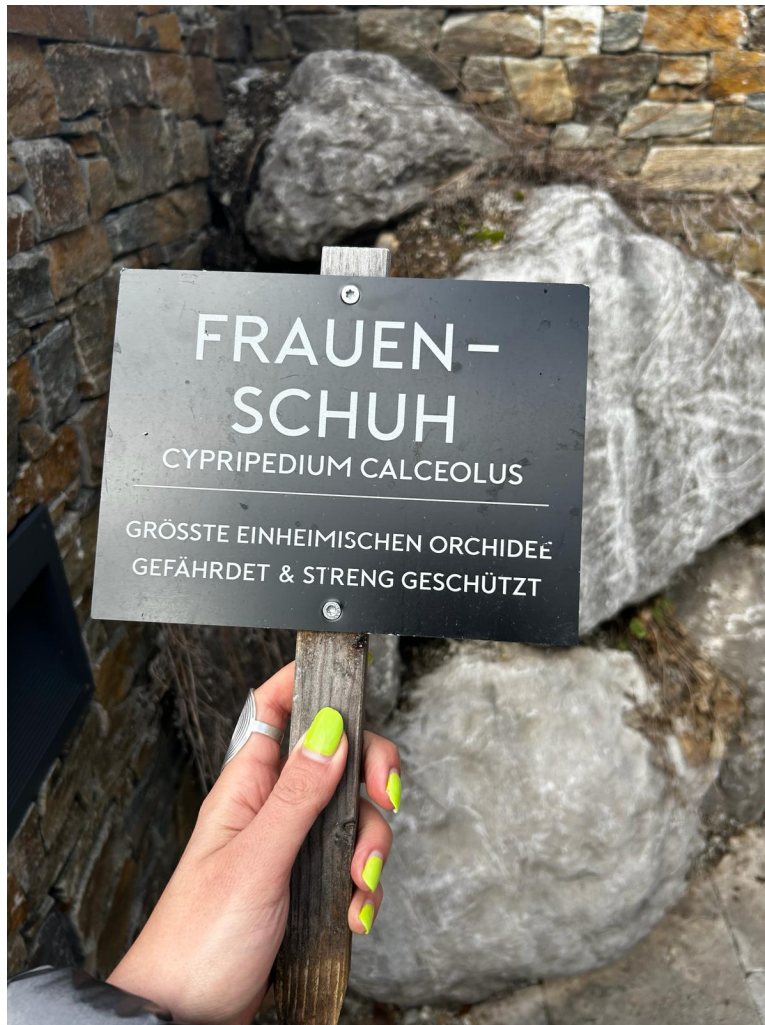
N S All images are political, I think... I cannot produce an artwork that goes to the museum when people are in the street to move *en masse* because of what is going on in occupied Palestine; if I am a politically engaged artist, I am in the streets when people are in the streets. It doesn't make sense to work in the studio, it just doesn't. And you saw in Germany, the amount of cancellations and censorship, together with the poorly produced art that is acceptable for the institutions, that really shows the problem of 'relational aesthetics', and the limitations of the art space, institutions and universities.⁷

Postcolonial theory is *always* rooted in practice. It is changing and it is taught in universities all over the world, because people of the Global South – *colonised and indigenous people* – did the work, not because institutions want to open their doors to theories that criticise all their knowledge production. Anti-colonial theory is always connected to the struggles of the people, it is militant, it emerges from the prison and the streets. It is theory for practice. But when the white man decides to bring his victims to academia, when they bring us in as victims, we are just tokenised, we don't have a space. We do the research, we do the fieldwork, we don't make theory; rather, they apply their theories to us and claim universality. They extract resources and knowledge from our land and try to separate it from practice. Many of the scholars who are silent about Palestine right now (over)quote Edward Said in their lectures, and have the anti/de/postcolonial theory stamp shamelessly in their bios. The refusal has to do with this.

The Indigenous Orchids All Around

K C So, what just happened: there was an interruption in our conversation during which we're standing beside a restaurant and my son brings a sign he has picked from the garden that says 'Frauen Schuh / *Cypripedium Calceolus* / Größte Einheimischen Orchidee / Gefährdet & Streng Geschützt'. He cannot read yet, but the sign fits uncannily well with our conversation. It translates the colloquial name for this plant called 'Women's Shoe', 'the largest indigenous orchid – endangered and strictly protected'. It's a little sign that's used to identify botanical specimens, and there's a small subtitle in Latin with the binomial class, the description that is regulated in the regimented language of scientific conservation. But the little plant that my son shows us is struggling.

⁷ See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002



Nour Shantout, *Hand with sign*, Ödensee, 2024, courtesy of the artist

NS And I did not realise what was written on the sign.

KC Just as we were saying that we have trouble reading the landscape for what it is, the two of us are theorising about orchids, and then we don't even realise when this largest indigenous orchid is dying next to us, struggling in harsh conditions. The orchids are so clever they can even get the humans to make signage to represent and translate for them. I'm thinking of Michael Pollan's argument about the agency of plants as they manipulate humans based on their desires, for beauty in the case of orchids and tulips.⁸

NS It could be a theatre piece, it's so absurd. It's beautiful though. Maybe it's not by chance we had this conversation in this place.

KC Yes, the orchids led us here. Look at all those trees that fell off the mountains up there, they're just like hanging out – can you see that? A pile that just crashed on that rock, it just looks like there's a storm that pushed a lot of trees down the hill there.

⁸ See Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*, Random House, 2001



Nour Shantout, *Desert Flowers*, 2024, image courtesy of the artist

NS Ah, yes, yes, I see, but some survived. If we have another conversation in a different place, it would be completely different. This is the only place where we could have this conversation in this way. Because it is not a neutral place.

KC I remembered that when we were driving, we were talking about our connections to orchids, and we were talking about how there are orchids in all different countries. They grow in so many different places. I don't know if I said it, but what I always liked about orchids was that they don't need earth, they don't need to root themselves; they are actually air plants in the way that they are migratory because they just need to take their nutrients from the air that's around them.

NS Yes, but the roots are fascinating, how they are very present in the air. But also the relation between the roots and radicalism interests me. Change comes from the roots, right? But orchids are so fragile and delicate at the same time. I think about this when I care for them. They are like an anarchist plant. If you care for them, you don't find it difficult, but every time I ask my friends to care for them they really struggle. It is the only plant I have that struggles when I travel. It requires a specific kind of care.

K C Orchids have a reputation for being precious or dramatic. In German there is a saying about obscure disciplines, they are called *orchideenfaecher*, orchid areas – fragile and weird and unmanageable for the majority. Maybe because they need a rhythmic, constant care.

N S By the way, the coffee really helped my orchids – I think I told you – they are blooming because I put some coffee in their pots.

K C Ah, the coffee in the orchid diet is from my mother, she is the best orchid carer of all time. Mine are struggling here in Austria, but ours in Australia are so full of life. Is there a Palestinian orchid?

N S I have read that there are Palestinian orchids. A lot of them became threatened after the colonisation of Palestine because they have faced colonial violence (replacement of indigenous plants, settlement building, etc) on top of other ecological catastrophes, such as climate change and urbanisation.⁹ But I don't know if this is just about Palestinian orchids. As we were discussing some time ago, the so-called 'orchid fever', a period in the nineteenth century – specifically, the Victorian era – is known for its obsession with this plant. There were many exploration voyages, with the aim of transporting rare species of orchids to Europe.

K C There are so many different species. What I really like are the thriving indigenous orchids in trees. I've seen them in Columbia and Malaysia, for example. And then, there are these overbred houseplants that are struggling in European supermarkets to represent the exotic. This whole spectrum are all orchids, and they all retain this dignified beauty despite that altered houseplant state. And then I was just thinking about how orchids are doing in Gaza – I'm sure there are some orchids there, struggling to survive.

Nour Shantout is an artist, researcher and educator. She was born in Damascus and has been based in Vienna since 2015. She is currently pursuing her Doctorate of Philosophy at the Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien, where she completed her Diploma of Fine Arts (Textual Sculpture) in 2020. She uses Palestinian embroidery to create contemporary works that reflect social and political challenges of the region, and are situated in continuity with the political application of embroidery, a practice that emerged out of the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Her work centres around themes of subjugated heritage, counter-memory and history, labour and alienation, from a post-colonial feminist perspective.

Khadija Von Zinnenburg Carroll is an Editor of *Third Text*

⁹ See Banan Al-Sheikh and Mazin B Qumsiyeh, *Imperiled Ecosystems in Palestine: Rare Plants as Indicators*. Dominic DiPaolo & John Vilella Imperiled: The Encyclopedia of Conservation", Reference Module in Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, Elsevier, 2021, pp 1–7; see <https://www.palestinature.org/research/157.-Rare-plants-WB.pdf>