Artist Lecture Series Vienna

Huda Takriti

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18:00, April 8th, 2025
Skulpturinstitut, Paulusplatz 5, 1030 Vienna

we can't rewrite history
[MUSIC]

The Setting: Living with ghosts. Ancestral inheritance can easily become a burden as the endless repetition of the past that won't pass keeps unfolding into the present. Potential ruins. A cemetery. A living room. A wave. The cycle keeps going and going. A cemetery. A living room. A wave. The cycle becomes my method.

I have to keep reminding myself to take deep breaths before I start cursing at my monitor. A habit that I am now realizing I have inherited from my mother; she, in turn, must have inherited it from her mother, which her mother inherited from her mother. To some, this anger is understood as the result of years of political turmoil, generational frustration manifesting over decades of facing cycles of imperial violence. Others blame the short temper on the *Arab sun*[1]. Or it is the natural response to avoid becoming failed witnesses—witnesses made to absorb the news at the start of every hour and move on with our lives in between. It can also be understood as a way of resisting the phantom of helplessness haunting us after the Naksa[2] of 1967 and the consequent death of the pan-Arabist dream, the invasion of Beirut in 1982, the so-called "War on Terror," and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The phantom of an ominous disaster nearly dissipated, allowing us to cultivate a space for hope with the start of the Arab Spring in 2010, only to resurface more dominantly shortly after, as Egypt returned to military rule, Tunisia reverted to dictatorship, and civil wars broke out in Libya and Syria. Probably, there are bits of truth in each of these interpretations, but I lost interest in finding answers a long, long time ago.

In my attempts at becoming a better witness, one that can weep, confront, question, interrogate, voice out, trace back, and imagine ways of living differently. Passing through became one of the methods that emerged from the substance of confronting everyday life over the past 15 years. So, excuse me if, in these passings, it seems that I am aimlessly spiralling around nothing; I am.

I lean back in my chair, and I stop the clock.

In the first passing, I find myself in Sidon, walking down the road from Abra towards the Cornish. It used to be a thirty-minute walk, but time for passing spirits is irrelevant. I pass by Abu Zaid's shop, five or six square meters with shelves packed from floor to ceiling with any random product you might suddenly need. His tiny TV is still on the right side of the table, and, as always, he is watching Al-Manar channel[3].
Abu Zaid won the imaginative competition he built in his head years ago, and he officially has the loudest TV among the neighboring shop owners. Now they are all forced to listen to what, in his opinion, is the only accurate source of information. When his TV was turned off and he accidentally heard the TV sound of a news report on another channel coming from his neighbor's TV, he made sure to go there and curse at the neighbor's TV. He was one of the people that I wished I was brave enough to approach and start a conversation with, not because we shared a short temper, but because I imagine that in his sixty-plus years, he has borne witness to many folds of history. He seemed like the kind of person who would be open to sharing his survival stories—not the stories about escaping death but the ones about refusing it.

I continue walking down the street and take a left turn after Bahia Al-Hariri's residence. When I reach the old town, I try to follow the smell of the freshly baked bread from Furn Al-hatab to find my way from there to the old Zeidania cemetery, where my great-grandmother is buried. I have never been inside, and I don't know the exact location of her grave. My mother made sure to take the same route my passing-

through spirit chose whenever she was on her way to the fish market. She made sure to pause for a few moments in front of the cemetery's brick wall. This was one of her many rituals, for which I can now unravel the hidden reasons behind. It was not a ritual of paying respect to the dead, but it was one of announcing her partial return to Lebanon after she was banned from entering the country for many years as a result of her involvement with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 1980s and for holding a Syrian-Palestinian travel document, laissez-passer, a curse, she says, that she inherited from her father until she married my father and became a Syrian citizen by default.

The longest period I have spent in Sidon with my mother was back in 2013 for approximately eight months. I now know which walls she leaned on to catch her breath after running away from her boarding school to have lunch with her grandmother; the first flat her parents bought when they moved back to Lebanon from Kuwait, which now became a supermarket; the morning walks she took with her grandmother to the seaside to sneak a kunafeh sandwich for breakfast—a sweet treat that her grandmother was banned from eating as a diabetic; and a few buildings where the communist party held secret meetings during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), to name a few. Some of these places no longer exist, but they insist on existing in these attentive moments of slippage from memory into imagination. Their ghostly presence creates a temporal landscape. A place where *the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done*[4].

Can these temporalities be hauntings from a past still hovering around us in search of an end? Are they a refusal of this daily brutalization of the self and the other? Or have we become the ones haunting the haunting, refusing to allow them to pass with our continuous revisits? If so, can these revisits harvest strategies for a stronger form of resistance? A resistance as the call to tell the truth. One that extends beyond remaining steadfast in the belief that this is not the only reality. A resistance that recognizes the tension between desire and incompleteness in the determination to keep going.

Up until the past year, I had never paid attention to the fact that nothing separates us from the dead except our desire to announce ourselves as the ones who are "living" and to distance ourselves from the ones that we have declared to be "dead." This past year, we watched others dying; we watched as their bodies vaporized, turned into powder, and merged with the rubble of our cities. We keep watching as the genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank continue to unfold. Death now—whether in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, or Yemen—comes in mass, in bunker-buster missiles and 2000-pound bombs.
The dead cannot be named, and the disappeared cannot be found. No ritual can separate us from them anymore. We remain stuck in this loop of repetition, awaiting a time when mourning is possible and when all this unreason can be brought to an end.

Recent images of the destroyed cemetery of Burj Al-Barajne in the southern district of Beirut and the Al-Labwa cemetery in Baalbek, caused by numerous Israeli airstrikes, appear before my eyes and quickly vanish at my feet. The ruins of my present find their way into

the imaginary ruins of my past and the potential ruins of my future. They come as a reminder that we are living with ghosts, with ghost images hovering around us as spectacles of our end, refusing to end. A fast exhale was enough this time to save me from facing them.

The second passing takes me to my aunt‘s living room in Damascus. My father insisted that my two siblings and I visit her with him every Friday evening. After turning fourteen, I was the only one of my siblings who continued to do so, not out of love but out of curiosity.

Every Friday, my aunt would open the door, greet us, and then turn left towards the kitchen to prepare coffee, while my father and I would turn right towards the living room. We would both sit on the couch on the right side of the room. She would come with the coffee. Put it on the coffee table in the middle. Sit in her armchair on the left side of the room, facing the TV. She would insist we sit on the couch closer to her armchair, but we would refuse, quoting the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood that sitting on this couch would be *better to see her*.
In fact, it was not a place where we would see her better; we both knew it was a lie, and we both understood that if we wanted to avoid the conversation about the Assadist propaganda broadcast on her favorite TV channel—that is, the national Syrian TV channel—we had to avoid sitting on the opposite side of the room. This way, we forced her to mute the sound of the TV so she could hear us.

I grew up knowing that my aunt, my father’s sister, was the one all of his eight siblings feared the most, as she was a loyal Ba’athist who rarely skipped any of the party’s monthly meetings since she joined it in 1979. Most of the time, we couldn’t avoid talking about politics with

her, especially the ones at the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011. She would get frustrated, turn off her TV, and close off the discussion with “You better be careful what you say out loud; walls have ears.”

„Walls have ears” became a common phrase under the Al-Ba'ath[5] rule in Syria, as family members fear each other, and together they fear their neighbors; minorities fear the majority, and the majority fears the rule of the minority. Christians are afraid of Muslims, Muslims fear the rise of secularism, and everyone shares the fear of the president and his officers. These officers, in return, fear each other, and the president—despite his godly status—fears his guards and fears the people. A country where the spread of fear is as swift as a tennis ball bouncing between rackets.

As the Syrian Revolution started in 2011, shop owners raced to get rid of the TVs they had in their shops, as rumors that secret police officers were roaming the city undercover and reporting the ones who were watching the news reports of Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyya had spread. Many shop owners disappeared without a trace, and those who were released spoke of the torture they endured or the bribes their families had to pay to get them back. Some of those who were released sold their shops, flats, and cars and left the country; those who stayed became muted and TV-less, staring at the ceiling or out of their shop windows.

Passing through the streets of Damascus, I feel myself missing the sound of Abu-Zaid’s TV. I hear it calling me back to Sidon. As I pull away from this force slowly dragging me towards the potential ruins of my future, I recall that I have never seen my father curse at the TV. He

was the type of person who never yelled or felt the need to raise his voice above others to make a point. The only instance in my life where I heard him being loud was when he jumped off the couch and joyfully yelled „Allahu Akbar» upon witnessing Iraqi journalist Muntadhar Al-Zaidi remove his shoes and throw them at George W. Bush during his joint press conference with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki in Baghdad, Iraq.

I feel the warmth of his “Allahu Akbar” traveling through my body to finally settle in my heart. I let out one long exhale, open my eyes, and restart the clock.


Un jour, nous reviendrons voir Alger réalisé par Laura Sahin
we can't rewrite history
[Music]
7:54 / 52:11

I reread this sentence, and I am struck by its defeatist tone as it declares history as a given thing. History, as we know, is a dead end. There is nothing we can be sure of when we are confronted with a history that claims to tell the truth except that it does not. And if you are asking yourself right now, “Which truth?” I mean the truth that does not assert one version of any story over another. A history that tells the truth is a non-static history. It challenges the imperial conventions that continue to confine us.

The sentence I wish more people would say is that we need to rethink history. We need to split it in half, shatter each half into pieces, rip them apart, chew on them, make them dissolve in our saliva, spit them out on the sides of the road, and leave them there to merge with the ruins of their empires. I want us to imagine a history that is in a constant state of flux, uncontainable within a data set. A history that travels with whispers and memories, one that has no starting point or an end, as it flows from the past into the present and unfolds to become the future-present of the past. A history that “*messes with the future, messes with the present, messes with yesterday,”* as Summaya Manzoor Khan proposed in her book *Seeing for Ourselves and Even Stranger Possibilities*.

A scene from Assia Djebar‘s film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (*The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, 1977) comes to my mind; it shows women from different generations sitting along with children, forming a chain and whispering history into their ears. We hear the sounds of their whispers as Assia‘s voice narrates:

So it was in a silent Algeria. Old women whispering by night, and their stories become wonders in the dreams of children. And history is revisited by the fire in broken words and voices searching for one another.

The scene ends with a close-up following one child‘s face as he is amazed in wonder at what is being told. Then we hear what the woman is whispering in his ear:

My child, the dead were martyrs for the revolution. It is called „The Revolution."

What this scene depicts is the tale of the Kabyle rebellion, which was launched on March 14, 1871, under the leadership of Muhammad Al-Muqrani, who raised 25,000 troops and 100,000 followers. We specifically hear how the Kabyles of Beni Manacer joined the revolt, which lasted a year and resulted in France confiscating more than 500,000 hectares of tribal land and placing the Kabylie population under a régime d'exception (extraordinary rule), which denied them the due process guaranteed for French nationals.
The last sentence, "*It is called 'The Revolution*'" is repeated twice in the film by two different women, a few minutes apart. I hear this sentence as an assertion countering the French claim that the Algerian Revolution of Independence was a civil war. This narrative attempts to erase the fact that Algeria was colonized by France and that the Algerian uprising was a fight against colonial rule for national liberation. The National Liberation Front of Algeria (FLN) saw the Algerian Revolution for Independence as a continuation of the resistance led by Emir Abdelkader Al-Jaza'iri[7] and his father when

the French troops reached Oran in 1831. Thus, all the revolts that took place between them form a continuous event—an anti-colonial struggle that lasted as long as the colonization of the land and its people did.

This scene has been inscribed in my memory since watching the film a few years ago, as I found myself wondering for a while why Djebar described Algeria as “silent Algeria.” As a native Arabic speaker myself, I was certain that the sentence was not mistranslated. At first hearing, one might think that the word “silent” means here the unspoken, the absent, or the unsaid, contradicting the scene and its purpose. However, I hear it as a description that reflects how the colonizers perceive the colonized or wish them to be: as a place or a people where channels for transmitting the efforts and the goal of the resistance are absent.
Imperial history overlooks the role of oral history and its relation to language and storytelling in indigenous historical preservation practices. It assures itself that the absentee other is, by definition, unavailable. Nevertheless, these chains of whispering depicted in the film were and still are deeply ingrained cultural practices that became the main tools of resisting dominant historical narratives. They are whispers of provocation that traverse time and space, shaking the foundations of imperial narratives as they arrive at their destination. Asserting that the violence by which these narratives were held and kept alive is not a violence that remains in the past, for history is best told by those who bear the bruises.

I close this tab and drift through a sea of horizontal and vertical lines. My seasickness has no bounds over my body here. I can finally

allow myself to linger, to sway right and left and left and right with the rhythms of the waves. As my body sways, the ground beneath my feet liquefies, and this time, I pass through into a space of performative nostalgias: virtual French colonial 'returns' disguised as a longing for the 'old homeland', Algeria. As my body sways, I summon Frantz Fanon's words: "The settler's feet are never visible, except perhaps in the sea, but there you are never close enough to see them.[8]"


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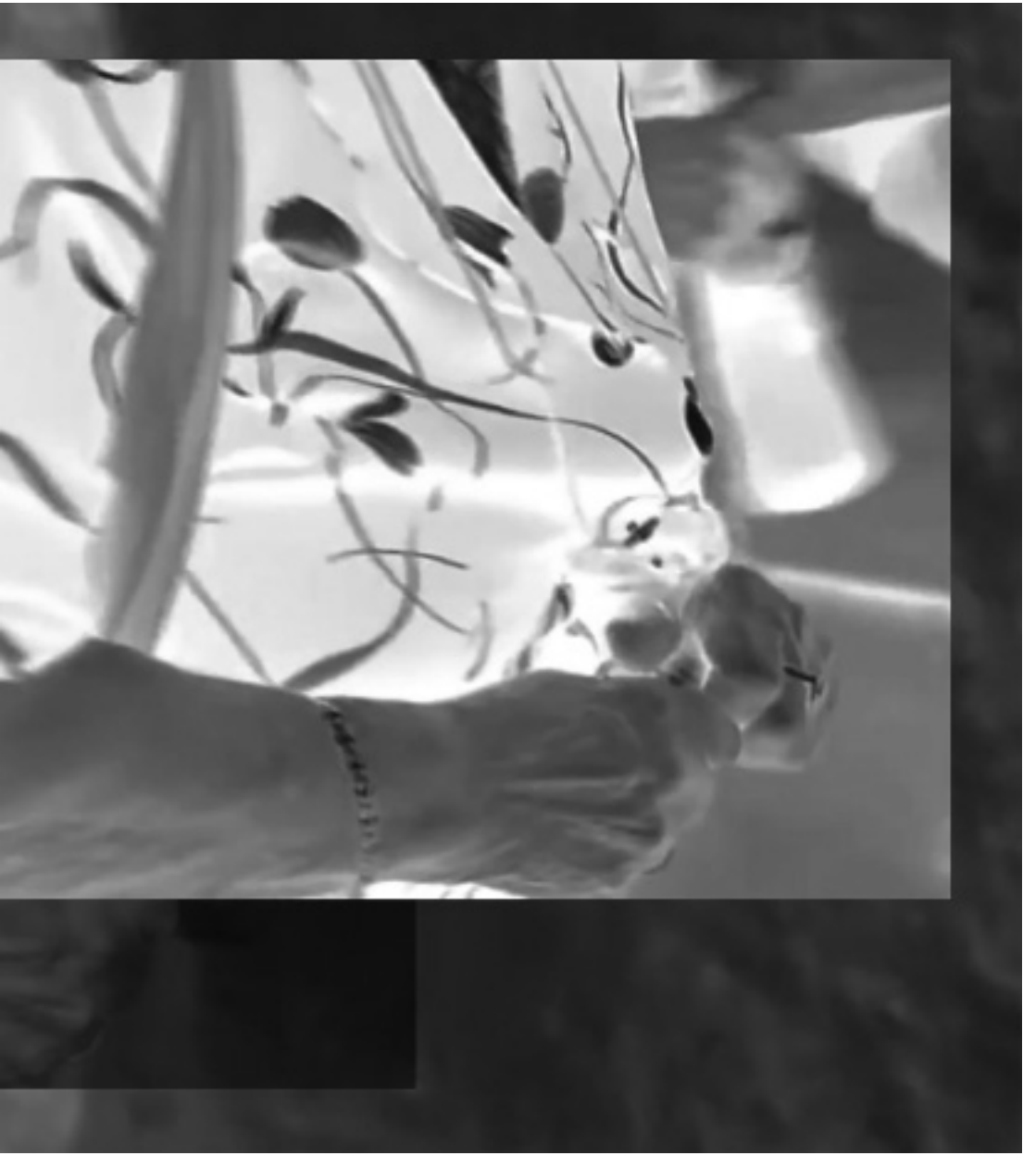

Here I am, not only close enough to see them but powerful enough to stop the clock and stare at them. I stare as the past forces its way into the future. I become the flickering sunlight reflecting on the surface of the sea. I become the camera, tracing the violence of performing a colonial nostalgia. And eventually, I become the future narrator, claiming back the narrative of the image.

Here, images are in contrast to history, not a dead end. Images are a product of the past—name it a past present or a present past; we will not disagree on technicalities. They bend and break sometimes, and from a perspective, they change constantly.
Images imply an archive, and archives—in their current form—are designed to keep us outside of history, to keep our telling silenced, as they erase our existence to uphold the state narrative they are meant to perform. Yet, images, whether within or outside the archive, possess the potential to evolve with each future viewing. In this process, they embody the essence of untaken or discarded images, as the viewers become part of them, projecting their imagination onto their surface.

Notes:

1. Etel Adnan, The Arab Apocalypse, The Post-Apollo Press, 1989
2. Naksa means ‚setback' or ‚relapse' and refers to the second Nakba*—the expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank, eastern Jerusalem and Gaza during the 1967 Six-Day War.
   * The Nakba ('the catastrophe') is the Israeli ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs through their violent displacement and dispossession of land, property, and belongings, along with the destruction of their society and the suppression of their culture, identity, political rights, and national aspirations. The term is used to describe the events of the 1948 Palestine war in Mandatory Palestine as well as Israel's ongoing persecution and displacement of Palestinians.
3. Al-Manar Channel is a Lebanese satellite television station owned and operated by Hezbollah, broadcasting from Beirut, Lebanon.
4. Gordon, A. Ghostly Matters, The University of Minnesota Press, 2008
5. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party–Syria Region (Ḥizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabī al-Ishtirākī – Quṭr Sūriyā,) officially the Syrian Regional Branch, was a neo-Ba'athist organization founded on 7 April 1947 by Michel Aflaq, Salah Al-Din Al-Bitar and followers of Zaki Al-Arsuzi. The party ruled Syria from the 1963 coup d'état, which brought the Ba'athists to power, until 8 December 2024, when Bashar Al-Assad fled Damascus in the face of a rebel offensive during the Syrian Civil War/ Revolution.
6. Abd al-Qadir ibn Muhyi al-Din (6 September 1808 – 26 May 1883; known as the Emir Abdelkader or Abd al-Qadir al-Hassani al-Jaza'iri, was an Algerian religious and military leader who led a struggle against the French colonial invasion of Algiers in the early 19th century.
7. Fanon, F. The Wretched of the Earth, Presence Africaine, 1963, p.30

Images:

Pages 12-13, Still, un jour, nous reviendrons voir Alger. Documentary by Laura Sahin.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF34TtpU9r8&t=506s&ab_channel=LauraSahin

Pages 18-19, Still, Fluid Grounds, Video, 11’28”, 4k, Color, Black & White, Sound, 2023.
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