

# Through the Algorithm: Empire, Power and World-Making in Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's 'If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust' at Art Institute Chicago

Leena Aboutaleb

How must Palestinians necessarily be written in order to be 'listened to?'

Fargo Tbakhi <sup>1</sup>

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Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, 'If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust', Art Institute Chicago, 31 July 2021 – 3 January 2022

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## I Rendering Methodologies

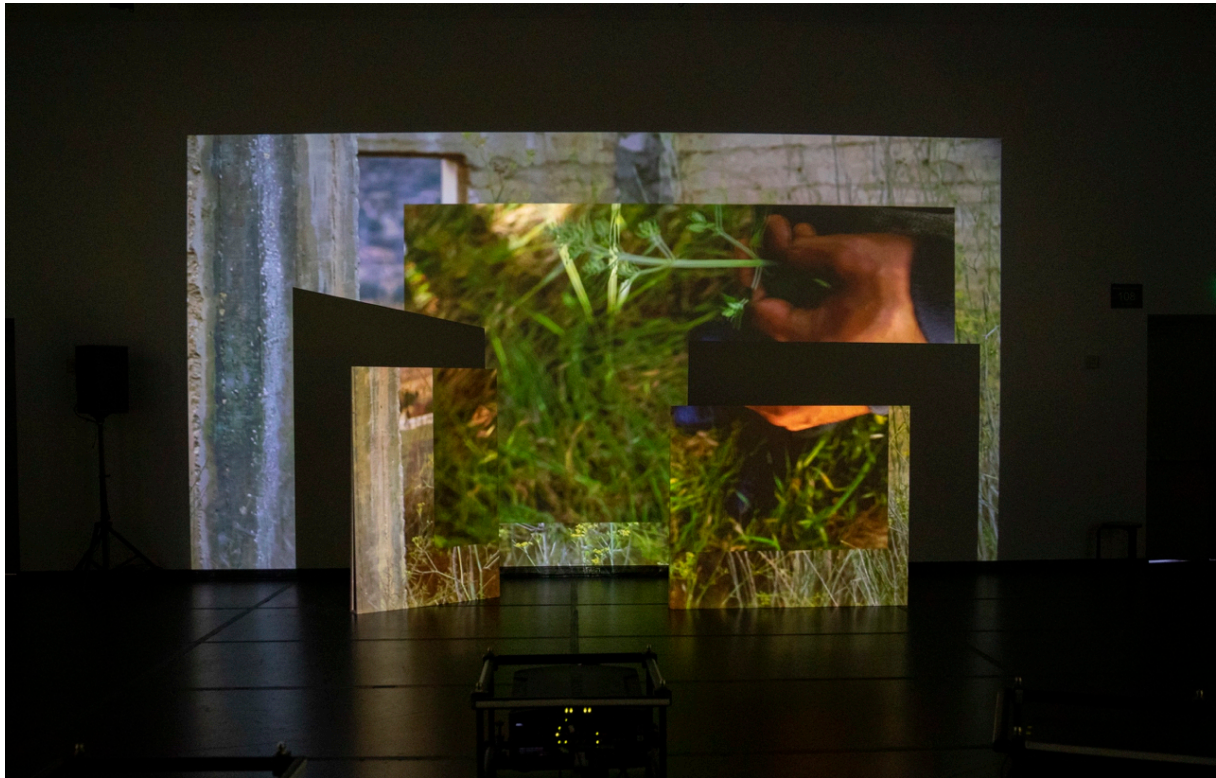
'If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust' at the Art Institute Chicago was Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's first exhibition in a major, canonical US institution. As the curators at the Art Institute describe, 'the interconnected works critically examine how bodies, images, language, memories, and narratives exist within contemporary archives, media, and institutions. Often reflecting on ideas of amnesia, erasure, and return within the Palestinian condition, the artists see these artworks as potential tools for the politically oppressed to become unbound from colonial systems.'<sup>2</sup>

*Oh shining star testify* (2019–21) uses security footage, which was released only during a court injunction but then circulated online (although it was removed later), of the murder of Yusuf Shawamreh, a fourteen-year-old Palestinian, by Israeli forces after he crossed the 'separation fence' to pick *akub*, an edible plant considered to be a delicacy in Palestinian cuisine. Layered recordings and a fragmented script – sampled from online recordings of protests, daily lives, moments of violence against Palestinians – weave this piece together, inbetween images of flora and foraging, with tender mentions of Palestinian lives and daily goings-on. It leads the audience

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<sup>1</sup> Fargo Tbakhi, 'Being Listened To: On Philip Metres' SHRAPNEL MAPS, Colonialism, and the Violence of Conversation', *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, #262, Fall 2020 [www.poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter/262-fall-2020](http://www.poetryproject.org/publications/newsletter/262-fall-2020)

<sup>2</sup> See Art Institute Chicago, *If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust*, 2021 [www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust](http://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust)



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2016–2021, three channel video, 2 channel sound and sub-woofer, wooden boards (variable size), installation view, courtesy of the artists

to consider ‘forms of entanglement between the destruction of bodies and the erasure of images, and the conditions under which these same bodies and images might once again reappear’.<sup>3</sup> In this work, the questions of what is seen and unseen, what are we made to witness, what we cannot turn away from, hold the audience at a grieving standstill. *Oh shining star testify* situates one in Palestine, among the natural landscape and the man-made brutality.

*At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other* (2019–2021) connects fragments of Edward Said’s *After the Last Sky* to interrogate, problematise and ask what it means to be rendered invisible, illegal and erased, all within the ‘amnesiac archive’.<sup>4</sup> Contextualised in Said’s statement, ‘And so our need for a new consciousness at those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other’,<sup>5</sup> the work is situated in a darkened room with projectors. *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other* questions what it means to be an ‘illegal’ person, performed by avatars constructed from images of people who partook in the Great March of Return in Gaza, an area that has been under siege, in violation of international law, since 2007.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh shining star testify*, 2019–2021 <https://baselandruanne.com/Oh-shining-star-testify>

<sup>4</sup> See the text for the exhibition on the Art Institute Chicago website: ‘If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust’, 2021 [www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust](http://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust)

<sup>5</sup> Edward W Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p 159

<sup>6</sup> See ‘UN experts say Israel’s blockade of Gaza illegal’, Reuters.com, 13 September 2011 [www.reuters.com/article/us-un-gaza-rights-idUSTRE78C59R20110913](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-gaza-rights-idUSTRE78C59R20110913)



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other*, 2019–2021, video still, four channel channel video, two-channel sound, 10'54, wooden boards (variable size), live performance (video, vocals, sound), courtesy of the artists

This piece is wrought by ‘fugitivity, fragility, and futurity’.<sup>7</sup> The lilac landscape of the evening and the low-hanging clouds are juxtaposed against the jerky movements of the avatars before nightfall divines: ‘Whenever we try to narrate ourselves / we appear as dislocations in their discourse / we appear as dislocations / we emerge as effects / errata / counternarratives’.<sup>8</sup>

The Art Institute adds in:

Extracted from this archive, *Once an artist, now just a tool* (2021) was commissioned by the Art Institute and critiques how museums perpetuate the legacies of the colonial apparatus. In repositioning these sampled fragments, the artists assert language’s capacity to challenge systems and histories of power, critically pointing to the shifts that occur between events and discourse.

The exhibition’s visceral and material narratives raise timely and urgent questions about the ways history is constructed and continually obliterated – encouraging viewers to imagine the potential futures that emerge from the immersive sonic and visual environment.<sup>9</sup>

The artists draw from multiple sources – security footage, recordings and renderings – in the effort to conjure, summon or represent ‘uncounted bodies’ that ‘counter their own erasures,

<sup>7</sup> Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, ‘At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade into Each Other’, 2020, *e-flux Journal*, issue 106, February 2020 [www.e-flux.com/journal/106/313855/at-those-terrifying-frontiers-where-the-existence-and-disappearance-of-people-fade-into-each-other/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/106/313855/at-those-terrifying-frontiers-where-the-existence-and-disappearance-of-people-fade-into-each-other/)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> See Art Institute Chicago, *If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust*, 2021 [www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust](http://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9712/if-only-this-mountain-between-us-could-be-ground-to-dust)



appearing on a street, on a link or on a feed'.<sup>10</sup> The avatars created are performed and embodied by the artists themselves, or are at times a rendering of low-resolution images where the software itself fills in the 'gaps' of the missing data through adding glitches, scars, wounds or incomplete faces to those documented. A central part of the work, Abou-Rahme says, is precisely how Pinscreen, the mobile phone app, renders the missing data, unintentionally speaking to the 'violence in the images used to represent us'.<sup>11</sup>

This is not the first time that Abbas and Abou-Rahme have used digital rendering to synthesise images in their projects. They first worked with avatars, albeit human ones, in their three-part work, *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012–2015). *Part 1* of *The Incidental Insurgents* works on a search that 'begins with four seemingly disparate coordinates' – of Victor Serge and his contemporaries in 1910s Paris, Abu Jildeh and Arameet and their bandit gang rebelling against the British and Palestinian elite in 1930s Palestine, along with Roberto Bolaño's novel *The Savage Detectives*, and the artists themselves.

Abu Jildeh and Saleh Arameet were Palestinian revolutionary figures during the British Mandate period in Palestine. Originally villagers, the two argued that bourgeois Palestinians and colonial British figures were one and the same, both uncaring of the broader fate of Palestine



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 1: The Part About the Bandits*, 2012–2015, detail of Chapter 1: documents, images, personal items, desks, chairs, table, stools, office cabinet, storage boxes, speakers, two record players, vinyls, sound of vinyl crackle, desktop computer with 35'51" video on loop, courtesy of the artists

<sup>10</sup> Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh shining star testify*, 2019–2021  
<https://baselandrouanne.com/Oh-shining-star-testify>

<sup>11</sup> From a conversation with Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme in 2021

and only acknowledging material and economic realities as primary. Acting as Robin Hood figures, they were later captured by the British in Nablus on 15 April 1934 and were executed in 1936, shortly before the Palestinian revolution. Victor Serge, an anarchist who joined the Bolsheviks in 1919 and fought in the siege of Petrograd, began the Brussels Revolutionary Gang in 1910s Paris with his friends. Members of his gang (Raymond Callemin, André Soudy and Stephen Monier) were sentenced to death by guillotine on 21 April 1913, and Serge received five years of solitary confinement. Abbas and Abou-Rahme use Serge's writings, alongside manifestos, memoirs, testimonies and text written by the artists, throughout *Incidental Insurgents* when creating a new political language and imagining.

*Incidental Insurgents* looks 'at the resonance between the inspiring, bizarre and sometimes tragic stories of these diverse bandits, the outsider rebel par excellence, often rewritten as mere criminals (or naively romanticised as wayward figures) and excluded from the narrative of revolutionary struggle'.<sup>12</sup> The artists write:

We only know that there are no stars shining in that space / A disproportionate ocean of emptiness. / But are we really sure that it is only a void... / If they existed would they be visible... / At the tipping point or the point of foreclosure... / In the midst of the not yet material or the already determined... / Our next of kin: snipers, country boys who smash up cheap cafes... / there / was / no doubt it / all they could be / were outlaws... / in quest of some impossible / new dignity... / a story of lost poets / lost works / no one has heard of / in the middle of a landscape / a real or imaginary place / bleached by the sun / and lost in...<sup>13</sup>

*Part 2: Unforgiving Years*, and *Part 3: When the fall of the dictionary leaves all words lying in the street*, continue to unfold the story and imaginary and political language. *Part 2*, picking up where the artists left off with the actors, 'traces the metamorphosis of these incidental figures (Serge, Bolaño, the artist themselves) or the resonance of their final gestures years after they have been killed (Bonnot Gang, Abu Jildeh), following the figures or their echo to strange places and obscure positions'.<sup>14</sup> *Part 3* continues with text as a being, a body, where the artists successfully utilise it as a pathway to an alternative world filled in both reality and imagination, materiality and possibilities. '[O]bsession gives way to hallucination',<sup>15</sup> as the characters, places and time itself recedes, leaving the ache and unfulfilled desire for another way of being.

*May Amnesia Never Kiss Us On The Mouth*, a decade-long project, also utilises the application with their avatars, although now AI-rendered, beginning with '*Part 1: Postscript: after everything is extracted*', focusing on the grief and loss in Palestine and how that was further compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic. As there is technically no Palestinian state, the Israeli colonial regime

<sup>12</sup> Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 2: Unforgiving Years*, 2012–2015 <https://baselandruanne.com/The-Incidental-Insurgents-Unforgiving-Years>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

locked down the entirety of the Palestinian territories, fully controlling movement and access. This included Palestinians receiving vaccines later than Israelis, and only having a limited option of what was available to them. Abou-Rahme has said that during the pandemic (when the two artists were in New York City) ‘it was intense to feel that the world had become like Palestine and there was no escape’.<sup>16</sup>

In *Postscript*, the two artists create a FaceTime-like simulation with a notepad of fragmented text in Arabic and English.

‘Every day we mourn another death’, says one text. ‘We mourn the disappearing land, the severed horizon. We mourn the deterioration of our bodies.’

‘We are *in* the negative / (no) / we *are* the negative / How easily we mutate / mutate and mourn / how many times have *I* died / how many times have *we* died / too many’, reads another.

Under the heading ‘New York’, one text reads: ‘This country is on fire. Some things need to burn.’ Another, headed ‘Palestine,’ refers to the violence of occupation: ‘I know the land is scorched.’<sup>17</sup>

In this work, the two artists examine the ways in which persons bear witness to experiences of violence, loss, displacement and forced migration, through collected videos of communities of the Mashriq singing, dancing and gathering following the revolutions in 2011 across the Arab world. The artists’ efforts lay in maintaining footage of resistance where communities ‘lay claim’ on their lives, in being alive.

The artists, over the course of their impressive resume, have continued to raise the question: what of those forcefully made invisible? The usage of rendering in their artistic process is striking, examining the consequences of defining and seeing people as ‘illegal’ or ‘invisible’. The sourcing of their material, derived from CCTV cameras, individual recordings and the artists themselves is also intriguing. What does it mean to scrounge for glitched footage or low-resolution recordings? What does the choice of that imply in the intention and materiality of their work?

Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work, for the most part, has not contained faces. However, *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other* works with literal AI-avatars. Created by Pinscreen’s algorithm, the avatars propose an uncanny field between something real and unreal. The artists state that the decision to work with avatars came from the idea of ‘becoming other, to mutate and shapeshift between positions, characters,

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<sup>16</sup> See Brian Boucher, *How a Palestinian Artist Duo’s Decade-Long Project About Mourning and Memory Was Transformed by the Pandemic* (2020), [artnet.com](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/basel-abbas-ruanne-abou-rahme-dia-moma-1931308), 14 December 2020  
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/basel-abbas-ruanne-abou-rahme-dia-moma-1931308>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

space and time'.<sup>18</sup> Through this transformation, they could let go of certain forms of subjectivity and become anonymous. *At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other* utilises avatars for two primary reasons. It is, at once, an attempt to rupture the imposed and impossible distance between Ramallah (in the occupied West Bank) and Gaza, so as to reflect the absurdity of being so close, yet knowing that neither one can reach the other. The second part stems from thinking on the impossibilities of the physical conditions in which Palestinians there are being asked to live, propelling the question 'if the physical conditions are this impossible, what does it mean to mutate into a virtual space?'<sup>19</sup>

Using Pinscreen, the artists input photographs of the Great March, contemplating the ways it was being represented and the images being selected. Cropping the photos into the software, with the knowledge that the images would become a synthesis of both them and the protesters, they create a space and body of neither one nor the other. As such, none of the avatars have the likeness of the original images, or of Abbas and Abou-Rahme themselves.

Basel Abbas describes the question behind this synthesis as asking that within this virtual space, how can we embody one another in the situation of complete disembodiment?<sup>20</sup> While there is no artistic interference with regard to the aesthetics, there is a synthesis between the performer and what the software creates. When one performs on the application, thus activating an embodiment, the software renders the avatar into a merging between oneself and the AI rendering. The avatars are at once the artists, the collective, and yet no one at all. Furthermore, the avatars not being identifiable as a specific person allows for one to escape the surveillance of images by becoming a mutating, shapeshifting being.

When putting the images into the software, the application began to render glitches, inadvertently bringing forth the otherwise invisible violence of the algorithm and meta-data – unintentionally engaging in the way the photographs are consumed by the public, in an almost sickly manner as a form of representation. Abbas and Abou-Rahme have mentioned that, conceptually, they thought of the avatar as the ability to be other and 'to let go of a certain kind of subjectivity, as an artist and as a political act: to be anonymous, to morph, to take-up, to be liquid, to not be able to be captured'.<sup>21</sup>

Abbas and Abou-Rahme talk about this, saying that it felt as if they would be erasing a layer of violence – not the literal, material violence but the invisibility which says 'we may look whole but we are broken'.<sup>22</sup> So what happens when one brings these forms of invisibilities out into the light? How is it that we survive and generate possibilities within these conditions – not in spite of or despite, as Palestinians are in a context of continual trauma, but 'within' the conditions.

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<sup>18</sup> From a conversation with Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme in 2021

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

The point is to transcend, speaking to both possibilities and erasures.<sup>23</sup>

In their fragmenting of text from Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*, Abbas and Abou-Rahme speak to what it means to be Palestinian, a people who are constantly under threat, with one's very existence continuously being questioned and threatened. How these conditions and identifications generate the experience of trauma and the impact on the subconscious creates a continued existential question. The avatar visualises this and goes beyond the situation of and in Palestine to think about 'illegal' bodies in general, asking who decides who is 'illegal' and what does this mean.

The voices in *At those terrifying frontiers* lend to this, as Abbas and Abou-Rahme begin to sing, auto-tuned, in Arabic to Said's text. The artists usually work, they have said, with 'text as body, essentially an element in itself with a body, a presence, a rhythm'<sup>24</sup> – so, what, in this instance, if the avatars speak? When one embodies the avatar, Abbas and Abou-Rahme are performing it through its limitations. Embodiment is an important aspect of this work – living and resisting this moment by embodying it.

Utilising auto-tune as a superpower in the space of both the real and the unreal, created by the avatars and the artists' embodiment, can compel within the negative space, not only to survive but actually thrive and be empowered. Within the break, within the scar, we will be who we are. We will use our superpowers within the broken thing.<sup>25</sup>



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 2: Unforgiving Years*, 2012–2015, video still, Chapter 4: single channel HD video and 2 channel sound + sub woofer 6' 20", courtesy of the artists

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> I paraphrase here from my conversation with the artists in 2021



## II Present Speculative

Palestine. A scorched land. Some things need to burn. Violence, brutality, the way they beat on lungs demanding for one to either become iron or succumb. There is no place to ask what is fair.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme ask, 'When did we become a people? When did we stop being a people?'<sup>26</sup> The land is Palestine, Palestine is the land. How is the future conceived? Does the future have a future?

Fargo Tbakhi, in the Poetry Project's online newsletter in 2020, writes in response to a flippant joke made by the poet Philip Metres at an online reading: 'The joke's magic makes me into museum exhibit, archival material, a signifier without any corporeal sign, legible only as the ways I am written (and, importantly, read) by the dutiful, good subjects of the empire itself. I am to be chosen; I am to be written-about.'<sup>27</sup> But that is not what Abbas and Abou-Rahme do – there is no simple will-bending or permission for othering. In their projects, the pair create a counter-archive, positing Palestinians as alive *within*<sup>28</sup> the violence endured and suffered in the last eighty-something years.

It is negligent to believe that Palestinians have no understanding of our temporalities. We understand that within the empire, we are seen as textual, only alive to outsiders in archaic and semi-holy ink, or as a non-existent yet violent entity, in a state of 'thingification' where we are imagined as an empty vessel, not fully human, an ontological zero.<sup>29</sup>

As Palestinians we are seen as bogeymen slinking along Tel Aviv's corridors, as if we are only the ghosts haunting a city built on razed villages. We are made to become violent, knowingly cruel. We burn tires, throw stones, protest against demolitions and demand a material right of return. In it, we are fictionalised as terrorists, and yet Frantz Fanon's statement that 'decolonization is always a violent phenomenon'<sup>30</sup> rings out in the clashes.

I maintain, nonetheless, that humanity cannot be taken or stolen. In the proclamation of existence, such as Tbakhi's above, we reclaim a part of our power – the more difficult part of this, however, is the complication of our humanity. Chaun-Rong Yeh describes how Fanon posits that humanity is experienced relationally, in a paradoxical mode of 'being simultaneously relative and absolute',<sup>31</sup> entangled in cognition and the sense of human belonging.<sup>32</sup>

Palestinians know and understand themselves as having humanity, but we are also acutely aware of our dehumanisation within the imperial context. We feel the ramifications of this theft,

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<sup>26</sup> Basel Abbas, Ruanne Abou-Rahme, 'At those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of people fade into each other', op cit

<sup>27</sup> Fargo Tbakhi, 'Being Listened To: On Philip Metres' SHRAPNEL MAPS, Colonialism, and the Violence of Conversation', op cit

<sup>28</sup> Despite. In spite of. Within.

<sup>29</sup> See Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Joan Pinkham, trans, New York University Press, 1950, p 32

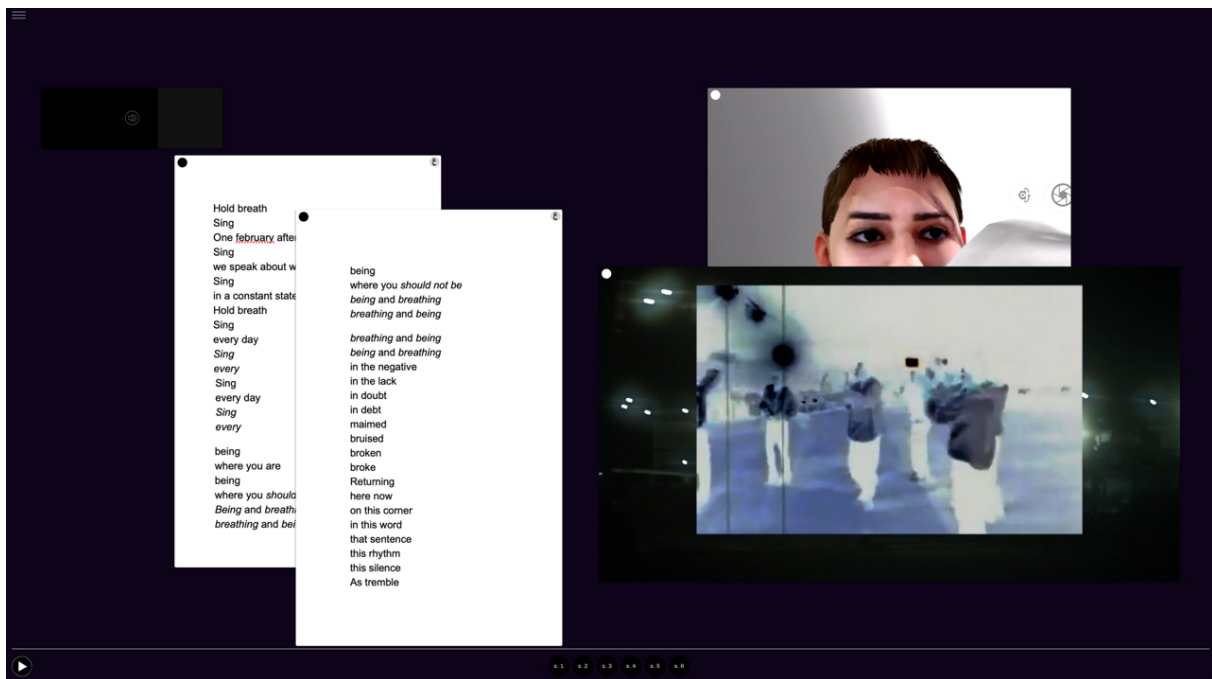
<sup>30</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York, 1963 [1961], p 35

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> See Chuan-Rong Yeh, 'Existential Thoughts in Fanon's Postcolonialism Discourse', *Policy Futures in Education*, vol 11 no 2, April 2013, p 208

wherein the experience of losing resources, access and dignity in dehumanisation creates a complication in how we articulate and engage with/in our realities and our humanity.<sup>33</sup> When Palestinians create art and demand space for our narratives and realities, we *pull* a material shift into reality. It is the refusal to be chosen and written-about. It is a declaration of intent and life.

Nevertheless, it is clear to any historiographer that the current occupation is not the first one that Palestinians have lived through. Palestinians have been, seemingly eternally, forcibly made into beings of near-repetition with the intrinsically simple human demand for dignity. It is not the historical empires, however, which have precedence with the particular contemporary form(s) of dehumanisation – the current, specific experience of dehumanisation is unique to the Zionist project of settler-colonialism and ethnic cleansing, and must be understood as such. It should be noted, also, that the idea of a coherent national community of Palestinians is an ahistorical and modern one, produced through the nationalistic logic of the contemporary nation-state project.



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth, Part 1: Postscript: after everything is extracted* (ongoing), video still, courtesy of the artists

### III Who Makes Your Violence?

N A Mansour critiques Abbas and Abou-Rahme's Art Institute exhibition in an online review, opening with the line: 'Maybe I just have to resign myself to the fact that some Palestinian art is

<sup>33</sup> I wish to acknowledge my friend Summer Farah for making this point so clearly in a personal conversation

not made for me, a Palestinian.’ The critique carries on to argue that ‘As a Palestinian, I don’t need to see these actions [the avatars] mimicked in our art when much of our time is spent trying to get the outside world to notice our oppression in real time... The piece [*At those terrifying frontiers*] reproduces that same violence wielded against Palestinians by the Israeli government and military, but this time allegedly in the name of pro-Palestinian advocacy.’<sup>34</sup>

What is particularly interesting in this critique is the idea that it posits: that there is a genre of Palestinian art that does not ‘traumatise’ Palestinians, as if those who live in continual violence are somehow spared from all-encompassing oppression. It is not that there are no works that indulge in exploitation, shock value, etc, but that Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work does not fall into that category. The author’s delineation of the audience, the assertion that one person’s discomfort with the work means all Palestinians will be uncomfortable, thus casting herself as a representative of a totalising viewpoint for Palestinians so as to judge which works are for us and which are not is jarring.

If we, as Palestinians, only write in futurity in a utopic sense – the temporality wherein modes such as joy are inscribed, entrenched so heavily in a living freedom – then, to some degree, we dismiss the present. The present tense we engender is one to brush off or repudiate, in Mansour’s claim. By arguing that the exhibition caters to an ‘ignorant audience’, Mansour dismisses the agency of Palestinians. In dismissing the present reality, the fullness of Palestinian lives is flattened; we are asked to perform in predetermined spaces that do not *hurt*. The crux of this request, however, is that we *are* hurt, and this cannot be undone or unmade by dismissing our recorded reality.

There are those of us who write violence as *its* intended.<sup>35</sup> Those who write ‘alternative’ histories.<sup>36</sup> What of future-making, if we have erased the present as a mere interruption into what could be in the place of not-yet-ness (as Reem Fadda articulates in her 2009 essay ‘Not-yet-ness’)?<sup>37</sup> It is strange to demand that those who have grown up in the country or in camps be denied their right to narrate.

There is, undoubtedly, a difference between witnessing and experiencing trauma, and while neither negates the other, it is a point to be made and considered. As much as one would like to dismiss it as a falsehood, violence is an unwilling part of us. Our different experiences of

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<sup>34</sup> N A Mansour, ‘The Limits of Palestinian Art: An Exhibition Review of “If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust”’, *Hazine.info*, 16 November 2021 <https://hazine.info/na-mansour-limits-of-palestinian-art>

<sup>35</sup> I write *its* rather than *it’s* [it is] to illustrate that Palestinians are *intended* for violence by the Israeli regime, rather than thinking of it as ‘There are those of who write violence as it is intended’, as in how violence is already materialised and present. ‘Its’ works to contain the dual sense that *Palestinians* are the intended for the violence brought by the Israeli regime, and that in our work we write violence as it is done onto us.

<sup>36</sup> I question what is an alternative history, if, for those who it originates from, it is *their* reading of history. I argue that in creating a space of ‘alternative’, we allow for state-ordained and colonising histories to be central and focal while others are marginalised into the periphery.

<sup>37</sup> Reem Fadda, ‘Not-yet-ness’, in *Liminal Spaces*, 2009, pp 223–231 – a reader published following the Liminal Spaces project 2006–2009 (see [www.academia.edu/12834866/Liminal\\_Spaces](http://www.academia.edu/12834866/Liminal_Spaces)); Fadda explores the concept of potentiality via not-yet-ness, which is ‘that which is, and which is not. Or that with the potential to be, but is not’ to contextualise and understand the modern Palestinian condition.

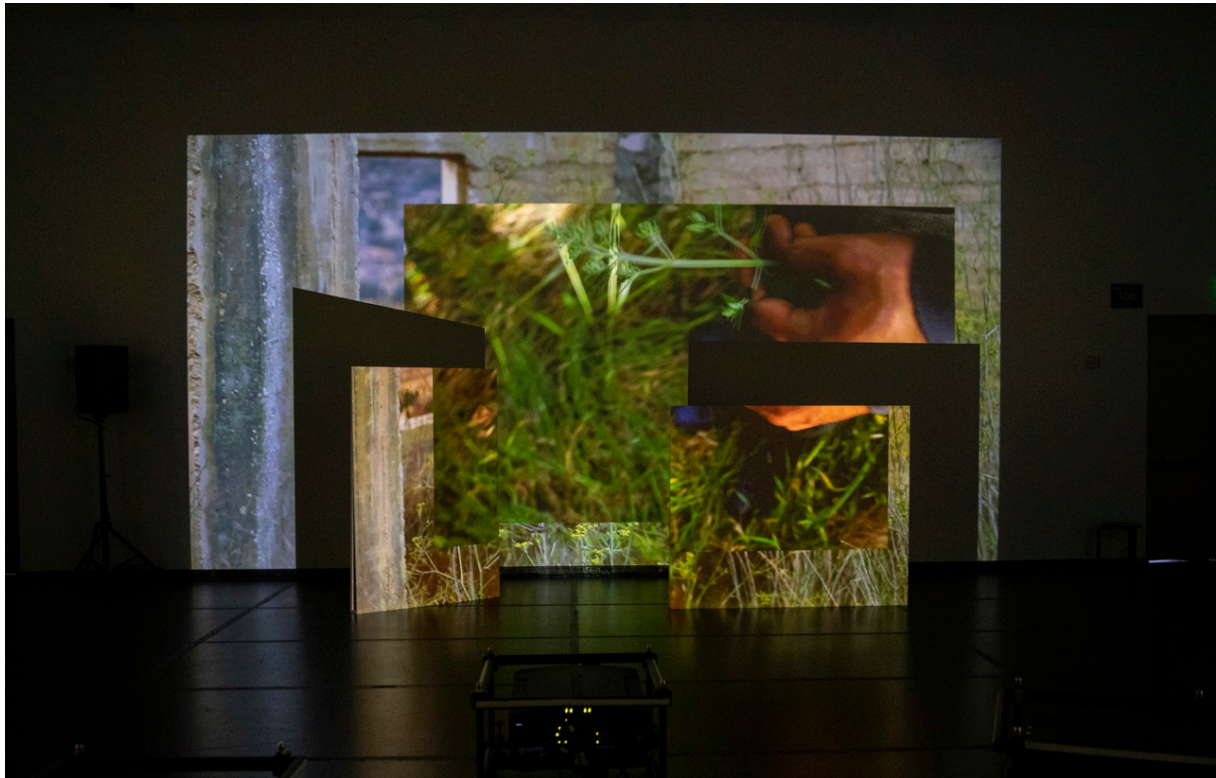
violence mark the faultlines of colonial fragmentation that has caused our experiences to be so radically different from one another. The differences in our experiences as Palestinians should be what brings us together, rather than further fracturing us. If we suspend ourselves in the argument of algorithm and social media feeds, we fall into a trap where those who mark the violence should only be framed in news articles or essays, rather than allowing Palestinians to have the irrefutable right to narrate, as articulated by Edward Said, their own visceral realities in whatever methodology of their choosing. The action of narration exists in direct relation to the colonial question of the right to exist.

The further point of Mansour's critique lies in the allegation of 'in the name of pro-Palestinian advocacy', as if all Palestinians are duty-bound to be advocates or representatives; as if there is a true collective artists call on, like a magicked ritual, to be all-inclusive and ever-knowing of Palestinians and each of our specific localities. There is a love in questioning our communities, a love that is bound in a hope for an expansive, limitless future – but instead we are confronted with disappointment that the artists did not take this perspective into account while rendering violence.

'If only this mountain between us could be ground to dust' was not a horrifying retelling of colonial violence that cannot be borne or witnessed. It was for Palestinians, by Palestinians. The presumptive and perpetual narrative that Palestinians can only write in either violence or trauma is, categorically, repressive. We are fixed into caricatures, or as an archived species. There is no love or hope in being reduced down entirely to one's ethnicity. It is stunting and leads to a static space and time. What good does that do for any of us? What world-making are we engaging in if we fix art-making into a frozen sphere, rather than realising that we ourselves are the makers of tradition, of the now, of possibility. Once we understand that time, tradition and space are ours to take and make with; fluidity is possible. In this fluidity, we find that limitless futures are attainable.

The focus on the 'representation' of Palestinian art and its 'limitations' is shortsighted. Mansour's layered refusal to problematise and complicate the institutional structures at play and instead place the whole responsibility and power onto the artists rather than fully exploring the dynamic and tenuous relationship and power-balance – among so many other entry-points – falls short of what conversations and imaginings are acutely possible in the midst of it all.

At the end of her critique, Mansour cleanses herself with Sliman Mansour and Bashar Murad, as if there is such a marker of a 'more' truthful narrative where one is not traumatised or brutalised. While we are all allowed a personal dislike or irrelevance of another's art, there is a space in-between where relief must be afforded. The right to narrate – or as articulated by Said, 'permission to narrate' – is inherent within all. That cannot be rescinded. That cannot be taken away.



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *Oh Shining Star Testify*, 2016–2021, three channel video, 2 channel sound and sub-woofer, wooden boards (variable size), installation view, courtesy of the artists

#### IV White Cubes and Empire

The question that should be asked is: how did these works, by these specific artists, enter an institutional space? Museums are not neutral territory; rather, they can be understood as an apparatus of empire. Canonical art institutions tend to reflect and reinforce existing power relations and are a consolidation of wealth and capital. Essentially, they are repositories of colonial plunder and the narratives that make this plunder and coloniality, with its capital and wealth, legitimate. They are makers of History and definers of Art, the end-all space wherein one is legitimised as an ‘Artist’ with all of the terms and conditions.

Beyond this, we must also ask what the Museum, as a tool of empire, intends to carry out. What of the control of narrative? What do Museums (and empire) particularly seek to maintain and re/produce? What is the role of a cultural institution in the political imaginary?

Lisa Lowe, in her articulation of the intimacies of four continents – where she focuses on reading the archive in colonial empire – describes how the ‘past conditional temporality of the “what could have been” symbolises aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss...’<sup>38</sup> requiring the past temporality to reckon ‘with the coeval violence of affirmation and forgetting...to recognise that this particular violence

<sup>38</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2015, p 208



continues to be reproduced in liberal humanist institutions, discourses, and practises'.<sup>39</sup> The 'lost struggles' that Lowe defines in her text must be reimagined in alternative knowledges, rather than the maintenance or translation, even, within liberal, humanist language and tradition so as to imagine a 'much more complicated set of stories about the emergence of the now, in which what is foreclosed as unknowable is forever saturating the "what-can-be-known"'.<sup>40</sup>

This allows the project of 'visualising, mourning and thinking "other humanities" with the received genealogy of "the human"'.<sup>41</sup> As Strike MoMA clearly articulates:

The aesthetic forms and imaginative powers of art require material support: economies of solidarity, platforms of cooperation, infrastructures of care and mutual aid. But the political economy of the art system is antithetical to these life-affirming practises. It is predicated on property, scarcity, competition, and assimilation. One canon. One centre. One meta-narrative of modernity, however diversified and globalised it may have become. It is governed by gatekeepers, critics, and canon-makers who try to create the measure by which art lives or dies, giving access to a select few while leaving the rest with the false choice between eating and making art. It doesn't have to be this way.<sup>42</sup>

In Arabic, the verb *تحرر* means 'to get free', an act of liberating. It is not a static tool, as Strike MoMA points out, but a *living* verb. There is no way to reform the Museum. We must go beyond looking within the existing modes of labour and the art ecosphere and to instead create alternate modes of being and living. The Museum is not our friend or ally; it is a mode of empire that will only continue to stall for time.

Alex V Green, in 'The Emptiness and Inertia of "Having Conversations"', outlines the 'Having Conversations Industrial Complex' as

a loose assemblage of professional speakers, non-profit organizations, astroturfed activists, diversity consultants, academic advisory boards, panelists, and politicians who are paid to generate a 'conversation' that doesn't need to show tangible results. Rather, the only role of the conversation is to generate more conversations.<sup>43</sup>

The Museum, occupying a role as arbiter of culture and creator of canon, functions as a member in the conversational industrial complex. The specificity of its body in which the Museum situates and operates from works in the Museum's heteronomous potential. What is the interior of the Museum, rather than only looking at the exterior? What do we truly need from institutionalised conversations? What has imperial discourse done for us in a material

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> See Strike MoMA [www.strikemoma.org](http://www.strikemoma.org)

<sup>43</sup> Alex V Green, 'The Emptiness and Inertia of "Having Conversations"', *Jezebel.com*, 22 July 2020 <https://jezebel.com/the-emptiness-and-inertia-of-having-conversations-1844376876>

and physical sense? Why is there a desire for representation in such a space? Abbas and Abou-Rahme's work illustrates a way of narrative reclamation, and, more broadly, the ability to define humanity by one's own terms. If this means the artists engage with the violence being done to Palestinians, why should that be dismissed?

We may argue that entering the institution engages in normalisation, as normalisation initiatives are a method of papering over power imbalances with the illusion of a balanced conversation or debate. We can briefly take over institutional spaces, knowing that they will never be for us, not truly, not really. But it is not liberation. So why do we enter such spaces? What points of power, agency, narrative and reality-making (or imperial-confounding) are we creating and operating?



Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part III: When the fall of the dictionary leaves all words lying in the street*, 2012–2015, installation view, 4 channel HD video and 2 channel sound + sub woofer 12'53", 7 wooden towers at varying scale, 3 mini projectors with 3 videos, courtesy of the artists

## V The Role of Power

Who makes decisions about memory? Who decides on what to archive? Who decides what is history? Who decides what art is? Who makes decisions about curators, artists, funding, conversations? What does representation *actually* do for us? Who decides what represents the whole of us as Palestinians (if such a thing is even possible)? Museums function as an eerie likeness to a menagerie; art is frozen and hung, decorating blank walls, fixed with overhead

lights, and split across fragmented and redacted texts – all for the profit of, and for, its boards.

As was demonstrated during the exhibition ‘Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011’ at MoMA PS1 in New York (3 November 2019 – 1 March 2020), which promised to ‘examine the legacies of American-led military engagement in Iraq’, with thirty of the eighty-two artists being from Iraq, the Museum does not always wield kind intentions. Hyperallergic explains about ‘... MoMA trustee Larry Fink’s investments in private prison companies. Fink’s company BlackRock, ranked as the world’s largest investment firm, holds stakes in two major American prison companies, GEO Group and CoreCivic.’<sup>44</sup> Alongside Fink, MoMA chairman Leon Black, is the owner of a private security company ‘legally implicated in the untold carnage and human suffering in Iraq’.<sup>45</sup>

The British artist Phil Collins withdrew his work from the exhibition before it opened, as prison abolitionist groups such as MoMA Divest and New Sanctuary Coalition had organised protests against Fink, along with an open letter signed by over 200 artists, scholars and critics.

Black, the owner of the multi-billion dollar private equity firm Apollo Global Management, has been under intense public scrutiny since revelations about his personal and business ties with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, which go back to the mid-1990s, surfaced after the latter’s death in 2019. This January [2021], the pressure reached a boiling point when an outside review for Apollo, conducted by Dechert LLP, found that Black had paid Epstein \$158 million in tax and estate planning fees, including unspecified art-related deals, between 2012 and 2017. The report cleared Black of any wrongdoing but revealed the extent of his ties to Epstein, leading the billionaire investor to step down as CEO of Apollo, effective in July 2021. He will remain chairman of the company.<sup>46</sup>

Rather than simply observing the physicality of the exhibition, attempting to understand what the work is doing in the pre-existing restraints and how it can transcend these offers a more fruitful reading. There is a value in observing how artworks (and art-making) try to wrestle with power dynamics. In taking the Museum hostage, despite the limitations, it could be argued that in such an act the artists agitate the power dynamics and the limitedness of such a space. Let us, then, see art not only as an almost-mirror of country and land but as, rather, a potentiality.

Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s documentation of violence in art is not sufficient enough to make a moral claim about the art or the artists on that basis. There is no reproduction of colonial violence when we recount reality, nor is it a violence in acknowledging those whose names and lives have been stolen, mistranslated and erased from colonial violence. Why is there, then, an expectation that we must dutifully create, as if we are made to be stowed away in towers and forced into boxes outside of our own making and selves? In that belief, where is our humanity?

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<sup>44</sup> See Hakim Bishara, ‘Behind the Scenes of MoMA PS1 Exhibition, Artists Confronted Leadership Over Chairman’s Implication in Iraq War’, *Hyperallergic*, 18 March 2021 <https://hyperallergic.com/620499/moma-ps1-gulf-wars-exhibition-conflict/>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

Our engagement with the Museum, as an institution, is not something, however, that can be separated from ourselves. In placing art within these spaces, Abbas and Abou-Rahme argue that they are ‘taking the Museum hostage’. The Museum can be a battleground where we, as artists, push the grounds past empire and into organic community; it is, as Nora Sternfeld has said, ‘the possibility of intervening in the space where the power of definition resides’.<sup>47</sup> Sternfeld describes how Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, in *The Undercommons*,<sup>48</sup> expand on the

...subversive relationship to the institution as the resistance of ‘the undercommons,’ who find a place inside the institution and lay claim to its future by simply inhabiting it in uninvited and uncalled-for ways. Harney and Moten call this acting against the grain of institutional norms and logics of exploitation ‘fugitive practices.’ Because critique is inextricably entwined with neoliberal and (neo)colonial conditions, they find themselves undermining and moving beyond it.<sup>49</sup>

The strategy, called the ‘para-museum’, notably prefigured in the 1970s by artists, allows us to conceive of the ‘taking hostage’ of a Museum as a ‘subversive gesture that steals (the power of definition and infrastructure) from the Museum’.<sup>50</sup> We can use Moten’s language of fugitivity as a way to describe what Abbas and Abou-Rahme engage in the disruption of the beginning, as Moten says, as they dismantle logic through their work. The two simultaneously engage in the precarity of ‘undercommon precariousness’. The ‘precariousness’ is, as Judith Butler describes, the implication of living socially, wherein all lives are entangled and dependent on one another, even if we cannot fully recognise the relations we all share.<sup>51</sup> In that sharedness, it asks who is grievable – meaning who is worthy of protection and rights. Abbas and Abou-Rahme create a window for open grieving in their work, illustrating Palestinians as precious, as people with rights that deserve to be honoured.

A metacritical hope, the two artists become fugitives reminiscent of Abu Jildeh’s intentions, both inside and outside of the Museum. What is most striking about Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work is the Fanonian sense apparent in their work: to not only destroy the colonial settler’s fundamental grounds, but the entire rationality that the colonial settler works within – to dismantle the entire logic and rationality in and of itself.

Museums, libraries, whichever spaces, are never neutral. They serve a purpose, maintain a hegemonic narrative, hold hostage a co-opted lineage of history and a bastardisation of the archives. It is past the time for a decentralising of these power structures. We must seek to create

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<sup>47</sup> Nora Sternfeld, ‘Para-Museum of 100 Days: documenta between Event and Institution’, *OnCurating*, issue 33, June 2017 [www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/para-museum-of-100-days-documenta-between-event-and-institution.html](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/para-museum-of-100-days-documenta-between-event-and-institution.html)

<sup>48</sup> See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe, New York and Port Watson, 2013 [www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf](http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Nora Sternfeld, ‘Para-Museum of 100 Days: documenta between Event and Institution’, op cit

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> See Judith Butler, ‘Precariousness and Grievability’, *Versobooks.com*, 16 November 2015 [www.versobooks.com/blogs/2339-judith-butler-preciousness-and-grievability](http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2339-judith-butler-preciousness-and-grievability)

spaces where art is understood as a necessity of human life. We must seek a world where there is no choice between rent and making art, but where both are possible; that there is a world, so within our reach, at the very tips of our fingers, waiting for us to *take* it.

The question has to be asked: what worlds are we making?

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