

Conversations in the Midst of the Syrian
Conflict: A Visual Response to the Syrian
Conflict via the Domestic and Personal

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To my angel

To my star

To the fine spirit that looks after me at all times

To my idol and ultimate hero

To the loving soul that continues to shine

To my forever cherished Dad

I present this thesis hoping to make you proud...

Thank you ...

To my supervisors professor Nicky Hamlyn and professor George Barber at the University for the Creative Arts for their generous academic and moral support.

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All my love and gratitude.

Hala

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Attachments in pocket:

Final Practice on 1 x DVD

Appendix on 1 x DVD

Conversations in the Midst of the Syrian Conflict

A Visual Response to the Syrian Conflict via the Domestic and Personal

Research question: How can a visual researcher address and respond to the personal impact of the current Syrian conflict and the inherent ideological battles within it without resorting to standard forms of war images?

Preface:

My personal motivation behind this project and my small history:



Me and my dad during my last visit to Damascus in 2011

“I have written every single word and made each video with a tear in my eye and pain in my chest. This project is a piece of my heart made real by means of paper and practice. It is dedicated to the memory of my beloved father Morris Georges.”

Hala Georges

I came to the UK in September 2010 to study. I planned, after finishing studying, to go back home, to my home city of Damascus and to my family who worked very hard for me to be here today. The Syrian war started in March 2011 and since then my dream of returning home has slowly faded. Communication with Syria has become very difficult since. Telephone and

internet lines barely work and I am constantly worried about my country's future and the safety of my family and friends. Some of my relatives have tried to escape the violence but they have not succeed and others have become refugees, being forced to live under very difficult circumstances. It has been five years and the pain is only becoming deeper and the situation there is only getting worse.

My greatest fear became a reality on the 22nd of April 2013. My father Morris Georges was killed in the city of Damascus by a missile thrown in a civilian neighbourhood while he was queuing to take cash from an ATM. Morris Georges was a retired General and a fighter pilot in the Syrian Air Force. He was an amazing dad, grand-father, a great husband and a unique person.

This project is the way for me to be part of my family's and country's grief. It is created to illuminate people about the impact of the Syrian war by focusing on the small history of one Syrian citizen.

Abstract:

The news shows us what we already know about the war in Syria and, in fact, any conflict in the Middle East, insofar as it resorts to familiar forms of news reportage. Typically, this can be a stream of constant violent war imagery, which in turn creates a distance between the viewer and the tragedy itself, thus producing a feeling of detachment and indifference - the familiar 'compassion fatigue'.(Moeller, 1999)

The research looks at developing a counter-point to the mainstream media by bringing to light some of the hidden histories of the affected Syrian people. Small histories are told by way of monologues, testimonies, and informal interviews with a known circle of participants. People who lived or are living with the conflict day-to-day, a group consisting of my mother, sisters, nephews, nieces and a few friends. My experience as a Syrian living outside the conflict, my relationships to the participants, and my travel to the country during this time of war are all considered as inspiring material, which both constrain and focus the topic under discussion. This participant-observer methodology incorporation with gathering material from inside the conflict enriched the research findings and pushed it towards an informing exploration of the ever-changing distance between myself and the topic.

The project refuses to be another Middle Eastern art cliché. It enjoys qualities of inventive, and at once truthful, documentary practice. It embraces a personal and domestic perspective, looking through the eyes of those whom

are living the conflict. At the same time, I adopt a compassionate response that seeks to engage the viewer's sympathy, not their anger. Consequently, I investigate the ethical issues of war images and argue against the use of violent images. To inform and inspire the practice, I investigate relevant Syrian and Middle Eastern art to position the project within the contemporary Middle Eastern home-related art.

These research steps led to a number of hybrid mixes of documentary and experimental short videos. The practice is supported by a number of illustrations – as additional material - which has been created when it wasn't at all possible to gather material from Syria.

The written thesis informs and supports the creative component, while the practice stands as a creative version of the written research and findings. The thesis also provides a reflective commentary on how the practice came to be, the difficult circumstances behind its production and the passage it took before it was finally realised.

Objectives:

I aim to emancipate the spectator from the unbearable images of war and to create an ethical and considerate art that is not typical, political, cultural or universal. Rather, it is personal, intimate and it depends on the power of the story of participants who lived the Syrian war, that is, to show the hidden side of this war, bring the unheard voice closer and save the untold small history of the affected, neglected Syrian person.

Respectively, this practice-based research is not a sociological survey, nor is it a quantity-based analysis of the tragic impact of the Syrian war. Instead, it seeks to contribute to our understanding of the Syrian conflict's effects on daily lives by taking a personal and ethical point of view.

Overall I plan to create a practice that is inspired by a theoretical investigation of the personal and the ethical as well as on an extensive contextual investigation of Syrian and Middle Eastern art. As a result of the study, the creative outcome takes its position at the Arabic contemporary art as a humanistic project that offers over-layered and hybrid moving image practice combining documentary with creativity and experimentation.

Original Contribution to Knowledge, Potential Benefits and Application:

By analysing Middle Eastern and Syrian art, interviewing friends and family, I recount stories, experiences and events about the Syrian conflict that are routinely ignored by the media. What has repeatedly been reported is only confirming what we already know about a violent conflict and feeding existing clichés concerning such 'revolutions'. I am configuring a new way to look at the war by offering a personal and domestic view, responding to it and incorporating it within a hybrid creative practice.

The practice is offering a new approach to view the impact of the war, a view from inside the conflict, from behind the walls and closed doors of Syrian victims and refugees. It is avoiding the repetition of what we see constantly on television and newspapers - blood, weapons and disjointed victims. Instead I aim to represent the life of ordinary people during the war, namely people simply trying to live a normal life and have enough education, food and water to survive. As a Syrian myself with my family and friends and my personal connection to Syria I am offering the viewer the unseen and the hidden reality of daily life at war. I am hoping to enlighten people and change their perspective about the issue.

The project is arguing against the traditional clichés of war representation; that is to say the usual universal implications and constant, unbearable, disturbing imagery. Conversely, my project offers a changed approach that

seeks compassion not disturbance and it is concerned with the Syrian individual and what he or she has to say about their life- changing experience.

Moreover, I am positioning myself as both a participant and observer in the research. This helps to create a new understanding of the Syrian situation and of the participants' contributions to the research. This all leads to produce an original practice, one which interweaves my own views and experiences of the Syrian conflict with my understanding of the statements and views of my relatives and friends. As important, the collection of videos is not classified under one type of documentary film, instead, it is a combination of documentary, creativity and experimental forms of moving image, which leads to a multi-platform of expression.

I am offering the domestic view using whatever accessible devices, by participants whenever it is possible for them to talk, record and share their small histories. Collecting material from Syria whilst being in the UK, dependent on weak and disrupted internet connections and through phone calls, which leads to having spontaneous and fragmented results due to the difficult circumstances of making the work. These qualities evidence the problems and realities of trying to make the work, and as such they encounter the media's representation of crystal clear war imagery.'

A possible application of this research would be in the context of an art exhibition accompanied by a written component in which I invite viewers to enter this private and personal part of my life, as well as the lives of the

participants, in relation to the tragic loss of home, loved ones, country, and future. The practice feeds into the thesis and vice versa, which makes each an essential part of the other. Although the practice is planned to stand alone, the thesis comes to support, rationalise and build up the practice content and direction. The thesis and practice together form one complete project that has the potential application of enlightening and raising awareness, while offering the hidden personal view of the Syrian war.

I declare that the research contained in this thesis is my own original work. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'H.G.', written in a cursive style.

Date: 15 May 2016

Introduction

Including Methodology

The on-going Syrian crisis started in March 2011. It has led almost half of the Syrian population of twenty seven million to be displaced. Over seven million people were displaced internally and almost five million Syrians have become refugees in different countries around the world (Syria Regional Refugee Response - Regional Overview, 2016). This vicious war has so far taken the lives of 470,000 people including children and civilians and this number is still rising (Black, 2016). In addition to more than one hundred thousand people gone missing (The Independent, August 2015). A huge part of the Syrian heritage, which is a component of the world heritage, was destroyed and demolished, including some parts of the old city of Damascus, the oldest inhabited capital in the world and Palmyra, an ancient Syrian Kingdom founded back in 2nd millennium BCE. (Darke, 2014)

With the 'Arab Spring' in the background, this war started as an uprising against the government in March 2011, and then subsequently developed gradually to become a complex and violent situation. This involved many parties, including extremist Muslims and foreign fighters, who are now calling for Syria to become an Islamic State (Tran, 2014), eliminating Christians, who are the native Syrian inhabitants, and all the other minorities in order to allow the extremist Sunni faction to take control under Sharia Law (Griswold, 2015). These religiously-motivated demands are louder in voice and action than the democratic political demands. We hardly hear of organised opposition

parties that propose clear requirements as we saw in other Arabic countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and even in Libya. The situation in Syria inflamed and has been taking the path of a bloody civil war. It is recently reported that 27,000 foreign fighters are involved in the war from 86 different countries (Kirk, 2016), some of them are funded by foreign countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the USA, all of which have their own political agendas and plans for the future of Syria (*Interview with Khaled Abood*, 2012). Altogether has left the Syrian citizen hopeless in the face of many competing and violent powers.

The common element to all 'Arab revolutions', and the one that turned into an enduring civil war in Syria, is the suffering of the individual and their family. This is what my project is concerned with - the history of the seemingly small things left behind and the stories of people ravaged by grief and loss: the loss of loved ones, homes, of hope and a future, details which are routinely ignored by the media but form part of my thesis.

The centre of my project is the personal. My family and friends' domestic stories living through the Syrian war help me shape a new observation of the conflict, as they are my connection to the reality there. It is establishing a unique path far from the clichéd political stories that are typically told. My approach is also beyond the common dualism of the documentary format, specifically it is real on the one side and artistic, poetic or fictive on the other. I believe a far more complex hybrid space will offer a more heartfelt perspective on the Syrian conflict, a creative one far from the typical war images usually depicted.

I am not claiming a universal timeless root to my work. It is located very specifically in my homeland. The specificity of my focus guards against and is distant from those clichés. I am not intending to capture that ultimate unbearable image that starts to bring home the true nature of the Syrian war. I am not searching for the equivalent of Vietnam's burning children covered in Napalm, taken by Huynh Cong Ut, the Pulitzer Prize winning photograph that did more than anything to bring home the reality of the Vietnam conflict. Instead, I am following a more domestically focused path towards understanding the current Syrian conflict's effect on people and presenting hidden human experiences that are not necessarily appreciated or heard of by the public. It is not my intention to represent the gun battles or helicopters thundering overhead, but families sitting for hours in small domestic spaces waiting for the gunfire to die down, so they might get some bread.

My work seeks to paint a more complex and layered image of how a family survives, changes and suffers in a prolonged conflict in the context of no real sense, order or political hope of those qualities. The focus of my project is absolutely a private account, simultaneously both documentary and subjective moving image response to how the non-fighters, the ordinary citizens not interested in picking up guns or shooting people cope bravely and regularly every day and hold on to their dignity and humanity while all around them descends into madness. This project's focus is the transmogrification of the Domestic in war, how that area stretches and what pains it has to bear and yet still retain functioning ideas of 'home' and 'family'. All the context here and debates I chose to write about are all implied by this

central focus. There is a natural fit between this core of the project and the thinkers I deploy to deepen and expand it. At the same time this applies to my practice, which is working through the same debates.

Throughout the beginning of the thesis I define the basic aspects of the project explaining how it distances itself from the expected clichés of war and explores its documentary and creative hybrid nature. To contextualise the project aims, I look at the philosophy of the personal perspective and the power of emotions and imagination. The ethical issues of war images then takes a good proportion of the essay to question the morals behind violent purposeless images while proposing my countering responsive act of producing an ethical practice.

After having the first half of the thesis dedicated to the theoretical exploration, the second half comes to conduct an extensive contextual review including looking at the modern phenomena of recording street violence in Syria using modern technology. This is followed by a thorough evaluation of relevant Middle Eastern and Syrian art with a case study of Mona Hatoum's moving image practice. Only then does the thesis propose my creative response to the impact of the Syrian conflict on myself and a number of participants' daily lives.

Methodology

The following text starts by describing the research methodology in general, then it moves on to illustrate the practical methods I utilise, including the 'participant-observation' method to eventually finish by explaining the relationship between my writing and practice.

A Pattern of Logic Inquiries

My methodology utilises a specific range of intellectual positions and artists' concepts that are relevant to my understanding of the field and help to interpret my research concerns in new ways. The aim is to open up, question and re-interpret the field, to explore its politics and ethical issues and investigate a variety of intellectual and practical contributions towards it. By overlaying these contributions on my experience and that of my country, I explore creatively what has happened in this small destroyed country.

For the research, I conduct a number of case studies, contextual and literature reviews, which are focused on Middle Eastern and Syrian art. I explore questions around the domestic perspective as a creative response, and the ethics of war images, all of which will lead me to develop my own practice and reflect upon it. In this way I define my own approach to the subject and point out its differences and similarities with the reviewed creative and academic encounters. The consistent methodology of using a limited but appropriate range of thinkers and positions will help to assert my standpoint in viewing and interpreting the field and the events both past and present

Syria. All this research and creative thinking inevitably informs my own practice so that there is a demonstrable coherence.

The questions examined in the thesis have emerged from my need as a researcher and as an artist to form a visual response to the crisis in my country. Although the motivation to explore the research question is personal, it holds another valuable and urgent aim, namely to re-configure the way we look at the war and refuse to accept the only side shown constantly by the media. Often this depicts the war as simply an announcement of death and the number of victims, presenting an endless disturbing imagery of destruction and violence that can only authorise our familiarity with any Middle Eastern conflict. They do not win our compassion as we are surrounded by them all the time. This is what scientifically is identified as 'compassion fatigue' or Secondary Traumatic Stress STS, which causes a slow decrease of compassion and sympathy when frequently and often having to deal with trauma or traumatised people (Figley, 2013). The media has been a major player in spreading this condition among its audience because when it is constantly faced with decontextualized images of violence, its response could become resilient and in some cases careless for victims. ('Self-Study Unit 3: Photography & Trauma | Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma', 2015)

What motivates the project is presenting what the Syrian people have to say about their hidden stories. By that, I mean to re-stage the way we look at the war and offer a new and original perspective about it.

My approach to the subject is asking participants to share their stories and what they have to say about their experiences in the Syrian War. This is an integrated methodology, which encompasses specific approaches to questions of ethics, views on the documentaries, the power of emotions, imagination, personal testimony, grief, loss, the dissipation of families and the destruction of people's lives. My project examines the impact of war from inside the home; a war experienced while trying to keep life normal for children; a war experienced during the break-up of families and communities; a war producing refugees and lives in exile. These all have a natural correlation with my methodology.

Practical Methods:

Participants in the project are informally interviewed and asked about their experiences during the war. They include my mother, sisters, nephews, nieces and the few close friends I have managed to contact. The reasons for choosing this circle of contacts is because they represent a regular Syrian family and a sample of ordinary citizens which is the concern of the research, so that the personal and domestic perspective is accessed and applied through their testimonies. They are happy to participate, not only to support my research but also to talk about their experiences in a cathartic way.

In addition, I include myself in the research, serving as both an observer and participant. In the practice I respond to my personal experience of being far from home while it is being destroyed, to the loss of my home, city and places I grew up in, to the grief, worrying about my family's safety, the difficulty

contacting them and the endless disturbing emotions I have to deal with on daily basis because of this unhealthy situation. This methodology of data collection, namely 'participant observation' or 'participant-observer', is often used in qualitative research and relates to anthropology and the study of culture. It involves informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group, collective discussions, analyses of data, and self-analysis (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2010).

Joseph T. Howell claims that this methodology requires four steps to be completed: the researcher needs to get to know the group, engage with the situation, record data and observe the examined situation, and finally to analyse the data (Howell, 1990). After including these four stages in my research, I am adding the creative dimension to respond to the collected data in the practice, i.e., it shifts from being a strictly anthropological approach to an artistic one.

Morris S. Schwartz and Charlotte G. Schwartz argue that this type of 'participant observation' methodology, called the '*complete participation*', is usually not objective because the researcher is part of the subject under study (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1995). If the researcher is part of the society which he/she is studying, how can the conclusions drawn from the data be successfully unbiased? (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1995). However, Alan Peshkin and Paul Atkinson argue that the recorded observations about a group of people will never be a complete analysis of the situation, it will always be effected by the researcher's personal view and their interpretation of data

they consider to be important (Peshkin, 1993) (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1995).

In light of this, it could be seen that my research is subjective. Nevertheless, I argue there is an advantage to my research being subjective and personal. It brings to bear a new understanding of the Syrian situation and gives a voice to the sentiments of the participants. This leads to an original practice that is enhanced via my personal connection with the conflict and the participants. I never claim that my research will produce facts about the Syrian conflict or will offer an objective political analysis of it, instead it will represent the stories of regular Syrians to convey a hidden aspect of the war reality.

Personal recordings of feelings and experiences and interviews with family and friends are key methods in collecting data for the project. Recordings of conversations or monologues are gathered using phones and the internet. After gaining their consent to participate, I record our conversations (or informal interviews) about their experiences and stories during the struggle. Often this approach proved technically difficult when communication, the internet or electricity was not available in Syria or my family's neighbourhood at all times. So my recordings are made when it is practical to do so and when the participants are ready to talk. On other occasions I have directed the participants to video-record themselves or other involved participants from distance, for example, in *A Letter From Luna* video, I had to ask my sister to film her daughter, while I was on the phone guiding her how to direct and move the camera. The project is necessarily fragmented due to the work

circumstances, which lead sometimes to capture poor image and sound or no image at all.

On the other hand, when producing illustrations – which are included as supporting material in the appendix - on the major events happening in Syria I would read thoroughly about the incident, digest the facts, politics, and implications in order to respond to it.

To further develop my work, I often engaged in reflective thinking and thorough reading in order to analyse and apply the philosophical theories and artistic statements and observations. I draw my conclusions and define my perspective, critically writing and arguing my own approach and defending its features, which allows me to produce the creative response I am aiming for. I keep a reflective journal of activities, which allow the research setting to be a space for review and development. The journal involves the use of visual and thought documentation to map the working plan in terms of goals and time management, to reflect regularly on the research process, the findings and experiments.

Writing in Relation to Practice:

Here I explain how each chapter of the thesis evolves and how exploring particular theories and ideas help me to understand the field and open it up in new ways which inform and inspire the practice.

In the first chapter I refuse to categorise my project as a typical political Middle Eastern project, or to be classified as a straightforward classic type of documentary film practice. I start with exploring the position of Middle Eastern art in the West and the specific classifications this type of art is usually associated with, which leads on to discuss art in exile and its associations from an Arabic and artistic perspective. This allows my project to adopt its position, while avoiding clichés and clarifying its features in relation to the political and exile art.

I go on to explore the documentary type of film and its problematic but fascinating politics. In parallel I explain the hybrid experimental and documentary style of my project and the challenges of marrying creativity with the necessary transparency and accuracy when recording a human experience through war. For that, I refer to theories by David Bordwell, Patricia Aufderheide, Stella Bruzzi, John Bang Carlsen, and Bill Nichols among others. Writers here assist to define the mix nature of the project and its rich potential of combining the fictive, the experimental with the 'truth'.

Theoretical keys mentioned so far unlock the discussion regarding the project's argument, which is at the heart of my thesis, and written within Jacques Rancière's theoretical contribution under the title: *The Emancipated Spectator* (Rancière, 2009). It plays a critical role in supporting my passion and aims to emancipate the spectator from the expected clichés of war art. He asks not only to liberate the viewer from those clichés but calls for a subjective, original and truthful perspective that comes from the inside, from the womb of emotions and feelings (Rancière, 2009). Likewise, Nawal Al Saadawi, among others ask for a compassionate view instead of the majority of representations we see in the media, which only touch upon the surface of our painful reality (Saadawi, 2013).

With regards to the war's painful reality, I intend to explore the ethical considerations of art and how difficult it is for us to ignore our moral responsibilities as artists. I propose being considerate to both sides: the Syrian participant in my project and to the viewer whilst at the same time I believe in a highly ethical consideration of my practice. To do this, I encourage the participants to talk about their experience during the war as long as they are happy to do so, making sure they are in a comfortable and humane situation. As for the viewer, my aim is always to ensure that s/he is not under attack from unbearable images, rather to rely on her/his understanding and sympathy.

Therefore, I depend on the critical writing and thinking of Ariella Azoulay and particularly on her theory '*The civil contract of photography*', in which she

asks for a civil contract between the war victim and the artist; always to consider ethical application when dealing with human disasters such as war (Azoulay, 2008). I also use Rancière's theory about the '*intolerable image*' such as unbearable war images, which immerse but do not necessarily win our sympathy (Rancière, 2009). He asks for a considerate view; one which offers a new perspective and changes what can be seen, said and thought while also considering the viewer's feelings (Rancière, 2009).

Fundamentally, this is what I am striving for in my project: compassion not disturbance. While exploring the ethical issues of war images and creating my own approach, I refer to James Elkins' writings among others. I also refer to Lucy Soutter who discusses Martha Rosler's essay; *In, Around, and After Thoughts* (on documentary photography), in which Rosler argues that documentary photography is helping nobody but the photographer in achieving his own aims and desires. Soutter asks questions in relation to our morals as artists, especially when we are involved in representing war (Soutter, 2013). I also consider Judith Butler's analysis of the ethics of photography, in which she talks about the presentation of suffering via instructed visual language and how such methods of presentation influence our acknowledgement of suffering (Butler, 2010). In contrast, I discuss Immanuel Kant's theory of ethics which proposes that a human cannot use another human as a way to fulfil a personal goal (Wood, 2007). While reviewing Ken Johnson's critique of Susan Meiselas's work I was able to explore the ethical issues from an art-critical perspective (Johnson, 2008).

After building theoretical concepts around my project aims (throughout the first three chapters), I examine - in another three chapters- relevant Syrian and Middle Eastern artwork. Including a case study, which is concerned with related issues of war, home, and exile. This variety of investigated artistic and creative responses inspire to define my own response and helps to position my practice within the debate of Syrian and Middle Eastern art; while highlighting differences and similarities with the examined artwork.

In details, in *'Pixilated Reality'* I examine the phenomena of recording contemporary revolutions using modern technology such as mobile phones and digital cameras, and sharing them online. This has created a library of pixilated images supposedly capturing actual events as they happened. I propose that my practice is creating something different by using the same technology and recording events happening to people caught up in the conflict. But in contrast to the majority of those personal recordings I avoid depicting violence. Instead I show the impact of violence on those individuals, their reflections and stories. Throughout this chapter I discuss the nature of such phenomena depending on my own interpretations and on Zaher Omareen and Chad Elias writings. John Tagg (Tagg, 2009), Victor Burgin (Burgin, 1999), and Lucy Soutter's writings also join the discussion as they are concerned with issues around photography and truth (Soutter, 2013), which help to question the status of such videos and ask questions about authenticity.

Followed by the chapter '*Sense of Home*', where I examine relevant examples of Middle Eastern and Syrian art in relation to my own approach, to expand the contextual review of the project. I start by reviewing relevant Syrian art and discuss the effect of war on most of the artists' style, colours and concepts, while also comparing between the perspectives of artists living inside and outside of the conflict. For this contextual review I discuss an early exhibition produced in response to the Syrian war in Damascus *Collective* 2012 and my exhibition '*From colours to black & white*' 2013-2014 among other examples.

Furthermore, I explore relevant Syrian fine art by Tammam Azzam, Sulafa Hijazi, Khalili Younes and other artists. Followed by exploring relevant Syrian moving image productions created by Orwa Maqdad, Nabil Al-Sayes, Wathec Salman and others. Here, *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* book by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud offered a rich platform for examples and discussions on contemporary Syrian art (Halas, Omareen, & Mahfood, 2014), so did many online platforms created by Syrian art organisations like Kayani and Bidayat.

I then move on to investigate relevant Middle Eastern art. I search in the *Unveiled: New art from the Middle East* (2009) book that holds a collection of art from the Middle East exhibited by Saatchi Gallery in 2007. I also research *Resistance* (2006, 2007, 2010), three collections of Middle Eastern and North African experimental videos relating to war and home related issues. Some

relevant examples to my project discussed are *Resonances* by Ismail Bahri, *Les Illumines* by Halida Boughriet, *The Smell of Sex* by Danielle Arbid and many other insightful and provocative examples.

For more in-depth analysis and examination of contextual, creative and practical examples I conduct one in-depth case study of Mona Hatoum's work, which proved to be necessary for the process of my practice realization. I chose her work because of the personal and general commonality between us and because of the concern of her moving image practice that is mainly responding to the difficult and life-changing situation; namely as a Palestinian-Lebanese artist living in exile in the UK witnessing her country's struggle during civil war.

Exploring what it means to focus on the personal approach and its ethical issues, examining the work of other Middle Eastern and Syrian artists, and their different responses to home-related issues all allow me to offer my own perspective and reflect on its developmental journey.

In a separate chapter '*From Rochester with Love*' I explore my own creative response to the Syrian crisis including a presentation of the final fourteen short videos, each made in response to either a family member, myself or a friend's experiences of the war.

The problems with audio and visual communication with Syria created a barrier to collecting data, which restricted my ability to produce videos. Therefore, I was motivated to find an alternative medium of expression, such as illustration. Since I come from a graphic and illustration background, they remain passions of mine and I felt confident using them when it wasn't at all possible to connect with Syria. The process of producing illustrations along videos offered me an interesting mix of approaches and encouraged me to develop creative ways to present the final video installation. This has led me to create a number of illustrations in response to some videos and to some major events of the conflict. I include these illustrations as a supporting material in the *appendix* because they are not the main part of the practice. However, some of them will make their way to the final exhibition to reflect the journey of research of taking adaptable methods and to support the whole look of the exhibition.

What proved to be useful throughout the research is the reflective continuous exercise that has been conducted since the beginning of the research. This is included in the *appendix* presenting a few remaining video experiments combined with reflection upon them, their making and relation to the development of the final practice.

Outside The Frame

Standing against the clichés

The project is concerned with the impact of the Syrian conflict on individuals, as represented by participants, that is by documenting real experiences including my experience of being far from home. This brief outline of the project quickly pushes it towards many typical categorisations to take the shape of a typical Middle Eastern, in-exile, political and a classic documentary art project. In this chapter I refute these classifications to be an accurate description of the nature and purpose of my project.

By doing this, I define basic aspects of the project and explain how it offers a new response to the Syrian conflict far from the expected clichés. The following text starts by discussing typical expectations of Middle Eastern art and how my work encounters it. It goes on to discuss the 'in-exile' aspect of the project and eventually how it differs from other political arts. The chapter concludes with a discussion concerning the project's hybrid documentary nature and the challenge of achieving the balance between being creative and at the same time transparent while documenting a human experience through war. In this way the project will be clarified as a new form of creative response.

In his Ph.D. thesis *Contemporary, Emigrant, Middle Eastern Art* (Withey, 2012), Andrew John Withey argued that most of the Middle Eastern artists in the West find themselves in a pre-prepared frame of presentation, which is the universal, global, international, transcendental, or multi-cultural presentation. He believes that even when the Middle Eastern artist tries to leave her own blueprint and individuality, she soon meets a typical classification and expectation of her art (Withey, 2012). This cliché of presentation according to him is sustained by their curators and representatives in the Western world and that is as an attempt to see the rest of the world in terms of the West's understanding and values, which Withey sees as "the Western fault of viewing the rest of the world in terms of its own vocabulary and tradition" (Withey, 2012:159). According to the researcher's findings, most Middle Eastern artists have 'some reaction' to this universalist classification of their art and he questioned if the Middle Eastern artists themselves believe in their art's universalism (Withey, 2012).

Another classification Middle Eastern art goes through is to be concerned with terrorism and the related political and social issues. Lisa Farjam opens the book *Unveiled: New art from the Middle East* (Farjam, 2009) that holds a collection of art from the Middle East exhibited by Saatchi Gallery 2007 by disputing the predictable conception of Middle Eastern art and its relation in addressing terrorism and its complex political and social background:

"The Middle East today is routinely viewed through the all-too-predictable prism of strife, oppression, terrorism. From this vantage

point it is perceived as dark, distant, ambiguous, other. Such handy clichés obscure a great deal- from vigorous civil societies to, as concerns us here, robust independent art scenes, in cities stretching from Marrakech to Tehran. They also obscure a history of cultural activity in the art scene, which, exciting as it is, does not exist in a vacuum.” (Farjam, 2009, Introduction).

Interestingly, Farjam here is fighting against a view of a stereotyped Middle Eastern art, by indirectly calling for another stereotype and putting it under another common clichéd title: Middle Eastern cultural art. The majority of expectations of Middle Eastern art evolve around the celebrative type of art of the Middle Eastern culture. Discussing the same issue, Anthony Haden-Guest is convinced that Middle Eastern artists have gone beyond the cultural cliché expected from them and that they are no longer offering the Western audience “white and gold ornamental” (Haden-Guest 2012, cited in Bonomi, 2012). He emphasises the role of identity and where the artist comes from in the Arabic world, as each country is unique. He also believes that other cultures interfere in the artist’s work once they leave their home country “...identity plays a strong role, whether an artist is Egyptian or Lebanese, whether they have spent their working career in London or Paris and how those European influences factor into the work, how different cultures complicate it.” (Haden-Guest 2012, cited in Bonomi, 2012). Moreover, Haden-Guest believes that the Arabic artist doesn’t need to fake cultural interest to exist in the Western market. On the contrary, they need to be true to themselves (Haden-Guest 2012, cited in Bonomi, 2012). There is a constant

expectation and preoccupation of art from the Middle East with the representation of this regional cultural background and its aesthetic and intellectual values. In this project, my country's cultural background¹ is not the main focus. Instead, it focuses on the human side of the Syrian war and effects resultant from it while being true to myself, to my participants and to the viewer.

Similarly, producing a universal art that is building on the violence and disorder in the Middle East concerned with, for instance, human rights, freedom or moralities have a world-wide implication and broad general associations, hence, it will add nothing new to our understanding of the impact of a specific war. Conversely, my project is offering a very close look through the Syrian people's tales about their personal experiences during war. It is not promoting the fierce and violent image, rather it is offering a lyrical view.

The aforementioned clichés are constantly used to categorise Middle Eastern art, in which the artist and their art are dealt with as a cultural and historical guide of an ancient or exotic world or being victimised and dealt with as the production of our modern time of war against terrorism. From personal observation- Arabic-war-concerned events and exhibitions in the west have become more popular since Arabic conflicts started in 2011. Noticeably, several of Middle Eastern artists themselves contribute towards framing their

¹ Arabic calligraphy is used in the presentation of the final exhibition to give a sense of the Syrian culture, however, it is not the main focus of the research, writing or practice.

art in cultural, political and other classifications. My project conversely is taking a step out of the expected frame towards a personal one, one that depends on the uniqueness of emotions and imagination inspired by personal narratives.

Within these Arabic-war-concerned events, questions addressed to the artist most likely include their relationship with their home country and whether they are still in accessible contact with it. This brings the notion of 'exile art' into the discussion. Thus I aim to clarify what aspects of exile art my project has and why this is not taking the shape of a typical exile project.

Bashir Makhoul in his Ph.D. thesis *Contemporary Palestinian Art: An Analysis Of Cultural And Political Influences* (Makhoul, 1995) defined the parameters of the contemporary Palestinian art practice, and stated that the difference between exile art and emigrant art is momentous: "An exile can be defined as someone who has an enforced or regretted absence from their country or home...The hope and expectation of returning to the homeland is vital in differentiating these artists" (Makhoul, 1995:137). The difference between an immigrant artist and an artist in exile as Makhoul describes it is vital. The possibility that he may not ever return home, changes his whole reality and hence changes his art statement.(Makhoul, 1995)

Being an immigrant having to deal with a sudden shape of exile would leave a dramatic change on anyone's life. Besides not being able to go back because of the war, the forced distance with my home country is neither

political nor compulsory, it is emotional. It is caused by the feeling of loss and grief, which puts another type of distance between myself and my home country. In addition to this, the feeling of isolation from the events that developed to a sense of witnessing. Hence the reaction was to want to contribute by my art project and refusing to become merely a witness of the tragic events.

To explore the exile Middle East art, Makhoul brought views by exiled Palestinian artists, one of whom was Edward Saeed, who described the exile art as 'one of the saddest fates in pre-modern times.' (Saed 1993, cited in Makhoul, 1995:138). Saeed argued that there is a common, erroneous supposition between people, that to be exiled means to be completely secluded and separated from the place you belong to, which is not completely true according to him. In fact, he wished that to be true, because for him it could have led to a peace of mind: "Would that surgically clean separation were true, because then at least you could have the consolation of knowing that what you have left behind is, in a sense, unthinkable and completely irrecoverable." (Saed 1993, cited in Makhoul, 1995: 138). In reality, what Saeed stated could be true to some extent is that we might find peace by putting an end to the pain of longing for our place of origin, however, the existence of hope remains vital to continue. This sign of hope is manifested in and throughout the project. In fact, doing the project itself is an expression of hope rather than a manifestation of suffering. I am choosing not to give up and keep silent about the Syrian war effects on my life and so many others. Instead I am raising awareness of the situation and seeking people's attention.

On top of this, going back home doesn't only mean returning for good, but also to have the right to communicate with family, to check on your beloved ones, to visit your country whenever you need, and the right to feel a connectedness. Communication with Syrian people via internet, phone, or even emails which, although it has been possible from time to time has also been constantly interrupted since 2011, sometimes not enabling any connection at all. Hence this practice-led research is a result of this constantly changing distance, and this highly digitally mediated way of communication manifests itself through the writing, the practice and the setting of final exhibition.²

The last typical aspect of exile art is to keep a strong attachment and manifestation of cultural and national identity, which brings back the note about a clichéd cultural Middle Eastern art:

“One would expect that the exiled group of artists would be influenced by their immediate surroundings and their country of residence would affect their artistic production. Given their attitude to their homeland, however, they are likely to try to retain a strong sense of cultural and national identity” (Makhoul, 1995:137).

Speaking from personal experience, I found this observation to be true. The sense of cultural and national identity that Makhoul described is considered in my project. However, it is not extremely perceptible. The represented stories and events throughout the practice create a Syrian impression,

² At the final exhibition the video installation will shed the light on the screen-based relationship with participants

naturally, because they took place in Syria with Syrian people, but I don't intend to promote the Syrian cultural or national identity since the stories of individuals during the Syrian war is the main focus.

Consequently, the project is developed to cover a new relationship created by this forced distance between myself and my country, family and friends (participants) and how this relationship is affected by the current circumstances of home. The concept of 'home' is being pushed by the current circumstances to change and sometimes to take on a different meaning. The project points out this change and asks questions about my connection with my home country and the country I now live in – the UK- and investigates the challenge of being 'here' while 'there' is changing and being distorted.

From the discussion so far, we notice that the project is motivated by a changing emotional distance with Syria, events and my participants so its exilic aspect is not political but personal. It is keeping a sense of connection with roots with the help of new technology and becoming a manifestation of hope and contribution.

The politics are essentially in the situation that the project has been created around. The availability of the internet and phone connection in Syria and the ability of participants to talk, massively inform what and how I am able to do. Hence a politics of form emerges, in that the political events raging around the participants give rise to certain formal characteristics that are limited in various unique ways by the circumstances in which they are created.

This political nature is also implied by the subject matter, however, it is important to clarify that the project is not supporting a one-dimensional, one-party view of the conflict. In other words, it is not taking a path of a typical political art project. Syria is perhaps the first truly complex international conflict; more fighters are there representing foreign countries than indigenous fighters between the government and the oppositions (Kirk, 2016). My project is political in the sense that though it is set in a war zone it primarily brings ordinary people's stories to light.

The differences between my project and a typical political art project starts by not adopting a specific ideology, critique or claim. It is focused on the human being involved in the Syrian war represented by participants. Secondly, political art tends to be provocative, polemical and shocking while my art by contrast is considerate³. The 'shock' approach to seeking attention is intentionally not used in my project. As an alternative, I am highlighting the story of the regular person offering a new path towards understanding the conflict's impact.

The last feature of the project I would like to discuss is its hybrid documentary nature. On one level, I am representing real events via real people while at other level I am taking that experience and responding to it and doing more than merely documenting it; I am using it as a starting point for a more complicated moving image mode. In other words, I am documenting first-hand experiences that are happening or have happened during the Syrian

³ This will be clarified in details in *Take My Hand* chapter

war since March 2011, but the perceptual and presentational modes do not all fit into the classic 'documentary' mode. In order to understand and define the project's documental nature and its potential of combining the fictive with 'truth' or real events, I will be reviewing a number of texts that explore theories of documentary and its qualities.

David Bordwell defines different types of form in the documentary film, like the 'rhetorical form', where the filmmaker argues an opinion and tries to convince the viewer to adopt it. He suggests: "We can define rhetorical form in film by four basic attributes. First, it addresses the viewer openly, trying to move him or her to a new intellectual conviction, to a new emotional attitude, or to action" (Bordwell, 2008:348). This description might sound a perfect definition to some of my videos, which can even be more thoroughly classified to fall under the 'Arguments from Source' category in the rhetorical form, in this case the participants are the trusted source as Syrians living the conflict:

"...arguments will rely on what are taken to be reliable source of information. The film may present first-hand accounts of events, expert testimony at a hearing, or interviews with people assumed to be knowledgeable on the subject." (Bordwell, 2008:345)

However, I soon discover that according to Bordwell some of my videos also combine an aspect of the 'associational form', which is a type of form in experimental filmmaking "it suggests ideas and expressive qualities by grouping images that may not have any immediate logical connection. But the very fact that the images and sounds are juxtaposed prods us to look for

some connection – an *association* that binds them together” (Bordwell, 2008:363).

I offer rhetorical form of documentary at some places in where I depend on my participants’ testimonies to generate sympathy in the viewer and to move them emotionally. While other ‘documentary’ videos in the practice have an associational experimental form in which I suggest meanings to be drawn from making connections between disconnected images and sounds. So the whole body of work is responsive to the material I have, in where I re-create the documented material to produce an artistic response to stories. They don’t take a pure classic form of documentary nor a pure subjective experimental form. Rather the practice builds on layers of documentary and experimentation. This all confirms that the practice is not falling under one particular type of documentary moving image.

To understand its documentary form further, I now explore its definitions and bring comparisons with the imaginative or the ‘fiction’ type of film. Patricia Aufderheide in her book *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction* (Aufderheide, 2007) begins to define documentary film by reviewing the typical and common definitions of such film, for instance: the documentary film is not a movie, nor is it an entertaining movie, but rather a serious one. She then continues to argue that most documentaries are created with an entertainment purpose and many documentary makers don’t see themselves as journalists but as storytellers. (Aufderheide, 2007)

Another point she raises about the nature of the documentary film, that this type is often considered to introduce us to a real story or real event, is exactly where the problem occurs; documentary film is not real life, rather it *represents* a real life:

“Documentaries are about real life; they are not real life. They are not even windows onto real life. They are portraits of real life. Using real life as their raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what story to tell, to whom, and for what purpose” (Aufderheide, 2007:2)

This points to my practice as one of trying to avoid the trite popular schematic that one’s practice is either documentary and real or woefully subjective and personal. My project attempts to take the dissolution of a country, via testimony and observation of my family and relatives’ troubles in Syria, and produce a layered result that has footholds in many different types of moving image presentation or traditions, resulting in a hybrid documentary practice with a private account and a subjective outlook. Aufderheide contends that documentary film represents a real life, tells a true story but with manipulation. According to her, there is no film completely empty from influence, editing, mixing, and with visual and sound effects and so on. She gives as an example of a great documentary film by Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which the director asked the participants to act just as in any fiction film to show them doing things they no longer did, only to keep the viewer interested in the film, and by that he represented his own perspective of years living with the Inuit. (Aufderheide, 2007)

She contends that to create a story about real life is an endless debate and there is no clear solution to it. She speaks from the viewer's perspective and asks for truth in such film, and expects not to be deceived or lied to. At the same time, she doesn't expect a pure objective view to be presented. She adds that the background of knowledge and experience of the viewer also plays a role in receiving and interacting with the documentary film. In other words, the audience expect the documentary film to be a frank and reasonable representation of the subject. She then refers to the argument made by Michael Rabiger "There are no rules in this young art form, only decisions about where to draw the line and how to remain consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience." (Aufderheide, 2007:3)

Aufderheide is correct here - the documental aspect of my project is not *presenting* a real story, rather it is *representing* the real story. The viewer will be introduced to a real story that happened during the Syrian war, yet the story is not a pure reality, technical manipulations are inescapable and my creativity of the artwork is required. There is no clear distinguishing line between imagination, creativity, the artistic input and the real subject matter. They altogether, as combined elements, create my documentary video. As Stella Bruzzi puts it "It's a fine line between the real and the fake, and what is of far more interest to documentarists at the moment it seems to me is the complexity and productiveness of the relationship between the two." (Bruzzi, 2006: 5-6)

There is often no clear distance between the real and the artistic. An example from art history is when Robert Capa staged so called 'real' shots, demonstrating that many ostensibly documentary images and sequences are highly contrived. Another example from this project is my video *From Rochester with Love* (2013), in which I put together shots of my current surroundings; house, garden, and neighbourhood, while talking about my life back home. It is footage about a real person telling real stories, yet it is altered by the invisible manipulations, for example, the editing process, including pre-selection of material, the sound of rain was emphasised, the sound of music was put down and so many other effects. The point is that this video, like the rest of the series, is documentary and like any other documentary project has a creative aspect and an imaginative one. Seeing that those aspects have the purpose to communicate a more interesting piece, nevertheless it is vital to remain truthful and honest with the viewer.

Martin Carter starts his review of Michael Chanan's book *The Politics of the Documentary* (2008) by questioning if the documentary film is a genre of its own and whether it offers much more 'truth' than the fiction film. According to him, asking basic questions about documentary including what this type of film is "opens up cans of worms by the shelf-load", referring to the problematic definition of this type of film, and how difficult it is to have its clear and simple description (Carter, 2007). To define the documentary film is indeed a complicated issue. However, Chanan describes documentary film's quality as Carter puts it "as being a 'family' of film forms linked by a common gene pool that, like family resemblances, can be identical, similar or totally different" (Carter, 2007). He asserts that documentary offers a vital community counter

to discuss ideas, argue points of view and put people on authority under the light.(Chanan, 2008)

Exploring documentary film in parallel with fiction film will help me understand my project's potentials, and whether representing the 'truth' is actually an action of *recording* the real thing or *recreating* the real thing to be represented.

Roberta Sopina and Michael Hoenisch explore the meaning of documentary film, compare it with fiction film qualities and demonstrate differentiations and similarities between the two genres. They review definitions of documentary by a number of experts, which helps to form a consistent understanding of this genre. John Bang Carlsen, John Grierson, Jonathan Kahana, William Rothman, and Bill Nichols explain that documentary film is a form of art, has its roots in reality in which it creates a direct reflection and observation of this reality, it responds to the new artistic and communication needs, and has social, profitable, entertainment and educational purposes, and finally conclude with a quote by Ellis and McLane "the power of documentary and its uniqueness lay exactly in its fusion of social purpose with artistic form" (Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011:18)

Sopino and Hoenisch build on this understanding of documentary film and suggest that it is naturally experimental and inventive and that the creativity of the filmmaker plays the major role in forming this genre and allows it to go beyond boundaries of reality presentation:

"actuality is submitted to the creativity of the filmmaker, who manipulates

it through more or less deliberate processes of selection and association, in order to go beyond the boundaries of direct observation, and to give it a precise, often politically-oriented meaning.” (Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011:4).

On the other hand, they dispute the common sense which indicates that documentary and fiction film are natural oppositions, different and can't meet or merge; instead they find similarities between the two genres and bring them closer (Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011).

To support their argument they referred to Henrik Juel's theory, which brings the documentary film closer to the notion of fiction film or creating film which says that the action of 're-presentation' of what happened without manipulation, editing, and cutting can't be called either a documentary or a fiction film. According to this theory it is actually 'nothing':

“A film is hardly a film without camera works, cuts or editing, and it is neither a fiction nor a documentary if it is nothing more than a 're-presentation' of what happened to be in front of a lens and a microphone” (Juel 2006, cited in Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011:12).

There seem to be logic in this statement. If there is no thinking, concept, editing and a message to convey, then the video could look like any immature video taken using a mobile phone or a home camera to record anything. The work must be ordered according to a conceptual scheme or set of ideas that guides the structuring of the work, that it can be understood by an audience as constituting a coherent argument.

Another theory developed by Bill Nichols suggests that every film has a documental aspect as an observation of the culture it represents, the fact that brings the documentary film genre even closer to that notion of film creation “Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it” (Nichols 2001, cited in Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011:12). In addition, they emphasise the importance of storytelling in all sorts of films and especially in the documentary format and relate subjectivity to this type of film, which is usually fiction film associated. According to Sopina and Hoenisch telling a story through the art of film is the only way to keep the audience interested and “the only legitimate way to hold a discourse on reality, without misleadingly pretending to be ‘objective’” (Sapino & Hoenisch, 2011:14). Clearly, documentary and fiction films are not different film genres as they might seem, they are similar and the distance between them is short and flexible. Unlike the expected, they can be mixed and they can overlap (Dunne, 1946).

Similarly, in my practice there is no distance between the real, the artistic and the experimental. While documenting the domestic during the Syrian war and applying a combination of forms, I am re-configuring and responding to the stories creatively while living far from Syria. So when using real footage, creativity, editing, cutting, applying some visual and sound effects –when necessary fitting with the context of the work- are unavoidable. Therefore, the practice is not real but rather a *creative representation of the real*.

By discussing a number of writings in connection to the project, we conclude that I don't follow the clichés in which the universal or political concerns and the shockingly violent are dominant. In fact, I am creating a new way to look at the Syrian war, and opening up the subject from the inside. It is responding to a national crisis, through reaching to everyday circumstances of Syrian people, yet, without being celebrative and attached to the national and cultural identity. The project also has a particular exile aspect that is based on personal emotional circumstances, not political ones, which enriches the project investigation in the connection between here and there and the notion of home.

Moreover, a complex hybridity of form is being presented by this project. Concluding that there is no clear line between the fictive and the real and what we will see of an artwork is a mixture of my creativity using the real story elements as part components in my experimental practice. What makes this hybrid documentary research project more rich and exciting is the challenge to achieve the balance between representing the destruction of my country and to some extent my family while conveying that it is also a legitimate space for an artistic creative response to that same nightmare.

In this way, the project is creating a space outside the typical frame of the Middle Eastern art; that is expected either to investigate a general universal concern, or to take an extremely political path, or to find a way to bring its strong cultural presence to the image. Instead, it is focusing on the personal story of experiencing the Syrian conflict. Its hybrid documentary nature is

combining transparency with creativity and leading to a mixture of elements inspired by real stories.

Throughout the next chapters, I will be explaining the project's personal, domestic and compassionate approach. I will also be pointing out the further features that distinguish my project and situate it in the circle of the Middle Eastern contemporary art.

Talk to me, I will listen

A Domestic and Personal View

“I want to talk about my suffering to you...because you know how I feel and what I mean...”

A quote taken from an interview with my cousin W. S. H. after he was kidnapped by ISIS for a few months in Aleppo, Syria in August 2012.

In this chapter I contextualise my project aim, which centres on the perspective from behind the walls and closed doors; the domestic and the personal. The violent images seen often on social media websites and TV channels about the Syrian war became so familiar and repetitive. What we learn from them only confirms our assumptions about a violent and incomprehensible conflict. We see images of a broken reality - holes in walls, tanks, guns, blood, dead and dismembered bodies and so on from one unbearable image of destruction to the next. I am offering a counter-point, a personal view of the war's impact, a domestic exploration of small histories following the carnage. What does it mean to a ten year old girl when she cannot attend school and see her friends? What does it mean for my seven year old nephew to be separated from his father for two long years? What does it mean for my friend to lose his girlfriend after she became a refugee in one of the Lebanese camps? Many questions could be asked about hidden and personal stories that radically changed people's lives.

Through the practice I am listening and responding to myself, my family and friends about what they have to say after the start of the war, how their lives completely changed and how these stories echo those of similar families and young people across Syria. For this discussion, I bring up thoughts by Jacques Rancière, Ariella Azoulay, Nawal Al Saadawi, and Lucy Soutter, to help me rationalise my project's aim and the perspective it is taking. In addition, I will use a number of emotion theories to help in understanding the impact of emotions on my practice. Concluding I bring up two different photography examples to show what shape this aspired vision could take and how on the other hand it is possible to duplicate the mainstream of war imagery.

Jacques Rancière asks to distribute the sensible more than the knowledgeable in art, to circulate what can be said, heard, and seen, the perceptible that opens the situation from inside and even creates a new subjectivity:

“I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (Rancière, 2004:12).

This, however, according to Rancière could create a political struggle. As he explains, politics doesn't constitute a struggle between precedent groups or classes, but it happens when the left-out and excepted groups try to build their own vision and identity and get their voices heard. (Rancière, 2004). "Politics [according to Rancière] is thus a struggle between the established social order and its excluded 'part which has no part'" (Sayers, 2005)

He argues that we are brought together to experience common sensations and art can't be isolated from those common and shared experiences. In other words, art cannot be separated from our pain, suffering, and other feelings we experience, it has to be involved in that immersion we all share "Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together, and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of 'being together'"(Rancière, 2009:56)

Rancière follows this idea up in writing *The Emancipated Spectator* theory, which claims that art doesn't only form a part of our sensational experience of the world, but it can also liberate the spectator from all the too-familiar and emancipate them from all clichés and the expected, instead it introduces them to a whole new perspective of the subject (Rancière, 2009). However, in order for art to have that power, he points out that it needs to be free from all hierarchies; art needs to be free from superiority over the spectator. Alternatively, he suggests a conflicted concept, which confirms art's independence on one hand, and on the other hand it dreams of liberating

feelings that creates a connection with the world and form the art's heteronomy. Only in that way can art offer emancipation - by being like a coin with two sides that complete each other; autonomy and heteronomy.

“Rancière proposes a counter-discourse, based on a contradiction, which, on the one hand, recognizes art's autonomy (a specific way of thinking, seeing, and speaking that is particularized when we stand in spaces reserved for art). On the other hand, it imagines a liberating sensibility that simultaneously reaffirms art's connections to the world of which this sensible experience is a part – its heteronomy. In this conception, stemming from Schiller's concept of “free play,” autonomy and heteronomy are opposite sides of the same coin – perceived simultaneously” (Hall, 2010:3)

For Rancière, the emancipation of the spectator can't depend on a hierarchical structure, because it has to offer a mutual experience between the artist and the spectator of simultaneously exploring the subject. In other words, the artist doesn't enjoy more knowledge than the spectator. The artist is in a creative way responding to his emotions about the subject while trying to allocate the sensible: to share the possible from what is said, heard, thought of and seen (Rancière, 2009). The artist and the spectator are both at the same time invited to investigate the image. (Rancière, 2009).

Moreover, in *The Future of the Image* Rancière promotes the phantasmagorical dimension; the imaginary dimension, which can be understood as 'the true inner world' that is built from the power of imagination and emotions.(Rancière, 2007). The political vision of art needs to be investigating, questioning, and celebrating the

personal unique powers of creativity and the true self. At the same time, it needs to be playing a counter point to the mainstream of media and consumerist imagery that serve commercial and governmental purposes. This is the vision that Rancière is striving for: 'the phantasmagorical dimension of the truth, which belongs to the aesthetic regime of the arts' against what he terms 'the representative regime', which is the governmental and controlled vision by media. (Rancière, 2004)

The presence of the inner phantasmagorical true energy leads our direction as artists. This powerful inner influence is what helps us to create a significance to our work. As Joseph Nechvatal puts it, adopting Rancière's view "Our inner world is the only source of meaning and purpose we have and a particularly politically visionary art of investigation is the way to discover for ourselves this inner life." (Nechvatal, 2007) Nechvatal then continues to explain more about Rancière's point in claiming for an encounter vision against the daily materialistic data we are constantly exposed to, a true, innovative, imaginative and sensible vision that comes from the true inner self: "in contrast to our market-frenzied materialist culture, which trains us to develop the eyes of outer perception, a politically visionary phantasmagorical style of art could encourage the development of inner sight based on individual intuitive eye."(Nechvatal, 2007)

The original political art practice Rancière is fighting for in his writings aims to recreate "the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our effects" (Rancière, P:82, 2004). This will lead to a subjective vision, a personal one coming from the depth of the emotion we feel towards the subject, a response

that can reform what can be stated about the subject, which has a great resonance with my project.

According to him the artistic image has to generate connections between the influence of creativity and the situation the image is inspired by. Another way of putting it is to make a connection between imagination and reality in one artistic frame. An artistic image for Rancière doesn't necessarily have to lead to something else, but rather to work as combinations of elements between what the artist has to offer from his own creativity and imagination and what the situation she is concerned with offers. So that the artistic image can be "operations: relations between a whole and parts, between a visibility and a power of signification and effect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them". (Rancière, 2007:3)

Noticeably, all through Rancière's writing, he is embracing the power of imagination, celebrating its ability to leave an impact, however, not by adopting creativity alone. According to him, sharing the sensible in a creative way can make the artistic image work. He insists that art can - differently than knowledge and political statements - produce "regimes of sensible intensity" (Rancière 2002, cited in Bornowsky, 2006). Rancière's claim for a true inner vision is not new by any means. This theory was brought up by Deleuze and Guattari twenty years ago (Nechvatal, 2007). When they claimed for 'nomadic thinking - making', they opened the opportunity for art to promote subjectivity, looking into the personal, and embracing the internal nature: "Deleuze/Guattari already have outlined new modes of sense perception

which help encourage novel forms of subjectivity....” (Nechvatal, 2007). This fundamentally proves the validity of my project exploring the domestic as a way of reassessing and representing conflict and war.

However, what differentiates Rancière’s theory from other proposals is the romantic and poetic nature of his claim. Although he describes the vision as ‘suitable’ it is still around the context of a ‘dream’. This romanticism –even if it’s not identified as such in his writings or in the reviews of his writings- would be appealing to a lot of artists. This art project is my creative response to emotions, therefore, the romantic and poetic nature of Rancière’s theory meets the motivations behind creating the practice in the first place.

My art is not designed to scientifically produce or analyse data about the Syrian war. It is trying to produce emotions based on emotions, the fact that makes art an advantageous and perfect medium to use. It is different from statistical information concerned with victims’ numbers, the size of destruction and the aftermath. It is also different from documented material about the war from facts, political and social reasons and its consequences nationally and internationally. My material, on the contrary, comes as a creative response to the emotional and essentially the human situation affected by the war.

Rancière even uses romantic and poetic words to describe

“The dream of a suitable political work of art’ as ‘the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable

without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations.” (Rancière, 2004:59)

These thoughts by Rancière converse with several features and aims of my project; to bring the sensible closer, in relation to what can be said and heard about the Syrian war while highlighting real experiences and testimonies. To listen to my participants is a fundamental value that adds to the meaning of the project. This reforms the project to become combinations of my personal subjective perspective with a projected view of what is being said, felt, and shared. My project is bringing this experience closer to the spectator, making him or her more familiar with it, towards more approachable stories and getting rid of its strangeness, alienation and separation from the world.

Depending on understanding Rancière’s theories, my project stands for what can be said and heard about the Syrian situation, which gives the practice a political dimension. In other words, by getting the left-out participants’ voices heard my project is creating an aspect of a politics counter to the media; the pre-established source of information.

Emotions and feelings form an important element of my project. As Rancière stated, art cannot be separated from our emotions and it has to be involved in our common experiences, which is exactly what my project is responding to; feelings caused by the Syrian war. What is interesting as well is his belief

in the power of non-hierarchical regimes of art, to be free from any classification or arrangement, which meets my project's spontaneous nature. It has been created whenever possible using whatever possible from devices, technology, communication tools, and art media from moving image to illustration. My project's tools have been always flexible, adapting and changing in response to the circumstances, the personal and the regional ones of a war zone: the factor that makes any pre-arrangement of the project almost impossible. As explained in Chapter One, the project can't be classified within one category, rather it employs hybrid contemporary-experimental documentary-moving image qualities. I am not claiming that I know more than the viewer about the war in Syria. I am offering what has been said and told about the topic during the interviews, I am then re-forming them. This is to be able to invite the spectator to explore, observe, and process the sensible. On top of this, by being an observer and a participant myself⁴ I am assuring the non-hierarchical setting of my practice. What I learn from my personal and participants' experiences is out there to be shared and processed together with the spectator. Similarly, the whole point of my project is to present a specific vision of the conflict in Syria, whereas there are hundreds of experts who in the language of the news precisely turn all wars, whether it is in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya into a severely homogenous world. Much of the problem lies with the media's inability to go into the amount of detail to bring a personal side of a certain conflict. Besides, most people simply don't have the patience to read thousands of words about a war's

⁴ Observer-participant research method as explained in *Methodology* section

personal effects on everyday life, hence we see the media simplifies and summarises everything.'

Furthermore, my project aims to respond to Rancière's ultimate invitation: to emancipate the spectator from the very-well-known; to refute the idea that war images can only be an announcement of death, instead they can release and liberate the spectator from all the clichés and offer one a whole new perception. It is based on enhancing an artistic response to the participants' participations, to incorporate imagination and creativity with personal testimonies. In other words, it is based on true feelings and emotions combined with inventiveness, which gives the practice a phantasmagorical dimension.

Since feelings form an important inspiration to my project; looking at theories of emotions help to understand their relationship with my practice and their impact on my creative choices. Several theories had been developed to understand emotions, however, four of them have been the most common and the most used in the history of literature and psychology. James – Lange's theory to start with suggests that emotion is not a result of the event but a result of the change in our body as a result of the event (James 1884) (Lange 1887). For instance, if our heartbeats suddenly became faster because of a barking dog this causes an emotion of fear. (Sato, 2010)

However, Cannon – Brad theory argues against the initial idea by James – Lange and claims that emotion and our body experience work independently from each other and neither of them is caused by the other (Cannon & Brad, 1972). “This means that our brain cannot just rely on our bodily responses to know which emotion we are experiencing... Both the experience of the emotion and the bodily response occur at the same time independently of each other” (Sato, 2010)

Schachter-Singer theory on the other hand suggests that having an emotion needs “both bodily response and an interpretation of the bodily response by considering the particular situation the person is in at the moment” (Schachter-Singer 1962, cited in Sato, 2010). According to Schachter and Singer an emotion is followed by an interpretation by the brain giving and considering the situation. So if we have fast heartbeats while we are looking at the person we love, it is interpreted by our brain to be love or excitement, however, if we have fast heartbeats while we are chased by a dog, our brain interprets it as fear. In other words, defining and understanding the emotion depends on the situation itself. (Schachter-Singer 1962)

The fourth most common theory of emotions is called Opponent-Process theory. It explains emotions in relation to opposites. The theory claims that having an emotion interrupts our bodily state of balance, therefore, each emotion has its counterpart to maintain that balance. This suggests that straight after feeling a certain emotion, we start feeling the opposite emotion

as an attempt from our body to uphold the balance of the body. (Solomon & Corbit1972, cited in Sato, 2010).

In relationship to my practice all four theories enable me to comprehend emotions and their impact on my body, my thinking and creativity. Among the four philosophies, I believe that Schachter-Singer's theory is the most logical and rational one, in addition to being the most adapted interpretation of emotions in psychology debates. Our body and emotions are connected and they feed into the experience of each other, whereas the interpretation of the emotion and defining it depend on the situation itself. Emotions I experience while creating the practice from nostalgia, worry, sadness, stress, and excitement etc. have all been responded to and considered throughout the practice, as well as responding to the participants' emotions coming across the monologues and interviews. It is informing to know that our bodily response and mind work together to produce emotions. This means that my artistic response is reforming in relation to my bodily response and my mind's interpretation of the story focused on.

Since my mind's interpretation of the emotion depends on the situation itself, and since it is totally subjective how my mind will interpret it, the artistic response to this emotion is led to be subjective. How I interpret the emotion based on the situation might be different to what the spectator will interpret in relation to the situation. This is logical, especially since the subject itself made it impossible for me to create an objective long distance with the participants

and the events. It is personal, based on my own understanding of the situation, and I am celebrating this nature in my practice.

However, there is a challenge across the project as a whole, namely that of avoiding producing a merely nostalgic exercise that could be turned into a collection of personal diaries and notes. Therefore, I have to apply a consideration of the context and the purpose of the whole project and to be selective in choosing the material. Although it is subjective, it is still considering the presence and after-view of the other. Ultimately, the project had to develop to create an interest and curiosity in the audience too, not only in myself.

If we return to Rancière, my art is supposed to emancipate the viewer from the pre-prepared clichés. The spectator and the artist are equal in knowledge and they are both invited to explore the subject in the same frame. I agree with that except in one detail - my personal attachment with the subject, which leads to my own interpretation of the situation, is inherently different from that of an unconnected European audience. This is what makes the difference between the viewer and me in relation to the project. There is no hierarchy involved, rather, a difference in distance from the subject. This helps me to offer an original art that is close to my heart and embraces my feelings about the war in my country. Yet, my feelings don't necessarily transfer to the spectator; feelings don't travel between artist and the viewer. As Rancière states, we should not fight for superiority in transferring any knowledge or

feelings to the viewer (Rancière, 2009), and naturally and scientifically the emotions the viewer feels are their own interpretation and response to the situation.

Although, there is no guarantee to trigger a particular feeling in the viewer like sympathy and compassion and to avoid to trigger shock or disturbance, the feedback of my work from viewers mostly was going towards the aspired direction: they mostly reviewed the work as emotional and moving and not shocking or emotionally disturbing. I intentionally try not to produce a disturbing practice but rather sensitive that seeks compassion.

I would like at this point to discuss a bit more the distance I have with the country, participants and hence with the events in Syria. This distance has created a curious perspective mixed with sentimental feelings, which gives my art a further dimension of inspiration. Being far away has made me even more involved emotionally in the war than I could be if I were there, which has been noticed by talking to the participants. While they are busy trying to survive the death and constant danger, I am focused on the emotional details of their daily experiences. This gives the project an interesting depth that could be only added by a creator, who lives outside the war, outside the danger and far from the lack of essentials of water and food. As our priority changes, making art in those circumstances can only be possible after having a reasonable sense of safety and survival, which unfortunately is still out of reach for most of my participants.

Expanding upon the theory developed by Ariella Azoulay in her book *Death Showcase* (2011) in which she asks for a close and involved look at the subject instead of an artificial, limited, and an expected one “The manual reconstructive act is... to resist the transformation of the world into a two-dimensional surface, into a picture which posits the viewers into the position of merely addressees whose only function is to confirm the seen by saying yes or no.” (Azoulay, 2011:86). My work, which is similar to what Azoulay is fighting for, is resisting the transformation into a two-dimensional world, into sender and receiver, media and spectator. The practice aims to encounter this expected view and invite the viewer to form his or her own feelings about the subject throughout my personal-focused practice. Nawal Al Saadawi – an Egyptian thinker and philosopher - likewise invites creative minds to stand against the mainstream source of information to enlighten us with an original perspective. According to Al Saadawi, the violent image dominates the media and touches only the surface of what is happening in the Arabic region. In response to that, she asks for a closer look, a poetic, compassionate and feminine view of our painful reality, a view that enhances and embraces our emotions within our humanity. (Al Saadawi, 2013).



Figure 1: *Les Pillards*, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, by Luc Delahaye, 2010

Of course there are many others who have reacted in a similar way. For instance, Lucy Soutter also believes that war images only confirm what we already know and fail to surprise us. She embraces the authentic art, the personal that isn't interested to prove itself as real, rather expressive of one's emotions and feelings (Soutter, 2013). For that, she brings to the discussion a photograph by Luc Delahaye (figure 1) depicting the Haiti earthquake disaster that happened in 2001 to ask a significant question after looking at *Les Pillard* "What do we learn that we didn't already know about Haiti after the devastating earthquake?" (Soutter, 2013:57).

Delahaye's work, according to Soutter, is typical, unoriginal and doesn't provide anything new about the subject "his compositions often portray an archetypal, clichéd version of events" (Soutter, 2013:58). Indeed, looking at the photo doesn't necessarily move us, inform us or add anything new to our

knowledge about Haiti's earthquake. It only confirms how overwhelming moments like these would look like. It's typical and overall ordinary, and despite the humanistic disaster it is concerned with, it seems far from any emotional involvement by the creator. In fact, it feels like he is creating a distance with the event and people involved till he became merely a witness. As an alternative response, Soutter promotes the authentic art, describing how important and difficult it is to create one, which inherently relies on the internal true and personal view. This takes us back to Rancière's parallel request to a phantasmagorical dimension and the inner truth that is built from the power of emotions. She describes what it takes to produce an authentic artwork in the following way:

“The project of authenticity involves the pursuit of self-knowledge. At its core, authenticity involves withdrawing from any posturing or false self in order to turn inward. Second, it requires action: living the life that expresses the self-discovered within...” (Soutter, 2013:78).

This statement brings us back to Rancière's romantic 'dream' for an original inner art. It also converses my project's objective, listening to regular Syrian people, who are going through irregular circumstances, while having all the freedom to share their feelings. Producing an authentic art is my intention, a work that relies on pure emotions, offers an inner world, whose existence we don't know of. In other words: my intention is to create art that explores inwardly to discover a truth outside the self and outside the anticipated.

In the late 1976 the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) published *Bad News* and *More Bad News* in 1980, in where they argued throughout their studies against the notion of objectivity of TV news and claimed that it is unfair, prejudiced and controlled by the dominant controlling powers against the working class people. (GUMG, 1976) & (GUMG, 1980). This leads to rethink of the news version of the Syrian events as a political message, which is mostly taking either a black or white colour, either an evil or a good narrative.

On the other hand, the Syrian media for the last few years has been detached from the Syrian reality and has very little connection with what's really happening on the land and behind doors of Syrians' homes. To change this, a vision that offers the Syrians as much as the rest of the world a close and genuine look is desperately needed, and that is to respond to the denial the Syrian media is living in and promoting for. A few thinkers, however, have argued that the current approach of the Syrian media is a way to encourage people to live a normal life without displaying a constant reminder of the trauma. (Abood, 2014). As much as I understand the motivation behind this approach, as much as I believe in the need to portray the real emotional face of the war to Syrians firstly and to the rest of the world secondly. A true vision has not yet been offered, a vision that reflects real life during war, which involved ordinary working class citizens. There is a need here for such a reaction using the medium of art. Despite all kinds of constrains and limitations operating on artists, art still has more freedom than the media, which could be controlled by political, governmental, administrative or commercial interests (Moeller, 1999). On top of this, as a Syrian artist I feel

the need to use the advantage of the art medium to fill this gap, a gap of response to the tragic events that have happened and are still happening in my homeland. At the same time, Syrians are re-living the distortion and suffer watching similar views of their streets on media. An original view that is concerned with their feelings is needed, similar to my view that offers a specific side of the Syrian conflict, while relying on my friends and family testimonies and my personal and close relationship with them.

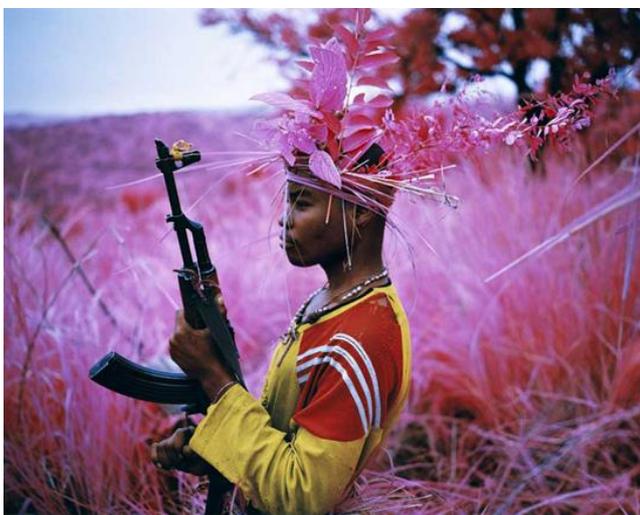


Figure 2- 3: Examples from 'The Enclave' collection By Richard Mosse 2013

An interesting attempt to offer a new perspective of a dramatic conflicted situation is a series of photographs and film installations by Richard Mosse: *The Enclave* (2012-13-14). The project responded to the conflict in Congo started in 1998, where Moss used ultraviolet film to produce unusual magenta effects on what looked like dangerous war zones and beautiful vast landscapes.

In her dissertation *Seeing Pink: War Through a New Lens: Richard Mosse's Infrared Photography in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (2014) Saskia

Boer argues that Mosse's images use the pink infrared film as a symbol for a strong presence and prominence, since the conflict in Congo is abandoned and forgotten about. Mosse is making a loud and noticeable statement "Mosse's images turn pink because of using colour infrared, a film once designed for the US Air Forces to make the invisible enemy visible. Mosse uses it as a metaphor for making the invisible visible; the conflict in Congo is neglected, hard to grasp and invisible." (Boer, 2014: 6). Furthermore, Marc O'Sullivan believes that this loud statement has the purpose of confronting the notion of 'compassion fatigue' –which is what my project is also encountering- and fighting against "the over-familiarity with traditional images of war that cause newspaper and magazine readers to simply turn the page." (O'Sullivan, 2014).

Boer continues to argue that the artist, by using the infrared medium, is encountering the aridness of everyday journalistic material by bringing a less serious material, something experimental and perhaps even tacky "Mosse counters the seriousness and literalness of regular journalistic and documentary photography by using cross processed infrared film, which connotes kitsch and experiment." (Boer, 2014: 6). So that his photography – according to Boer- is offering an unhurried intermediate representation of scenes- after-war instead of the usual critical and rushed moments of war brought regularly by video-journalists: "Mosse's photography is a turn away from photojournalism as decisive moment and a dissociation from superficial video journalism, technically by returning to an analogue, slow medium and conceptually by focusing on the aftermath rather than the event." (Boer, 2014:

6). Boer carries on to state that “Mosse counters the conventions of realism and supposed indexicality by taking the documentary subject out of its context of ‘truth’, both literally by taking it from the press into the museum, and figuratively by employing a totally different, and overt style.” (Boer, 2014: 6). So in this way, Mosse questions the photographic claim of truth and “contrasts it by openly showing beautiful pink lies.” (Boer, 2014: 6). Boer goes on to explain that it is difficult to differentiate what it is indexical and what is iconic in the context of documented material, therefore, Mosse “deconstructs the possibility to objectively and immediately represent reality by drawing attention to the constructedness of the photographic surface: he makes us aware of the fallacy of photographic representation” (Boer, 2014: 6). Eric Wilson agrees with Boer and outlines the clear attempt by Mosse’s images to question the objectivity of the documentary photography and at the same time he confirms that the artist succeeded in breaking the cliché without producing the expected violence and carnage of a conflict, instead Mosse “gives his viewers enough space to meditate on the conflict without blinding them to massacre or numbing them with bloodshed.” (Wilson, 2014)

Despite this positive reflective way to look at the Enclave, Boer moves on to bring her worry to the discussion and wonders about the ‘risk’ that Mosse’s images carry of mislaying trace with actuality and truth: “Their deconstruction and estrangement may destroy any link to the real world ‘out there’ in Congo. The reversal between surface and horrible subject may be amplified by the extreme beauty of the surface, but it may also cause the viewer trouble to see or imagine past it.” (Boer, 2014:7)

Another view brought by Yvette Greslé points out the overwhelming visual impact of the pink effect and its influence on the 'bodily sensation'. As Greslé puts it "These are not photographs to be looked at with cool detachment; they provoke optical and bodily sensations. I *feel* as I look at them." (Greslé, 2014)

The critic is convinced that the empty pink landscapes of the Enclave bring a valid debate about the notion of opposites in the context of war photography: "They would make for a fascinating study in the history of landscapes of war in art and photography. The nightmarish, deeply affecting pinkness and the play of oppositions (natural/artificial; visible/invisible) is full of critical possibilities." (Greslé, 2014). However she has her concerns about the way the soldiers have been represented throughout the film and in the photographs, in which the over-staged shots reminded him of fashion photography approach: "I find no critical value in his representations of soldiers, who are presented in the mannered mode of fashion photography. The titling of Mosse's photographs also makes me flinch: 'Vintage Violence', in particular, is a grotesque and naïve juxtaposition." (Greslé, 2014)

This censure is followed by a deeper undelaying criticism carried out by Greslé about the ethical standards considered in the Enclave. To address this issue Greslé brings the deep-rooted dilemma of a western photographer visiting African affected counties: 'Is Mosse perpetuating the idea of an imagined Other? The idea of the European travelling photographer adventuring into the imagined hinterlands of Africa is rooted uncomfortably in historical concepts of colonialism and race...' (Greslé, 2014). In such a way, Greslé queries the ethics behind the action itself; a western

photographer restaging an atmosphere around a violent situation situated in Africa. Taking into consideration the complex history between Africa and the west including the relationship of the latter to 'Cold War politics and post-colonial dictatorships; the regimes of neighbours such as Rwanda; and war-related violence ...' (Greslé, 2014) the subject matter inherently carries problematic questions and endless speculating about an ethical approach to addressing them. The discussion then leads to an invitation by Greslé to photographers to be more aware of the consequences and references of their war-related work in relation to the historical context of their subjects: "It is time, in the 21st century, for photographers such as Mosse to give more thought to the idea of self-reflexivity – one of the most important lessons to be learnt from 20th-century post-colonial thought, that still presents challenges for both historians and artists alike." (Greslé, 2014).

Arguably, it is a challenge for western artists to keep high ethical standards while encountering the usual seriousness and dramatic features of the documentary language, expressly like in this instance, when approaching a complicated situation like the Congo's and its complex geo-political relations with the west. On other hand, the bold pinkie statement here is underlining the invisible to make it alive again in our conscious, thus standing against the spread of compassion fatigue and the exhausting familiarity with documented material especially the war-related one. However, to some extent this prettifying-horrible-things attempt went beyond that encounter and to evidently lost connection with authenticity, so these over-staged shots became more present and overpowering than the rationale behind their

existence. Combining two contradicted worlds together: beauty and war, led to a new experience of the Congo conflict; an aesthetic experience, which showed an artistic potential of telling a story of pain while at once encountering the basics of documentary language, yet, it is still far away from creating an emotional connection with people involved. As long as the event is situated in the accustomed frame of violence, weapons, strangeness and fear, the emotional impact on the viewer remains out of reach. I am still looking for an intimate view, a vision that brings us closer to the struggle's emotional experience and connects us with people affected.

An example of a closer and more engaging approach was made by a group of Syrian artists: Youssef Alshoufan, Antoine Entabi, Maria Kedikian, Nour Nouralla, Ziad Alasamar, Madonna Adeeb, Khaled Alwaera, and Zaki Alasmar in 2014. The project is called 'The eyes of Syrians around the world'. It is a counter-example to the previous one, less staged, more spontaneous and far from the familiar setting of war and environment after war. It consists of a series of portraits of Syrians living around the world after fleeing the danger of death. Here we can see the eagerness to converse with the inward realm the people in the photos are living (for example see Figure 4). It is refreshing attempt to explore the inner true world of those war-escapers. The artists created their work out of the expected typical war frame, out of the ruins and distorted backgrounds. They created it into the participants' new worlds they are trying to build, going on with their lives while surrounded by details that make them who they are or what they want to be. Details like their



Figure 4: Majd Al Hamwi- Music composer & Artist By Madonna Adib - Beirut- Lebanon 2014

studios, living places, existing memories and new ones that are about to happen.⁵ The series focuses on life during and after war, giving us a domestic view of how the participants are surviving the conflict and trying to recreate a life. The great amount of photographs all point to hope, the will to survive, and even to shine. From the founder Youssef Shoufan's statement, we learn that this vision is planned to counter

the mainstream imagery we face about the Syrian war and also to 'give a voice' to everyone affected by the conflict. They are deeply trying to communicate a humanitarian experience:

"Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, what is shown about Syria isn't always beautiful. It's a sad reality, but in an effort not to forget the human beings behind the conflict, we decided to show the world other faces, other realities. As we want to broaden the spectrum of what is shown about the country, the objective is to give a voice with no discrimination to the diverse communities that form this diverse nation." (Shoufan, 2014).

⁵ To see all photographs, please see this link <http://www.syrianeyesoftheworld.com/>

Here are a couple more examples from 'The Eyes of Syrians around the world'

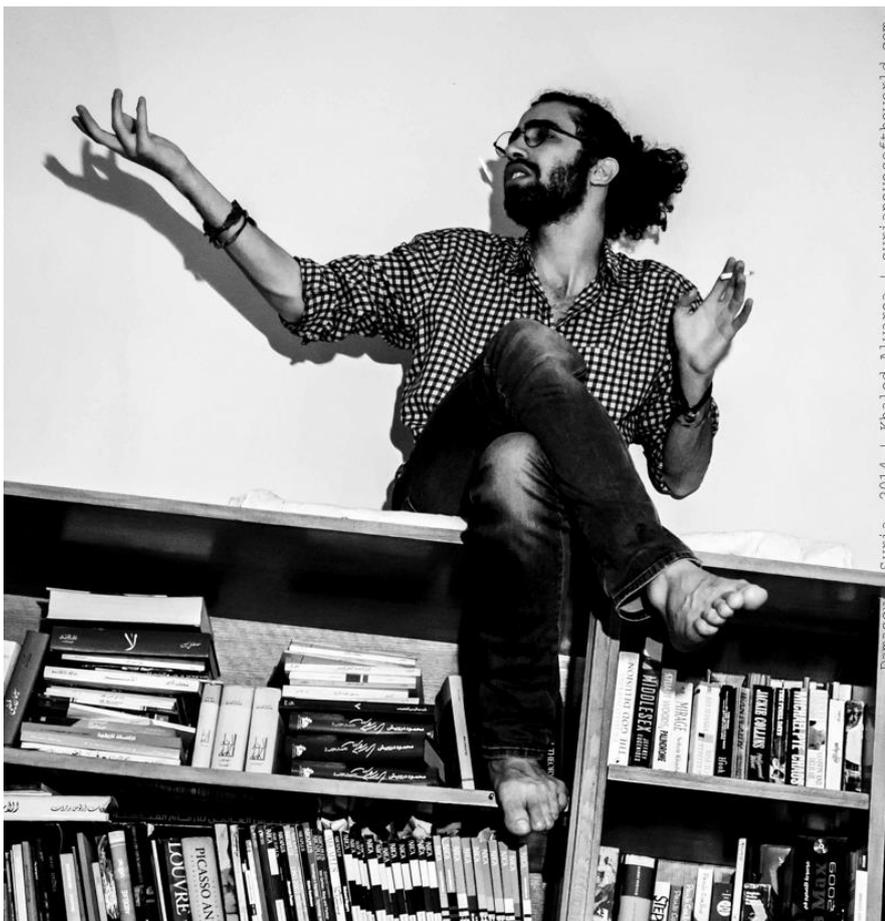


Figure 5: Ammar Ma'moun: Journalist By Khaled Alwarea - Damascus - Syria 2014



Figure 6: Yara Awad: Dancer By Nour Nouralla – New York - USA 2014

This chapter rationalised the objective of my project and explained why I am drawn to explore the impact of the Syrian war via my personal and my participants' personal perspectives. I emphasise throughout the text the need to listen to my participants and what they have to say about their emotional experiences. A number of thinkers helped to form my argument, to determine why it is important to bring the inner world closer and to connect emotionally with the war-affected people rather than duplicating what we are surrounded by all the time from Middle Eastern war images.

Rancière's ideas supported the project's aim, namely the need to bring the sensible closer, what can be said and heard about the Syrian war while highlighting real experiences and testimonies. His thoughts also put my project in the context of an opposite medium to the mainstream source of information and give the practice a political dimension. According to Rancière, art cannot be separated from our emotions and it has to be involved in our common experiences, which is exactly what my project is responding to and based on - feelings caused by the Syrian trauma. I also point out that my project aims to respond to Rancière's ultimate invitation: to emancipate the spectator from clichés and offer one a whole new perspective, which is based on true feelings and emotions combined with imagination giving the practice a phantasmagorical dimension.

I also looked at emotion theories to understand their impact on my project. This in return empowers my practice and embraces its foundation that is built of true sentiments. The exploration concluded that how I interpret the emotion,

which is based on the situation, will be different to what the spectator will interpret and perceive. That emphasises the personal and the subjective nature of the project.

The text then articulated that, in addition to Rancière, a number of thinkers also support this invitation to a phanrasmagorical view, a view with a deep and genuine outlook. Ariella Azoulay asks for a close and deep look at the subject instead of an artificial one that depends on one-dimensional vision, similar to the views of Nawal Al Saadawi, who invites creative minds to stand against the mainstream source of information. The text by Lucy Soutter adapts her criticism of typical war images, in which she believes that they only confirm what we already know and fail to surprise us. As an alternative she embraces the authentic and genuine art, the expressive of pure feelings. Following on from that, I have requested, instead of a one dimensional vision, a close and more caring vision, which pays attention to the affected individuals. Then the chapter goes onto to state that pure art has the freedom that media doesn't necessarily have, which feeds into the need to fill a gap of response to the tragic events that had happened and is still happening in my country. I then conclude that an original view concerned with the affected people feelings is needed, not only for the world to see but for those affected Syrian people themselves. Especially in response to the denial of the Syrian media and being far from portraying the true face of the war for the Syrian audience.

Finally, I brought two opposite examples of photography both concerned with representing the impact of a conflict and that is to show the difference between a vision with a generic outlook (*The Enclave* project) and a vision with a close outlook (*The eyes of Syrians around the world* project). Although both projects are concerned with a similar issue, the different perspective has been taken and made a huge difference in the impact of each.

This chapter eventually helps me to state that my project is aiming to create an emotional connection with the participants. It is an invitation for them to talk while I will be listening and creating art in response.

Take my hand

Ethical issues of war images: The photographer as a vulture

“While I am suffering to death, I need you to take my hand instead of taking my photo”

A quote taken from an interview with R.A. about her experience during the war and leaving her destroyed house and city behind. Damascus- Syria 2013

Here I question the ethics behind war images and how strange it is for us to admire a beautiful and successfully taken photograph of a dismembered body. I argue that a person would not want their distorted body, their pain and suffering to be exposed to the world. It is better to present their final image as a human being, with a name, personality, dreams, and family, and to respect their humanity. What I am doing here is a responsive act to being humanistic, not producing another cliché war representation, but an understanding response of the viewer and participant’s feelings.

Exploring the moral relation to painful imagery leads me to discuss my approach to the subject and the importance of the ethical contemplation in my research methodology and practice. Jacques Rancière, James Elkins, Lucy Soutter, Ariella Azoulay, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, and Susan Meiselas among others are all concerned with ethical issues of war images and argued in their writings for images of compassion against the use of violent and unethical art. Bringing their writings here will help me to wonder about this subject and encounter several points in relation to my perspective.

The intolerable image, according to Rancière, is the image that we cannot stand, the image we feel hopeless in front of, yet, it is everywhere and part of our daily lives (Rancière, 2014). He starts his essay *The intolerable Image* by questioning what makes any image intolerable and whether is it suitable to share such an image that causes the spectator a great deal of pain, disturbance and emotional discomfort. To answer those questions he explores the potential of the image in general and the intolerable image in particular and the effects it could leave on the viewer, bringing a number of interesting examples to the discussion (Rancière, 2014).

He calls the intolerable image: the image that is very much real in an unbearable way, too real to be exhibited and shared, and too real to take a visible form. This type of image he considers to have a purpose of making the spectator feel the guilt of being hopeless in front of, instead of realizing the power, which caused the image to be impossible to endure. The spectator becomes so controlled by that feeling of guilt that they stop facing the reason behind why that situation existed in the first place. They stand against themselves as shamefaced and unable to do anything to change it, as a substitute for standing against the power, which is the reason behind the intolerable spectacle seen “[The spectator] must further feel guilty about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it. In short, she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt.” (Rancière, 2014:85)

To resist the intolerable image Rancière suggests turning the screen into darkness, silence and to nothingness. Perhaps only then something equivalent to horrible realities can be found and an action against this image passive status can be done:

“it now seemed impossible to confer on any image whatsoever the power of exhibiting the intolerable and prompting us to struggle against it. The only thing to do seemed to be to counter-pose the passivity of the image, to its alienated existence, living action. But for that, was it not necessary to abolish images, to plunge the screen into darkness so as to summon people to the action that was alone capable of opposing the lie of the spectacle?” (Rancière, 2014:86)

‘The lie of spectacle’ as Rancière puts it is the furthest existence of the intolerable images from our existence. He brings *The Society of the Spectacle* film by Guy Debord as an example that deals with this notion:

“The reality of the spectacle as the inversion of life was shown by his film to be equally embodied in any image: that of rulers -capitalist or communist - as of cinema stars, fashion models, advertising models, starlets on the beaches of Cannes, or ordinary consumers of commodities and images. All these images were equivalent; they all spoke the same intolerable reality: that of our existence separated from ourselves, transformed by the machine of the spectacle into dead images before us, against us.” (Rancière, 2014:86)

According to Rancière the aim for creating the image is not to contrast the appearance of reality but to create a work of invention that brings, as explained in the previous chapter, a common sense and establishes new links between what has been said and has been created about a given situation. It is to respond to intuition and good judgment and to create information that could be shared, received, and transformed into meaning. (Rancière, 2014)

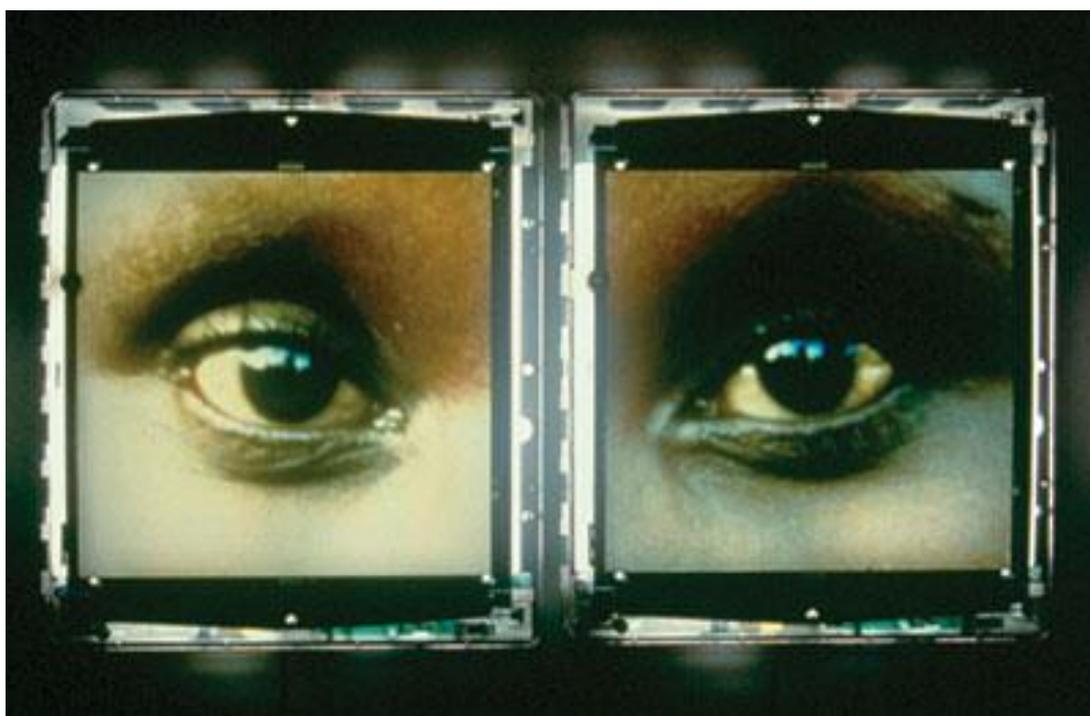


Figure 7: *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* by Alfredo Jaar 1997

Rancière outlines the alternative image to the intolerable one. Although he doesn't define it and introduce it as the alternative image directly, he carefully describes the opposite to the unbearable image, the more acceptable, shareable and the one that offers a 'common sense' (Rancière, 2014). He gives an example of how to present an intolerable occurrence without necessarily showing 'an intolerable image': *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* by Alfredo Jaar in 1997 (figure 7).

Rancière uses the image as a cover of his book *The Emancipated Spectator*, as a reference to what type of image he is looking for and arguing about all along. Jaar chose to represent the Rwandan genocide that happened in the summer of 1997 not by showing any bodies, destruction, or blood. Instead he chose to share with us written words about the massacre followed by an image of the eyes of Gutete Emerita, who witnessed the horrible slaughter and saw her husband and two boys killed in front of her eyes. She and her daughter managed to escape for her eyes to tell the story. (Rancière, 2014).

The introduction to the image as a written text about what she had witnessed, make us imagine and think of what her eyes might have seen. In the presence of her eyes, all that we can care about is what she could possibly have seen and how they affected her gaze. By naming the work using her full name, Jaar is acknowledging her humanity and identity and refusing to show her as merely a victim. That's what Rancière considers as an alternative representation, which doesn't eliminate the subject matter or reject it. Rather it encounters the horror critically and effectively (Rancière, 2014). The eyes in this instance have succeeded to move the viewer without showing a drop of blood. They give a space to imagine what had happened, inviting the viewer to engage emotionally and involve their imagination, which requires their sensitive interaction and collaboration.

My project is aiming similarly to break the flood of anticipated violent images and offer new links between what can be said, heard and shared about the Syrian war. Instead of generating feelings of guilt and disturbance in the

spectator, I am seeking humanistic interaction and compassion. Like the eyes of Gutete Emerita my participants have seen and witnessed horrible incidents and are still living under horrible circumstances. Taking the approach of talking and listening to them focuses on them as human beings and their experience through the war. Every video has been identified with their names, age, and relationship to me, based on my belief that by embracing the participant's humanity and respecting their feelings as well as the viewer's feelings help to create my compassionate project.

In a compassionate project, the painful imagery is the furthest imagery from what I am aiming at. James Elkins wrote *Lingqi* the last chapter of his book *What Photography Is?*(2011) as an attempt to understand the meaning of this unbearable type of imagery. He looks at four pairs of the most painful intolerable images he can find of *Lingqi* and asks the reader to try and look at them slowly and carefully and as if they are looking at any other photograph included in the book. Although I was advised not to look at them carefully as asked by the writer, I had to flip over the pages and read the text. I had a quick glance at the images and soon I realised that they are very disturbing that I've felt emotionally attacked.

I quickly understood that each photo shows a Chinese man being tortured in public, in the ritual known as 'death by a thousand cuts', where there are a lot of spectators and somehow I felt that I have forcefully joined the crowd. The depicted torture is surgical and clean, which make it even more disturbing. Although they are in black and white and the quality is not the best, they still

managed to shock me. They were very upsetting and in a way celebrative of the pain. I was looking in the person's face for some relief, perhaps he is somehow unconscious, but unfortunately, the torturers intentionally keep them conscious to the last minute so they fully feel the pain. They apparently left a space for the camera to take the photographs, they planned to celebrate the torture, and they planned to shock every viewer. But nevertheless, did they manage to leave a powerful impact? Yes they did, but how? By using the disturbing and shocking approach, which is exactly what I avoid using in my project.

Throughout the essay Elkins brings Barthes' opposition to using the technique of 'shock'. As Elkins explained Barthes believes that war atrocities photography fails to shock him because it "over-elaborated the horror" (Barthes 1979, cited in Elkins, 2011:191).

"...the idea of shock, makes the claim that some photographs intend to "disorganize" the viewer, but mainly fail because the photographer has "almost always over-constructed the horror he is proposing," leaving no imagination room for the viewer. The machinery intended to produce the shock effect ends up insulting the viewer..." (Barthes 1979, cited in Elkins, 2011:180)

Although Elkins' language appears at first glance to argue against Barthes' idea, in fact he encounters many thoughts of *Camera Lucida* throughout the book, yet he later compliments Barthes' view when he acknowledges that lots

of these shocking and painful photographs are in fact useless, moreover, they can be so painful that they cannot be included in art practices: “Photographs of the opened body are such strong signifiers of pain and death that it can be challenging to take them into existing art practices. They overwhelm the strongest intentions to see them as art.” (Elkins, 2011:185)

During his attempt to make sense of pain imagery, Elkins admits that they are difficult for him to understand and relate to “In photographs, the faces of people in pain can be distorted in unreadable grimaces or ecstatic visions, and I may feel entirely cut off from the possibility of understanding them”. (Elkins, 2011:179). For him it is difficult to relate to pain images, because it is out of his own body experience. As a phenomenologist he emphasises the necessity of relating to the image fully by our body and senses to enable us to understand and interact with them:

“When they show me people whose bodies are torn or deformed in ways I cannot bring myself to see as being like my own body, or like anything that might happen to it. Photographs often alienate and repulse me in this manner. Images of people maimed in wars, starving bloated children, men mangled in car accidents, birth defects and deformities.” (Elkins, 2011:187).

This type of imagery fails to represent people according to him. They are merely a representation of pain and pain only: “The common ground of these photographs is pain, and it compels me to return to photographs of people –

although in fundamental sense, these are no longer representations of people, but pictures of the body in pain.” (Elkins, 2011:178)

‘Photographs of people’: this notion is what attracts me the most while creating the project. To talk to people, to understand them, to listen to their stories and to respond to their pain. Avoiding what Elkins describes as ‘pictures of body in pain’ (Elkins, 2011). Elkins here divides pain from people and makes a clear distance between the two notions. Similarly, I am refusing to consider that pain is what distinguishes the image, it is what makes it interesting to include in my project. It is not about the pain itself, rather it is about the participants’ experience of pain, their words about feeling it, their expressions, their voice and their presence.

Emotional pain is more immense to deal with, respond to or depict than the physical one. For example, Georges Didi-Huberman has examined the few remaining photos of people being led to gas chambers (Elkins, 2011). Elkins describes them as images that represent what can’t be represented:

“they are taken from a distance, so they are still too much about representing the un-representable, witnessing, obliteration, and the ability to say and show, and not enough about what photographs can do when they are about pain that registered directly in the photograph.” (Elkins 2011:190)

Some levels of grief and suffer can't be represented. The state of grief to lose my home is indescribable. The state of waiting for my family to contact me is also indescribable. For instance, I responded to the state of waiting for news to arrive from home by the video '*Waiting*⁶, in which I display a black silent screen for several minutes and if I could I would display it for hours, days or months, but again it is un-representable. Like in some other videos, I couldn't find the visual language to represent the very painful situation, so I found myself not only taking a refuge in listening and talking to people involved, but also listening to myself and generating monologues, in which words and sometimes silences become stronger than imagery. This requires embracing the nothingness that could be equal to the unrepresentable horror of war and to the horror of waiting, which takes us back to Rancière's search for the alternative image, where he looks for a more subtle and less direct type of imagery in response to the opposite extreme and painful situation.

Martha Rosler likewise stands for the considerate creative reaction from photographers. Lucy Soutter in her *Documentary Dilemmas* essay raises Martha Rosler's argument on documentary photography and her critique of the social-documentary agenda, which Rosler considers to be intensely defective and faulty. (Soutter, 2013). The motive behind this statement appears to be Rosler's belief in the need to help the victims of the documented pictures rather than achieving goals of taking them. Goals that are normally involved around supporting personal objectives of the photographer while producing stereotypical war imagery and forgetting the

⁶ More about *Waiting* video in *From Rochester with Love* chapter

victim's needs in front of the lens: "She argues that rather than helping its depicted victims, documentary has too often served the interests of the privileged. Despite, or even because of, the good intentions of photographers, the work has taken on clichéd or institutionalized forms that become even more impotent and self-serving once they are absorbed into the domain of art."(Soutter, 2013:54).

Soutter suggested an answer for this quandary by applying "a constant renegotiation of content through careful use of text and an acute self-consciousness." (Soutter, 2013:54). She adopts this argument and continues to say that "These strategies remain crucial for contemporary art photographs engaging with documentary as well as for a new wave for photo-journalists revitalizing the project of witnessing world events." (Soutter, 2013:54).



Figure 8: *Taliban Soldier* by Luc Delahaye 1994

Delahaye's photograph *Taliban* (2001) shows a corpse lying in a trench forming a 'beautiful' image according to Soutter, which she used as an example to ask the question: "At 109 cm x 236 cm, the image is dazzlingly detailed, presented for contemplation rather than quick consumption. Is this

contemplation productive in some way, or merely pleasurable at the expense of a dead boy?" (Soutter, 2013: 55). (Figure 8)

This question leads to an extended list of other similar questions: what is the point of showing details of a dead body? Why is it exhibited in an art gallery? Is it a piece of art? Is observing death and suffering from a distance, and from the safe room of the gallery, pleasurable to the viewer? Does the interaction with death become entertaining and acceptable because of the detachment from the situation? On the other hand, does the exposed dead body contribute to the history of the place presented in the image or to our knowledge about the situation? Does it contribute to our familiarity and knowledge about the human being in the photo? Exhibiting a dead body in an art gallery is not informative about the situation, history or its circumstances. That is apart from being a showcase of what we previously know of the unfortunate victims' existence of any war. The dead body can only assure the natural and normal results of the war, which are death and destruction.

The choice of an audience and place to exhibit such an image is a major factor in the exhibition setting that is in terms of acceptance or rejection of this type of imagery's content, format and context. For example, to introduce the image in the Western world in a context of an art exhibition is to suggest that the furthest people are from the topic, the more likely they are to accept to deal with such a confrontational and unendurable image. This attempt is suggesting that the Western audience's reception of such imagery most likely

remains objective, distant, and detached. In this way, a dead body in Syria, Nepal or Afghanistan, which is proposed to be part of an experience of art exploration, might provoke thinking and enlightenment. However, it will most certainly provoke feelings of guilt and disturbance without necessarily adding anything new to our knowledge about the situation.

The extensive distance with the situation does help us to accept the photo at least initially, because it is about something horrible that happened somewhere far away to someone unknown and the viewer is not directly and immediately affected. For example, a campaign by Amnesty International 2014 that raises awareness about different crises around the world adapted the slogan 'It's not happening here but it's happening now' in order to bring the situation closer to the viewer and shorten the distance between them and the event.

The fact that an artist is inviting people to observe a violent and unbearable position and perceive it as a piece of art makes us question the ethical standards behind it. In this instance, to freeze a suffered distorted body in time and print it on a big scale to maintain and even more celebrate details has an aspect of doing an immoral act. Using art as the ultimate justification to expose the viewer to intolerable and unbearable images is an inadequate excuse that has not been accepted in the view of several writers such as Ariella Azoulay and Judith Butler.

Ariella Azoulay points out the clear violence of war imagery describing it to be politically and ethically bankrupt, the argument that has been embraced by Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes (Cram, 2011). In place of a solution for this exhausted usage of violence she proposes '*The theory of civil contract of photography*' a powerful theory as an imaginative mode of humanising controversy and resistance against the notion of abusive power and governmental control. (Cram, 2011)

According to Azoulay, photographed people in a given situation – in this case a war victim - are put there in the presence of a public to being dealt with as an issue to perceive, process and eventually react to. The photographed person with whatever issue he or she is presenting is putting a responsibility on the viewer and asking for an elucidation for their matter. As well as becoming a 'participant citizen' in terms of performing a message and provoking a reaction in return (Azoulay, 2008). As she puts it:

“The assumption is that the photographs show or perform something that is already over and done, foreclosing the option of seeing photography as a space of political relations. In the political space that is reconstructed through the civil contract, photographed persons are participant citizens.” (Azoulay, 2008:1)

Moreover, if the image is presented in a context of an art exhibition, it gives the spectator even more time and a better atmosphere to observe the act of the image than to see it quickly on TV screen or in a newspaper as part of the

daily updates; that is, we tend to deal with it differently than the news info. We consider the news as information to know about or to be aware of not wanting to analyse in details, and wonder what it means to individuals and try to achieve a political and personal response to the event and people photographed.

In chapter 5, 'Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of a Rape?' Azoulay gives an example of her civil contract theory. While trying to rebuild photographic elements that refer to the presence of a rape culture, she wonders about the reasons behind hiding images of rape and why they lack existence in our visual archive - not convinced by the excuse of being an act that happens in hidden places and far from spectators (Azoulay, 2008). After excluding the porn industry production of staged or taken-in-reality rape images from our visual archive, I would agree with Azoulay to a certain extent: detailed and graphic rape images have a weak presence in our creative visual archive⁷ for culturally and humanly approved and obvious reasons. It is extremely unethical to display and share such a horrendous act and crime with others, as well as considering the fact that the act of rape is such a private moment of the victim's life and that we, as art audience, don't have the right to break through this space. One cannot imagine an exhibition celebrating or even displaying detailed images of rape victims during the act of rape or straight after and calling it 'art'. Why don't we see the same consideration and thinking go into displaying other crime pictures like war

⁷ Creative visual archive here means: art production excluding the porn industry production that has specific goals, audience, and ethics that the project is not concerned with. My focus here is specified around the ethical considerations of what it is been called art and exhibited as art.

crimes and disasters? Aren't victims of war and victims of rape both sufferers of violence and disgrace?

Although it is not possible to avoid or stop the flood of violent images, as spectators, we can yet control what type of images we include as part of our art archive and our daily dose of visual information. As an image generator about the civil Syrian war, I respect the victim's privacy, humanity, and vulnerability at this moment and the grief and anguish of their beloved ones. On the other hand, I respect the right of my spectator not to be exposed to horrible and graphical scenes of this war. Any new knowledge about the subject is far more effective than reproducing familiar and exhausted information of distorted bodies and destroyed scenes.

As Azoulay has stated, images of political violence don't succeed in inviting any empathic feelings (Azoulay, 2008). This statement led her to question the status of our 'contemporary citizenship'- asking if our civilian responsibilities are only generated by the feeling of pain and guilt. If that is the case, we have to discuss carefully and deeply the sense of our civic obligations and perhaps even restructure them (Azoulay, 2008). As Cram puts it "if our civic duties are usually imagined as only a response to pain and violence, then we should begin to ask more questions about the status of contemporary citizenship." (Cram, 2011:190)

Azoulay's theory is a claim to reconsider the predominant conception of our social responsibility and citizenship. She argues against the modern and postmodern tactic towards 'photographs of horror' as she describes them. Her fight is to stand against what is becoming more and more graphical, aesthetically-focused, unprincipled and impoverished. She invites us to reconsider our social responsibility in relation to these trauma images and how we can possibly react against them. At the same time, she asserts that photography should be dealt with as unseparated practice from disasters of our latest history (Azoulay, 2008).

In agreement with Azoulay, photography has been and still is a form of representation of our traumas and wars and has been always attached to their existence since the American Civil War of 1861-65. With this observation in mind, it is then possible to argue that photography as a practice is very significant in archiving our human records and visual history. Therefore, we should be extremely thoughtful of what we include in our visual archive and rethink the method, content and format and to keep them far from being simply and only either hurtful or clichéd. We should make our best effort to produce less harmful but more informative images. Although we can't control who might be harmed by the images for any reason, we should at least make an effort towards reducing the amount of violent images archived in our creative visual history especially the scenes that do not help us to understand the situation better, but which rather are merely a display of human violence.

Consequently, it is reasonable to debate that a considerate and compassionate photographic approach to document our catastrophes is the practice we need to achieve the balance between respecting the human rights of the person photographed, not taking advantage of their vulnerability, and attracting attention to their situation in the public arena while fulfilling the viewer's curiosity.

This leads to the question of how we end up dealing with piles of harmful, insensible, and uninformative contemporary practices of trauma documentary. In the same context, Azoulay asks a relevant question and wonders what could possibly be the authorised, political or social settings that allow the acts of exhibiting and seeing traumas of other suffered people as spectacles of exclusion (Azoulay, 2008). This query indeed makes us re-see this type of exhibition as a phenomenon of its kind, wondering how it is acceptable to share depictions of disturbance and suffering at the expense of hurt people and their beloved ones. That is in an art exhibition, which is an atmosphere of observation, admiration and socializing.

A vast number of photographers looked for the most graphic and bloody images they can capture at the heat of the moment to share with the world, either in a context of an exhibition or broadcasting news. One could argue that this method brings the horrendous reality closer and make us aware of the real weight of the tragedy. In reply to this, I contend that we, especially now in our modern time, are surrounded by visual information of what's happening around the world minute by minute by a multitude of means so we

are enormously familiar with such graphic imagery. This has been introduced to us through violent cinema, violent news and violent art shared via physical and digital channels. We don't need to see it again to remind ourselves that the Syrian war for instance is dramatic, violent, and just as expectedly bloody.

This turns me to Immanuel Kant's ethical theory of the *Categorical Imperative* (1785), which is based on three rules. First, someone must refer to a maxim in everything he does and test if this maxim can be a universal law, in a way that everyone else agrees on it. Second, every human being is priceless and has "value beyond price", so no human could use another to accomplish a self-interested task." (Woolsey, 2010). The third rule is to treat others as they want to be treated (Wood, 2007). Focusing on the last rule, I believe it is very efficient if applied to my discussion, because even if one chooses to overlook the first two rules, it will be difficult to ignore the third one. Even when the image maker is not making an effort to protect anyone's feelings, instead, she is taking advantage of a vulnerable human being's situation, if they consider putting themselves in the victim's or their beloved ones' place they would reassess how and when to use their lens. 'Would you accept for someone to take a picture of you or your beloved one if killed in a war zone and share it with people under the title of an art work?' if this question is asked to the image maker, we might have seen less hostile and more considerate war-images throughout our visual archive. Kant's rules have been promoted in philosophy, in religion, and culturally are very familiar but unfortunately not often applied. If they are well-thought-out in the art of photography when approaching war

disasters, we wouldn't have to be dealing with such a massive amount of visual violence on daily basis.

In the same context, Judith Butler rethinks the imagery in relation to ethics through the work and writing of Susan Sontag. In Butler's essay *Torture and the Ethics of Photography* (2007), which is part of *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2010)- a broader analysis of the issue - she looks at the way suffering has been shown and presented to the public and how this particular way of exhibition has influenced our reaction to and recognition of suffering (Butler, 2010). Those 'acts of recognition', as Lara Mazurski describes them, interject the flood of violent narratives of war and victims: "Acts of recognition break and interrupt the grand narratives that surround war and represent victims." (Mazurski, 2008). Following the act of recognition of represented pain and how we react to it will help to understand the importance of how we as artists represent and display pain to public.

According to Sontag, the photograph succeeds in informing or moving us politically only if it is established within the context of an applicable political awareness (Butler, 2007). In her book *On Photography* (1977) she argued that promoting the act of suffering and pain doesn't affect us anymore and our ability ethically to respond and react has come to an end:

"... the photographic image no longer has the power to enrage, to incite, that the visual representation of suffering has become clichéd, that we have become bombarded by sensationalist photography and that, as a

result, our capacity for ethical responsiveness has become diminished.”

(Butler, 2007:955)

However, in *Regarding the pain of others* (2003) Sontag counters this statement to declare that photography should by all means represent human suffering, guide us to record human damage, raise awareness of the “human cost of war, famine, and destruction in places that are far from us both graphically and culturally” (Butler, 2007:955). To achieve that Sontag claims that the photograph representing pain must shock the viewer. Especially, that the image –according to her- is critically related to the momentary and temporality. While tales or descriptions make us understand, images don't do the same, instead they work on our emotional side “They haunt us”. (Sontag 2003, cited in Butler, 2007:955)

In reply to this Butler explores the ability of photo in a more complex way. Taking Abu Ghraib photos as an example, she claims that the image is capable of contributing to the situation itself, having a camera in this scene, for instance, is part of the torture act itself. It helps to compose the scene, to spread it out in time, to keep it alive. As we feel that it is still happening now as long as the photo exists “it allows the event to continue to happen, and I would suggest that, because of the photo, the event has not stopped happening.” (Butler, 2007:961). In other words, by taking a photo of a war crime, the photographer becomes an observer and a participant at the same time, contributing to that crime and making it last for eternity. Above that, the photo offers a visual replication and a record of the event that will never

diminish. Butler also believes that the photo illustrates details while having “a representational and referential function” (Butler, 2007:959)

This dialogue between Butler and Sontag about the photograph and ethics helps to reflect upon the photograph in relation to representing pain. Butler continues to question the type of reality that has been represented by Abu Ghraib photographs and how the ‘frame’ of exhibiting the reality can limit what we can call ‘reality’. About that she says: “So we are seeing what is true- in the sense that *this really happened*, and yet, the truth of what we see has already been selected for us - *and in that way we do not know precisely where the happening begins and ends*” (Butler, 2007:960). Yet, we see this ‘reality’ that has been curated and selected for us surrounding us from all sides. (Butler, 2007)

This analysis allows Butler to question the relationship between the camera and our moral and ethical reaction to the situation. According to her, in the case of Abu Ghraib, the photo doesn’t succeed for a moment to alarm us to the offensive pain of a human being nor to act as a moral player in the scene. Although it doesn’t perform the act of torture itself, it in fact stimulates and encourages it (Butler, 2007). The photo, and by implication the photographer, are complicit in the crime. This makes it more shocking than a photo by a journalist taken after the event. Also, the context the photo has been presented in plays a major role in perceiving it, here the caption that describes it is critical.

Although the example used by Butler is extreme and far from my project, it still shares two aspects with my imagery - they both show human suffering and raise ethical concerns between the photographer, viewer and the scene. In my case, when interviewing my participants, they open up for the camera, they indeed are eager to make others know about their suffering. Here the camera alerts the viewer to the brutality of the war and the difficult emotional and physical circumstances participants live in. Also, the camera works as a moral witness and records the subjects' story to keep it alive. It informs us and moves us as the framework is inviting the viewer to understand the scene and sympathise with the participant. On the other hand, the context of presenting the project is a compassionate and considerate creative response to my participants' stories of suffering. It shares the tales with others in a context of concern and emotional consideration to both victims and viewers feelings.

Although both examples show human suffering, they are extremely different and each stands at the other end of the spectrum. The Abu Ghraib photos are showing human suffering while encouraging it, inviting the torturers to pause and perform for the camera. It is a sadistic act, mentally disturbed, and obviously one which gains pleasure from seeing other people being tortured. Beyond that, recording the act celebrates it and even empowers it. It is empty from any sense of consideration to the victim or to the viewer and empty from all sense of ethics, responsibility or humanity. It's starkly truthful and revealing, in that it shows what its perpetrators and their controllers would

never have wanted the outside world to witness. It's counter-propaganda in this sense.

My moving images on the other hand are co-participation, the antithesis of the Abu Ghraib situation. They aim to give a voice to the victims to speak their stories while the camera stands aside. It is ethical, considerate and performs a sense of responsibility and sharing the victims' grief while inviting the viewer to interpret the scene with sympathy and kindness. It offers the experience of listening to them while responding to their words creatively. Instead of letting them suffer and counter that moment of pain, I am opening up the moment after pain, after loss and what they have to say about it. The act of listening, the act of responding artistically, the act of sharing their tales, are all act of kindness towards taking my participant hand, helping them instead of taking their photo while suffering.

The exercise of bringing Abu Graib photos to the discussion has showed a problematic example of producing a painful imagery and how the act of photography can misuse the lens. Comparing this with my project helped to further define my practice approach of addressing the issue of pain and how it aims to encounter this example figuratively and conceptually. Figuratively, by taking a domestic perspective on spontaneous activities with the least staging possible, and conceptually by having high ethical standards of the photographic act and asking the participants to open up about their experience when they are willing to do so, in such a way the camera became a moral witness. These two examples are fundamentally opposite examples

that demonstrate what a camera is capable of producing: ethical and anti-ethical act of the lens.

It is useful now to bring a more relevant example to this dialogue, a photographer who is 'concerned' with other people suffering while documenting their history. Susan Meiselas was one of the most debated photographers that registered wars, human crises and documented 'unique' moments during conflicts. However, her photographs succeeded in starting controversial debates around the ethics of war images. Meiselas has admitted that the nature of her job gives her the reason to enter hot-zones, which makes her feel involved but at the same time detached and protected from the event: "The camera is an excuse to be someplace you otherwise don't belong. It gives me both a point of connection and a point of separation" (Meiselas & Lubben, 2008)

Ken Johnson has reviewed her exhibition 'Susan Meiselas: In History' (2008), which brings different pictures of funerals, aftermath, during conflicts, weapons, people picking up things from their destroyed homes, wounded children, bodies, destruction, etc. All look familiar and don't clarify anything new and particular about these disasters and people involved.



Figure 9: 'Fleeing the bombing to seek refuge outside of Esteli, Nicaragua' Sep. 20, 1978 by Susan Meiselas

One provocative example that particularly attracted Johnson's attention is the photo taken in Nicaragua in 1978: a young women running to escape death and struggling to hold a naked boy (figure 9). In addition to many other provoking examples, the exhibition brought to the public something of a similar nature: hopeless people, who don't need a lens following them in that critical and most difficult time of their lives. Instead the photographer is waiting for the closest and the most precarious moment to take their picture. Meiselas made a comment on this photo admitting that among the other photographers that were taking pictures of the women, no one thought of

helping her including herself, the women was 'literarily vulture by us' as Meiselas put it. (Meiselas 2008, cited in Johnson, 2008).

Although she is trying to give us a bigger picture of the historical context and happenings, Johnson is struggling to see the benefit of that to those who suffer like the women in the picture: "You feel like saying, "Susan, it's not just about you.""(Johnson, 2008)

While the critic is still not convinced that Meiselas' work has developed into anything apart from herself, she replies to his criticism throughout an interview with Phong Bui, in which, she states that she doesn't want to claim simply that the act of photography itself is a 'responsible response', and she doesn't believe making the image alone is enough. But at the same time she suggests that to ask: "should I not have made them, as a registry of history, for the following generations, to make sense of and understand themselves? My concern is not the concern of the concerned, but just to not pull back from that act." (Meiselas 2009, cited in Bui, 2009). Throughout the interview she considers herself a 'concerned photographer' and asks ironically if criticizing her work is actually "a response to finding a way to be concerned about being a concerned photographer?" (Meiselas 2009, cited in Bui, 2009)

Although her interest in documenting critical moments during conflicts appears to be genuine, the ethical human consideration seems to be less focused on during the execution of her projects. Especially, when we see figure 9 for instance and many other similar photos of people were taken in

moments of desperate need for help. Photography's purpose in this case has turned from being a useful documentary tool to save a record of history, raise awareness and distribute what is known and seen about the situation to become a self-centred act accompanied by an eagerness to take the best shot and be closer to the pain, loss, vulnerability, and desperation. The act of photography as Meiselas calls it not alone a responsive act, yet, is crucial and important in saving untold stories to generations to come and spreading even a small part of the truth of the unfortunate happenings. However, there are times in which common sense takes a priority, namely where helping another human being to survive is the noblest act any artist can do. And that not by taking their photo while escaping a bomb and looking for a refuge but helping them to find that refuge so they stay alive.

In fact human beings in those instances become goods, products, models for filling the photographer's purpose, to have a sense of achievement in the middle of hot dangerous zones. The camera becomes an excuse to focus on the shot and finding the right moment instead of remembering that these victims whom the photographer is 'concerned' about are human beings who need help, not another 'shot' aimed at them. As Azoulay describes the power of the camera in *Death Showcase*: the photographer can be like the killer, they are both in control of the happening and they both use their tool to shoot. (Azoulay, 2003). One can simply ask: can any of the iconic works of war art make any real contribution to the affected society? Did for example Jeremy Deller's *Baghdad Car Bomb* Installation at the Imperial War museum in 2010 help to stop the bombing in Iraq? The answer is no. However, my request

essentially is not to be unrealistic about what art can do, but rather not to abuse what art can do, especially in life and death moments.

What this chapter is mainly concerned with is the war documentary photograph entering art galleries under the category of art but lacks the ethical high standards that my project is looking for. Taking this case as an example; 'Susan Meisales: In History' exhibition (2008) has taken Meisales' photographs out of the media documentary context into an artistic context; into the art gallery. In this way the purpose of the photographs has changed from keeping a historical record and documenting aspects of reality through the main means of mass communication into carrying an artistic intention which is mostly known to provoke thought but at once exhibit the visuals to be observed and in the classic understanding of art's purpose to be admired and talked about as an aesthetic experience within a socializing activity. Photographs like Meisales', which carry critical moments of people stuck between life and death, survival and falling a victim, putting them in an artistic context, takes away the solely-informing-purpose of their act as mass-media documentary photographs. These photographs' purpose then adapts to carry a longer-existence on the gallery's wall and provide multi-purpose medium that includes admiration, details' exposure and to some extent making the suffering in the frame lasts and gets to be celebrated as long as the exhibition exists. In this sense, people involved in such tragic events and their pain and vulnerability become exposed to the public on its leisure.

The difference between this act of media documentary put in artistic context and my art project are the following points: My project has a documentary aspect but also holds an experimental one. As explained in chapter one my project combines documentary approach to the subject but remains creative at the core and applies experimental and imaginative solutions for representing the collected material. While media documentary material is direct and has the purpose of providing facts and information about a certain event without creativity application necessary. It doesn't go through a selection process to eventually resultant with a creative project, media documentary usually provides an objective and comprehensive view of the subject. My project on the other hand depends on a transparent but specific view and the selection of a specific and known participants to testify their experience. It doesn't take a general view of the Syrian war but has a private standing point.

Furthermore, this art project is responsive to communication limitations and barriers with Syria. It is also responsive to the emotional experience of collecting and contributing to the material. Documentary material doesn't let technical or emotional issues interfere with the final outcome of the project. The context of exhibiting the project is essentially different; my project is designed and prepared to enter the art gallery as an art creative project. The material is pre-processed material. For example, the visual and sound presence in my image is all thought of and designed to have an aesthetic aspect to some extent, in addition to making conscious decisions of using the most suitable composition, colours, typefaces, music in the background, etc. While the war documentary photographs in media have a raw quality and their

place fits within the information –provider context, they have the purpose of documenting a critical moment so people become aware of.

Finally, the ethical standards in my project is high and have been considered all the way through. I have full consents by participants to be involved and to be seen by the public so they are willing to give the audience all the space to enter their private zones. I am adamantly avoiding violent images and showcasing any direct suffer, instead I am focusing on embracing the participant's humanity and articulating their stories. However, when the media documentary give an overview of the subject it usually happens in the heat of the event, which normally include –if it's a war zone- violent images of affected people and their distorted surroundings obtained without necessarily their approval - figure 9 is an example.

Having argued these differences; I have to point out that every photograph of something has an aesthetic element to it (Downs, et.al. 1991) and can be considered as a documentary piece of that thing (Nichols, 2001), therefore there's a critical overlap between what we call art and what we call documentary especially when they both take the art gallery as a place for display. In this case, our understanding of what is 'documentary' is determined by contextual factors i.e. when we turn something documentary into something indented to be seen an aesthetic, it becomes about the contextual elements that surround the image. However, putting a documentary image into a gallery doesn't automatically transform it into an artwork especially now that galleries tend to show an ever-widening range of

kinds of work, but it could lead to comprising the documentary aspect of the image and its political effect.

In this chapter, I explored various ideas to conclude several points in relation to my research ethics. Throughout the exploration of Rancière's theories, I concluded that my project aims to interrupt the overflow of typical violent images and create new relations between what can be said, heard and shared about the Syrian war by distributing a common sense about the situation. Proposing at the end of this part that embracing humanity and respecting the participant's and the viewer's feelings are the key for creating practice.

James Elkins' attempt to make sense of painful imagery helped to outline the focus of my project, which is not about the pain itself but about people who are living the pain. Bringing *Lingqi* images as an example of pure shocking and disturbing imagery, I found it to be the exact opposite of my aspiring imagery. Using Barthes' belief against using the shock technique, Elkins considers the shocking and painful photographs to be useless and so painful that they cannot even be included in art practices. He also finds them out of his own body experience and impossible to relate to and understand. This led me to state that 'photographs of people' is what attracts me the most while creating the project and avoiding what Elkins describes as 'pictures of body in pain'.

Images that represent what can't be represented came into the discussion through a couple of examples. Similarly, my project deals with high levels of

grief, suffering and pain that can't be represented, the fact that requires embracing a nothingness in some cases, which is closer to the un-presentable horror of war. With help from Soutter, I questioned the act of showing details of a dead body in the context of an art exhibition, an act that I described as unethical, hostile, and above all uninformative. This led me to discuss the choice of an audience to exhibit such an image in terms of acceptance or rejection of this type of painful imagery. Here I adopt the opinion of many thinkers of this matter and state that using art as a validation to expose the viewer to unbearable images is not a good enough reason.

Azoulay on the other hand encouraged the act of our civil responsibilities towards the participant, who in return is practicing their civil rights when becoming part of the image that is by regulating the kind of images we include as part of our art history and our daily visual information. As a substitute I argue that we can offer a new knowledge about the subject through words, alternative imagery and through the focus on the individual. By taking this approach we achieve the balance between respecting the human rights of the person photographed, attracting attention of their situation while fulfilling the viewer's interest.

Despite the probability that bringing graphical and painful imagery carries the real ugliness of the war closer, I argue that we are already aware of it and we don't need to see it again to realise the hostility of the war. Hence, the ethical art comes as an alternative form of presentation to leave a true impact. After that, using Immanuel Kant's ethical theory helped to support the core of my argument for a more principled practice.

A dialogue between Butler and Sontag then leads to define the power of the painful imagery. In addition to conduct a comparison between Butler's example for discussion: the Abu Ghraib photographs and my approach. Stating the obvious differences between the two examples helped me to describe my practice qualities, in which the camera alters and works as a moral witness to the brutality of the war. At the same time, I am inviting the viewer to understand the situation and sympathise. Confirming at the end of this part that the act of listening, the act of responding artistically, the act of sharing their tales, are all act of kindness towards helping the participant instead of considering them as a tool to fulfil personal objectives.

The final part of the chapter, looking at Johnson's critique of Meiselas' work, is put in dialogue with my perspective about the ethical standards of some of Meiselas' photographs. This eventually led me to claim the obvious: image making is an essential practice towards documenting our history and creating our visual archive. However, we have to rethink and rearrange our priorities as artists entering the hot zone; helping another human being to survive is the most crucial act any human being can do for another human being instead of taking their photo while they are suffering to death. In my own way, I am inviting people who are suffering the war to take my hand, by focusing on their stories and respecting their emotions. I am sharing their experience with others, I am sharing the sensible; what can be said and what can be represented.

Pixelated Reality

The phenomena of documenting the Syrian conflict by modern technology

‘After watching the video online, I almost believed them and questioned my own eyes...’

A quote taken from an interview with my friend T.A. about losing his 10 years old niece who was killed by a sniper – Damascus- Syria - Summer 2013

In the following text I explore the phenomenon of using modern technology that records the actions of the Syrian conflict and shares them online, which I then put in dialogue with my own attempt at documenting an aspect of the struggle also using modern technology and devices, such as video Skype calls, digital cameras, mobiles, call-apps, and mobile recording. I discuss the characteristics and features of such phenomena depending on my observations and on the essay of *Syria's Imperfect Cinema* (2014) by Zaher Omareen and Chad Elias among other writings. Also, with the help of scholars, John Tagg, Victor Burgin, and Lucy Soutter, who are concerned with issues around photography and truth, I question the status of such videos and ask questions about authenticity. This will lead to define furthermore the approach of my practice.

One of the hallmarks of the Syrian conflict is the exponential growth of amateur footage harvested by either mobile phones or small digital cameras. These are usually an immediate response to incidents and harrowing events within the Syrian conflict and are then hastily put up and distributed on online forums. They are often shot in one go without editing and they are mostly

shaky, blurry, and pixelated with low-quality sound and resolution. The very lack of any consideration of aesthetics, planning, directing, framing, or lighting appears to give them a style and supposed authenticity. This type of video is simply a result of pressing the record button to show the obliteration and destruction of the afflicted areas, or recording in the middle of a battle, a protest, a sniper operation, a bomber attack, or even a one-to-one fight. Sometimes, the makers provide a specific place and time for the video, but they mostly struggle to provide a specific context.

Such digital devices are now very popular and have been used extensively, that Shr3 (a Syrian art production company) had its first *Mobile Phone Films Festival* in September 2014, carried around Syrian cities, and *Citizen with a Movie Camera*, another documentary film festival, took place around the country in 2013. Despite the difficult conditions the country was and still is going through, those festivals managed to share a good amount of amateur videos with people, videos that happened in extraordinary circumstances.

The time we live in, in which we are surrounded by technology and the internet, especially modern communication and recording tools, helped to generate this occurrence within the Syrian war. It has created a library of pixelated images capturing what supposedly happened at the time and leaving the space for viewers to give immediate comments and responses to what they are watching. For instance, groups of terrorists used this medium constantly to show details of their operations, from preparation, praying, to al-takbir (saying Allah akbar frequently which means God is great) and

execution, finally to claim responsibility for bomb attacks carried out across Syria. These pixelated YouTube videos mostly show ferocity, clashes between the two sides and the aftermath of their daily violent encounters. They show dismembered and injured people, destruction and so many other disturbing images. It could be argued that this type of video represents a view from inside the battle especially that with this open and connected world we live in at the moment - people expect to know details of any happening they are interested in.

Some of the amateur videos online took a similar direction to the media and started to look like them; focusing on violence and violence only⁸. Yet, we still have to acknowledge the value of such videos. According to Chad Elias and Zaher Omareen –Writers of the *Syria's Imperfect Cinema* essay- the value of these videos is in their documentary function, the new audio-visual means of communication that has “techniques of direct cinema and eyewitness reportage” offering “the intimate and defiantly human snapshots of everyday life that make the use of filmic devices” (Elias & Omareen, 2014:258). I would also add that they have been taken in extraordinary circumstances and most likely under the threat of death, which make the videos themselves extraordinary. An example of such a video is a shot taken by a Syrian army soldier recording his last moments before he dies using his mobile camera and leaving a message to his mother and the rest of his family; a message of love and farewell⁹. We suddenly feel that this technology i.e. personal

⁸ For examples please see this link: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=syria+violence+

⁹ To watch the video please see this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jw9N3sokkY>

cameras and Internet can serve humanity in an unexpected way. “[This video is] a genuinely moving portrait of human frailty” (Elias & Omareen, 2014:260).

That subtly applies to my project, which is based on a series of interviews taken in extraordinary circumstances lived by the participants. For instance, to create *Skype Call with Mom* video in 2012, my mother had to put herself in danger and stand next to the window (which could have exploded while she was standing next to it) so my phone could record the sound of bombing in her neighbourhood, or my friend T.A. who had to risk going out to his garden in 2013 while shelling was taking place on his neighbourhood for *Rama* video to become alive. In other words, the framework of war makes recording or making-image practice an extraordinary act by itself.

Elias and Zaher call this occurrence *Syria's Imperfect Cinema*. Although the title describes a defective cinema in some form, the actual findings throughout the essay find many special qualities in this non-quality cinema. They start with Juan Garcia Espinosa's definition of 'imperfect cinema', which is claimed to be common cinema yet not commercial, experimental yet not selective, political yet not rigid. In other words, Espinosa believes that imperfect cinema is intuitive, accessible, and approachable without any commercial purposes. It could offer a political meaning but at the same time it is neither fixed nor inflexible (Espinosa, 1979). Besides adopting Espinosa's definition of imperfect cinema, they state that the most remarkable feature of the era that Syria entered since 2011 is this usage of the mobile camera as a means to document the Syrian reality. Because of the difficulty for

international media to film, young people with mobile cameras took the responsibility to film the happenings of the bloody conflict. (Elias & Omareen, 2014). One more observation made by the writers is that “the degraded amateur digital image functions as a counter to the clear, professional images authorised by official institutions and other regulated systems of image production and transmission.” (Elias & Omareen, 2014:265). This observation is true and applies to my project, which also works as a counter to the crystal clear war material we see on TV on a daily basis, however, we rarely see that great quality or even bad quality of personal testimonies and stories of Syrian people included in the news.

In 2013 artist Rabih Mroué explored this imperfect cinema, which fills online forums and social media, and gave it another interesting name: *Pixelated Revolution*. As the artist called it: an ‘un-academic lecture’ and a multi-art performance to explore the shaky footage uploaded by Syrians not as low-quality video full of defects but rather unique footage that reveals moments which were taken in extraordinary circumstances (Mroué, 2013). That also applies to my footage that has been taken by participants surrounded by danger and unusual conditions. Even the monologue I take of myself, I consider it to be an extraordinary time of my life, in which I wish to convert my worries, nostalgia and grief into a creative piece of video. However, Mroué focus is on the violent struggle that is happening out in the streets of Syria's cities and the spontaneous footage that resulted from it. His experiments responded to the fact that, according to him, Syrians are “double shooting” their death using cameras and weapons. (Mroué, 2014)

He also points out the fact that by removing the sound, a suicide bomber's self-documentary video looks obscured and not understandable. He argues that the sound of war is the only source of context in that video. Without the sound, he says, the video can be applied to any context (Rabih Mroué in Conversation with Philip Bither -Youtube, 2012). He increased details of some soldiers and terrorists' portraits and presented them on a big scale in an attempt to reveal new implications and portraits out of this obscured and unstable footage (for examples see figures 10 -11).



Figures 10 – 11: 'Pixilated Revolution' examples, Rabee Mroweh 2012

What is more important than the quality in these types of video is the role they play as a witness to the event, which is usually not planned or directed; it is the message that forms itself from the context and the background of the

video. For example, none of my participants has any artistic interest, neither have they access to high definition cameras; most of the footage has been taken by the available means such as tablet, iPad, and mobile phones and then it was sent to me via Google Drive, We Transfer, or email. Similarly, non-photographers and filmmakers had been taking material and uploading it online. They are merely witnesses; they could be passers-by, or soldiers, security, police, rescuers, or sometimes the attackers themselves. Besides, downloading material online suppresses the quality, which makes the quality of such videos and images even worse.

The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn commented on that by saying that quality in this case is not essential and we don't need to see a good quality images in cases like these, all that we need to see is the image itself "It is the confirmation that, in conditions of urgency, 'quality' is not necessary" (Hirschhorn, 2012). Hito Steyerl defends what she calls the 'poor image' and argues that despite our free-at-any time-at-any-place access to it and despite this image's low resolution, compression, alterations, cuts, transformations, flexibility of changing set-up, format, length, and medium of display, it remains an image about reality, something that reflects the reality we live in; an open world connected via technology (Steyerl, 2012).

Although, these types of videos can be about reality and function as an important witness to the happenings of the war, some struggle to provide any context. We, for instance, see a shaky image recorded by someone running and then suddenly a strong sound is heard and the video finishes by the

camera falling down on the ground. With no source of information referred to, or even any information at all and therefore we can't consider this video as a proof of incident or a message or even a piece of image-making of any kind. We have the right then to assume that it could've happened at any place at any time to an unknown person or even it could have been staged. The video, without its context, adds nothing to the war's archive apart from being a random moment during a conflict of some sort. Hirschhorn says that this uncertainty of the mobile phone image 'reflects today's unclarity', referring to our current time of unlimited but unidentified sources of information (Hirschhorn, 2012): "the origin of these images is not signalled; sometimes it is confused, with an unclear, perhaps even manipulated or stolen address, as is true of many things on the Internet and social communication networks often are today. We confront this every day." (Hirschhorn, 2012)

Omareen and Elias confirm this and say that most of these files remain nameless for known reasons, which generate doubt and disbelief in their viewers: "These files are uploaded onto the internet and distributed through social media networks composed of disparate and conflicting interpretive communities. As with much of the digital sphere, discussion around the images shot by mobile phone is often characterised by suspicion, dissensus and evidentiary uncertainty. There is ultimately no way to ground these videos in an original intention or source." (Elias & Omareen, 2014:263). In other words, these types of videos open debates and discussions around the relationship between them and the political sphere around them. They generate questions such as: what is their agenda -if there is any, is it all

documentary material, or is there any fictional and pre-prepared material involved? What about their artistic appearance and style if there is any, and is it intentional and planned, or is it a pure, spontaneous activity? All these questions were raised and with the online world we enter on regular bases, the questions were raised on online platforms usually appear underneath the videos as comments.

The many sides of the conflict all started to film from their own point of view and upload the content online for the rest of the world to see. In some cases, that allowed the spectator to see many perspectives of the same event. However, this variety of perspectives created a debate around the objectivity of each standpoint and whether they succeeded to give out to the world the 'real' picture. Laureb Kirwood argues that although the material on social media has made wide and unconditional access to the civil war of Syria, this material is not a completely truthful depiction of the war (Kirwood, 2014). "...according to a report from the congressionally funded U.S. Institute of Peace. After reviewing more than 38 million Twitter posts about the Syrian conflict, a team of Middle East scholars from The George Washington University and American University concluded that rather than an objective account of what's taken place, social media posts have been carefully curated to represent a specific view of the war." (Kirwood, 2014).

All conflicts in our age escalated from the real to the virtual world. Each side of the conflict has its own FB page, YouTube channel, Twitter accounts, etc., where they upload their videos, statements, and point of view. The strong

attack and defence techniques used on social media became as important as the army strategies and physical strength in the field. All this causes confusion to the public and uncertainty about what is really happening. We see this confusion for instance when it comes to understanding the Ukrainian crisis happened in 2014, the civil Arabic conflicts started in 2011, and the Syrian crisis is little different from these unclear situations. So, it is more important than ever to give a voice to stories we don't necessarily hear about, voices that are not concerned with fighting for one's political view, not affected by the political-media agendas, not touched by any conspiracy theory, rather they are concerned with speaking up their pain caused by these conflicted points of view revealing the specificities of the misery and disruption caused to Syrians.

Respectively, this discussion raises some of John Tagg's thoughts about the role of presentation and dialogue that surround the photograph and the institution that promotes it in defining what could be considered as certain and factual. According to Tagg, a photo such as a war image is controlled by the state that produces and promotes it, and only the state can over-value the photo to make it part of the war history (Tagg, 2009). Victor Burgin, similarly, agrees that photography is based on 'manipulation':

"Work with an obvious ideological slant is often condemned as 'manipulative'; that is to say, first the photographer manipulates what comes over in the image; second, that as a result his or her audience's beliefs about the world are manipulated...although we can be fairly sure that people aren't simply led by the nose by photographs. Whatever the

case, both charges can similarly answered: manipulation is of essence of photography; photography won't exist without it." (Burgin, 1999:41)

Photographs, whether they are politically influenced or not, are logically manipulated since they are the production of photography settings from cameras, models, set locations, and editing, etc. This leads us to question the authenticity of such uploaded online videos about the Syrian war – which are surely a series of war photographs. With a huge library of pixelated reality online, the word 'reality' stands out immediately with urgent questions: is it a real pixelated 'reality'? Is it authentic? Can the viewer consider it as *the* Syrian reality?

According to Lucy Soutter, the question of authenticity has always generated endless debates in photography about how truthful and valid the photograph is. Especially now, the digital era we live in, resultant with processed and manipulated photography, either partly or totally, but it is certainly not identical to reality (Soutter, 2013). To confirm this, Soutter references Foster's belief that photography is reforming continually our lost connection with the real (Soutter, 2013). Depending on classical texts on the semiotic analysis of photography, Soutter argues that 'visual and contextual elements' that surround the photograph plays a role in how we conceive it, and they even affect our acceptance of it as a real or true image (Soutter, 2013):

"Semiotics reduces the truth-value of the photograph to a set of crack-able codes. For example, we can easily identify the visual and contextual elements that would make a photojournalistic image operate

in a convincing way to trigger empathy or outrage. This sense of contractedness makes it difficult for us to view any images as sincere.” (Soutter, 2013:70).

Online videos about the Syrian conflict could have so many visual and contextual elements attached to them, for example, the videos made and uploaded by an extremist Islamic party, which has its own YouTube channel, working-team, editors, and followers.¹⁰ Or they could have little or no information provided, nor a time, place and content context¹¹. These two types of online videos, either uploaded by a political or religious party with a specific agenda and purposes, or uploaded by amateurs with no clear agenda or purposes, both make it difficult for the viewer to trust their validity and legitimacy. As previously noted, some of these types of videos online are fabricated, re-edited, touched, and manipulated. When offering a style of raw shaky, exclusive and personal material, the authenticity is granted for the first glance, but with a bit of thought we start to question their authenticity. Still, this doesn't apply to all videos, some of them can be genuine while others can be created for specific reasons and uploaded to look genuine.

That leads us to argue that these videos form a *version* of the Syrian reality rather than forming *the* Syrian reality. It represents the actual conflict on the land between those conflicted parties and on the other hand represents the amateur video-makers, who have no interest in politics but happened to be in

¹⁰ For an example please see this link: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCIBzvsFpdJyJr0-tsdeJLw>

¹¹ For an example please see this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzy-eqBFMrw>

that place and time with their camera. After all, we can claim that online videos about Syrian conflict are a *reflection* of the Syrian reality but not necessarily offer things as they actually exist.

Soutter attaches the idea of authenticity with the “unmediated transparency between photographer and subject matter” (Soutter, 2013:89) exactly what we struggle to find in most of these online videos. Comparing this to my practice, ‘transparency’ has been carefully considered between myself and subject matter by creating the base of the practice using real experiences, testimonies and interviews of a specific circle of participants, who are known and trusted by the creator. However, as stated previously, it is been creatively enhanced to become a piece of art. My practice can’t be fully real, but it has all the intention to bring real personal stories to the light with combination of truthfulness and creativity.

Also the practice offers the viewer a personal perspective, which invites him in return to shape his own personal perspective about the subject. I am not promoting a political or religious agenda with particular purposes similar to some of the online videos, nor is my practice aimless in a similar way to the online amateur videos referred to. My practice, on the contrary, has the aim to create ‘individual meaning’ that comes out of the personal testimony. As Soutter argued: “The quest for the authentic image is leading at this moment of history towards individual meanings that may or may not connect to each other.” (Soutter, 2013:88). Besides this, all my videos offer a specific context, from a statement, place, time, participant’s identity, and their connection to

myself and to the subject. All these elements to my practice allow me to say that the project has all the intention to be true and genuine. Although, it is difficult to fully achieve that, the intention to do so is essential towards the realization of my practice; "Authenticity is an elusive, ever-moving target. Although impossible to retain fully, it remains a worthy goal for the contemporary photographers who seek it."(Soutter, 2013:88)

In this chapter I have explored the fascinating new occurrence that has occurred in the era of the Syrian conflict, namely that of using modern technology as a tool to document its happenings and downloading them online, so images that we could've never known about, became accessible to the whole world. However, this phenomena has its own problematic features, which I have gradually covered in this text.

This occurrence grew into a widespread phenomenon that some art festivals in Syria are celebrating it annually. I discussed the low quality of this type of videos but their role of bearing witness, reflecting reality and their high impact in terms of creating a new language of documenting the war and the extraordinary circumstances they have been taken in. That allowed me to conduct a comparison with my project, as it also depends on life events, people involved with the conflict, technology and internet to realise the practice. The difference between the project and this popular facet of the Syrian war is evident; my project depends on interviews that tell us stories of the participants without necessarily having destroyed areas of Damascus as backgrounds for videos for instance, that I keep far from the sound, image

and action of fighting as much as possible, which is the opposite to most of this online footage. Online footage is mostly taken by people inside the battle and shows indefinite violence and disturbing images. The recordings on YouTube and other online media are spontaneous and don't fall under any kind of definition of art and they mostly fail to provide a context, while I put my creativity into the collected footage, in which I clearly identify the context, place, time and participant.

My project is using this modern technology with the aim of writing the unknown small history of my participants including myself far from the well-known images of war and giving a voice to stories we don't necessarily hear about, voices that are concerned with speaking up their pain caused by conflicted points of view. Nevertheless, I found a couple of features in common: both 'projects' are being made in extraordinary circumstances and under the danger of death, and they are only possible with the help of modern technology resulting in a low quality image, resolution and sound.

The last observation in the text has questioned the authenticity of such online videos concerned about the Syrian conflict, and with help of scholars such as Tagg, Burgin, and Soutter, the authenticity and the truthfulness of such images have been interrogated. These videos with their different types; political, religious or amateur and aimless videos all directly reflect the Syrian reality but not necessarily at all times represent what actually had happened in reality. The viewer is the one who can decide whether to consider it real or a complete fabrication, hence the subjective view of each viewer alone will

resolve the question. This then led me to bring the notion of authenticity of my practice and conclude that my project has all the intention to be true and genuine with all the elements that form it from responding to real experiences and interviews of known participants to providing specific contextual information to support each video. The intention to be genuine and authentic is essential towards the realization of my creative practice.

Sense of home

Syrian & Middle Eastern art (Contextual Review)

“I create art to say how much I miss home, I miss the sense of home, and I miss myself at home”

A quote taken from an interview with a Syrian artist and friend H.E. who escaped the war in 2011 and became a refugee in Jordan at the Syrians Refugee Camp

The research came across a range of artwork generated by the extreme situation of war and violence lived by Syrian and Middle Eastern artists, which resulted in a rich review of the different approaches artists have used to express their points of view. In this chapter, I focus on a number of insightful examples, in addition to reviewing a number of relevant short videos to put in dialogue with my work, which contribute towards shaping the project's context, help to position my practice and give a rationale for my creative choices. I specifically look at how artists with similar background to mine approached the subject of home and war, highlighting the differences and similarities with my practice. In this way I intend to bring a personal debate and dialogue with other Syrian and Middle Eastern artworks. I also explain how my practice is inspired by some of the reviewed pieces and how it tends to avoid some other approaches mentioned.

I was led to some of the examples by *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* book (Halasa, Omareen, & Mahfood, 2014), and other sources like exhibitions, online platforms, festivals and events, which exposed me to the latest Syrian art movements in the time of war. On the other hand, I was led

to some video examples by the annual *Made in the Middle East* festival organised by Euromed Audio-visual organisation in 2014 and by *Resistance[s]* collection - a three part DVD series of avant-garde Middle Eastern and Northern African experimental films produced by Lowave in 2006, 2007 and 2010.

Immigrants might feel stronger about their home when they are away. Hence, the effect of immigration on creative people could be a positive step towards creating an original and heartfelt art which will not only add to the art archive but will also help to spread awareness about their home situations in different places around the world. I am not encouraging artists to leave their countries, however, when it is an unavoidable step (in case of war and human disaster) we have to acknowledge the bright side of it, namely the production of a genuine art that is concerned with urgent issues happening in their homelands.

My personal experience of being far from home while it is being destroyed reflected directly on my interest in research and later on my art practice. The notion of home for me will remain around the place of Damascus, which is the place I grew up and lived in for twenty six years of my life. My visit to Syria in 2013 during the war and seeing the distorted city which is barely recognizable assured me that home can remain in our mind, heart and memory and that I can try to keep it alive through my artwork. In other words, this project is helping me to recreate the notion of home by exploring and responding to what's happening at home and sharing the individual stories of

people who left their homes. To explain further, home to me means the feeling of safety, belonging, warmth, familiarity, protection, the place I grew up in, family, and friendship. In this project, I am trying to bring the meaning of home by my video work. Each video will introduce the audience to one of my family members and a few of my friends to tell their stories and how they left their homes. Eventually, those people who I care for form the meaning of home to me.

When artists create works about home during their exile it helps them to react to loss and also helps the audience to understand the artists' background. Making art about what's happening in Syria while I am living in England helps me to deal with my fears, gives the audience a new perspective about the Syrian war and an idea about my background, which in turn helps to introduce the practice.

Within the focus on video art the chapter is divided into two sections:

- Syrian art in response to home related issues
- Middle Eastern art in response to home related issues

Syrian art in response to home related issues:

From the beginning of the crisis in Syria, Syrian artists responded to the hectic and influential events happened in the country and around. For example, an exhibition called *Collective* opened in Damascus in 2012 about the impact of violence on Syrian society. They looked into the composite interweaving of art and politics and explored various creative ways of reply to the turmoil's effect on their lives (Ayam Gallery, 2012).

Issues explored by these artists are different from issues that could be explored by artists that live outside Syria, because they are affected differently by the subject matter. For instance, in this exhibition issues such as isolation, destruction, and the act of witnessing the actual chaos were represented from the perspective of a person who is inside/part of the event while issues to be explored from here -outside Syria- come from a different angle of observation. As an example, isolation for me is not the isolation from the world but from my country, family, and the rest of the Syrian people. While the Syrian crisis isolated the country from the rest of the world and closed all international embassies in the capital, it also united families and brought them together. The destruction happened to their living and working places, the constant danger, and the difficulty to escape the country made them stick together. Most families now live with other families and share the same properties. Also, the fact that electricity/power, which provides not only heating and energy but also communications like telephone and internet, is not available all the time, led to people spending more time together. They

are not isolated from each other, they are isolated from the rest of world, and that establishes a difference between the meaning of isolation for an artist like myself and the meaning of isolation for an artist living inside the conflict.

Where we are and where we create from have the effect on our thinking, analysing, receiving, and processing what's happening around and finally responding to it in a shape of an art-work. Syrian artists opened up their artwork and had a good exposure since most of them fled Syria to the neighbouring countries, especially to Beirut. About this Samar Kadi says "forced exile opened new doors for young, promising Syrian talentswho started to have exhibitions in art centres in Beirut and gain wider exposure of their art" (Kadi, 2015). While according to Moharram –a curator of Syrian art in Beirut- "War and exile have, in many ways, helped young Syrian artists improve their work and open new horizons" (Cited in Kadi, 2015). Similarly, by being in the UK I have had the opportunity to be exposed to arts from all over the world, which gives me an insight into developing my own work. Yet, being in a closed and isolated place might give those inside-artists a different insight, an insight that comes from the womb of the place, from inside the pain.



Figure 12: Untitled painting by Kais Salman Collective 2012 – Ayam Gallery

To give briefly a few examples. In the *Collective* exhibition, I notice the focus on the destruction and devastation (see figure 12 for example) after being famous for their childish and carefree style like in Kais Salman, Mohannad Orabi, and Nihad Al Turk's paintings. The shift in their

bright and joyful colour choices into dark shades and their concepts into gloomy and funereal one are noticeable and death was repeatedly represented in a figurative and abstractive way. In a statement published on the day of the opening, artists declared that the effect of the turmoil is dramatic on their lives, and directly applies to their art work. (Ayam Gallery 2012).



Figure 13: Untitled by Khalil Younes 2012

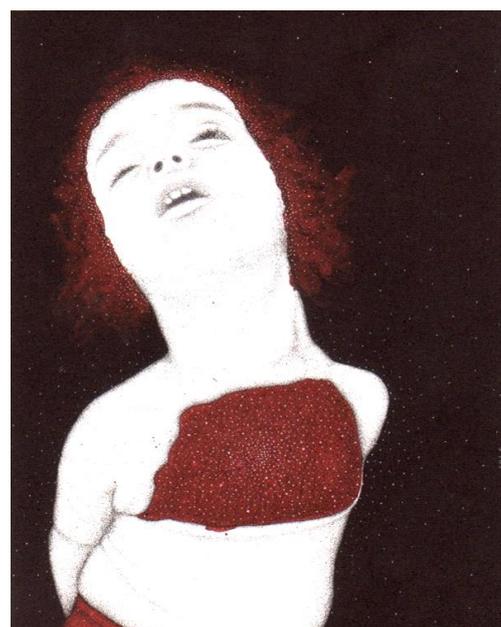


Figure 14: I am from Syria by Khalil Younes 2012

Khalil Younes' work is another example in which violence interfered within the artist's style. The child portrait representing the state of being Syrian is very dramatic and powerful. The exploding head holding a weapon is intense and a good attempt to represent the chaos and terror we are living in Syria (see figures 13 & 14).



Figure 15: Untitled by Randa Maddah 2011 - 50 x 70 cm, Ink on paper, posted online on 23 September 2011.

Additional example is by Randa Maddah; (see figure 15). It was made at the beginning of the crisis, when people started to feel lost, scared and not knowing what their role could be in this radical change of the country present and future. In addition, so many other similar examples have been produced by Syrian artists

throughout the crisis and shared on online forums like on *Syrian Art – Syrian Artists*¹² and *Art from Syria*¹³ Facebook pages.

One would quickly notice that there is a dramatic and funereal impression left heavy on Syrian art production after having to face the war. Most of them tend to use dark colours and developed gloomy concepts in their illustrations,

¹² Syrian Artists on this link <https://www.facebook.com/thesyrianart?fref=ts> Accessed on 19/10/2015

¹³ Art from Syria on this link <https://www.facebook.com/Art.from.syria?fref=ts> Accessed on 19/10/2015

painting¹⁴, sculptures and films. Additionally, the violent conflict pushed many artists to experiment with new methods and media of expressions that are equivalent to the level of change in their lives. This observation refers to the impact of the war on Syrian art and what possibly could be the future Syrian art archive of the conflict. This fact makes my approach different from the majority of viewpoints that are coming from inside the conflict. My project as an outsider's view offers a diverse perspective from the Syrian mainstream art about the Syrian war. As the majority of artists inside the conflict can be taken by the destruction and aspects of death and obliteration of the Syrian war, an outsider artist as an observer has the chance to look at the crisis from a different perspective and explore other aspects of the war, which I am trying to achieve in my project.

Having stated that, when I first started developing the practice, I applied a black and white effect on videos and added a minimal red to black and white illustrations remembering that I used to be passionate about colours. That was shown in the *From Colours to Black & White* exhibition in 2013/2014 at UCA Maidstone. The showcase focused on the shift from colours to black and white in my practice because of the subject matter, which has affected the visual naturally. Meaning the crisis, grief, worry, stress and loss all affected

¹⁴ These examples and other dramatic artwork have been posted and shared on the *Art & Freedom* Facebook page, which later transformed into a physical gallery and travelled to so many places around the world. The power of the modern technology and social media here is not only expanding the audience but taking the artwork further; to the actual market, in which people can interact with the work, experience its impact physically and meet the artists in some cases. However, the social media websites still attract enormous amounts of Syrian artwork because of the option given to the artist to remain anonymous and even deleting the files if they need to for security and safety reasons, which gives the Syrian artists an unusual freedom of expression.

and impacted on my practice and caused a black and white effect on the footage.

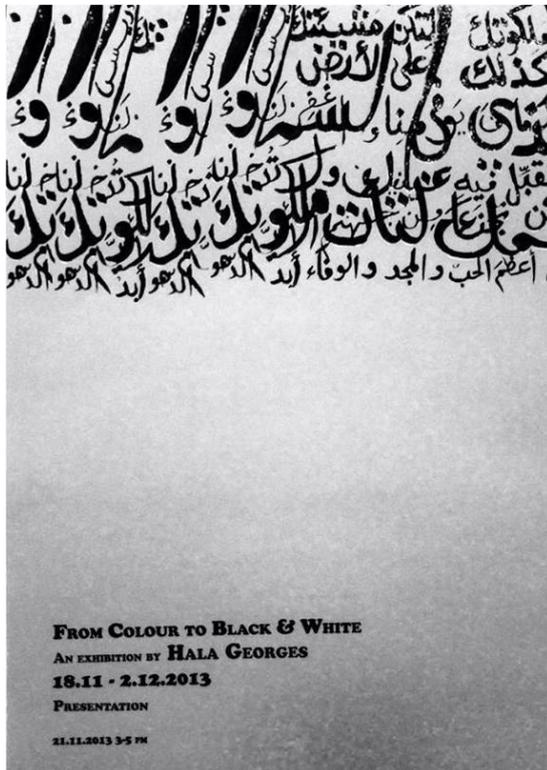


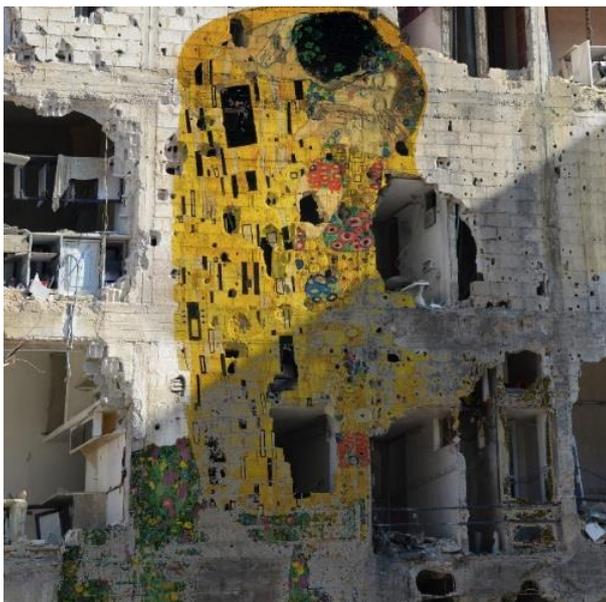
Figure 16: From Colour to Black & White exhibition
Poster by Hala Georges 2013

This experience makes me fully understand the tendency of Syrian artists towards a depressive art. Conversely, the concept and ideas behind my practice remain hopeful and far from presenting death and violence, which led me to eliminate the very gloomy experiments from the final collection¹⁵. The project is intentionally stepping away from that to focus on the impact of death instead of representing death. It's

worth mentioning here that in time, I started to feel more comfortable about using colours, which led to later creating full colour videos.

¹⁵ Some of these videos are kept in the *Appendix* as a proof of progress and experimentation

A refreshing example of Syrian art which looked at the war from a different



perspective and refused to represent only death is *The Kiss* 2013 by Tammam Azzam. He placed Klimt's famous painting on a destroyed building at Damascus, calling for love instead of war and bright colours instead of shades of grey. This image has been shared on

social media widely and is attached now to the Syrian war subject on the online scenes. However, I still think that the moving image practice is needed to be present in response to this subject. In my case, moving image practice helped me to respond to my participants' statements and introduced the audience to a different range of stories brining hidden voices and narratives to the light instead of making a sole statement throughout a two dimension image.

On the other hand, throughout my contextual research I notice that the artistic tools didn't follow the artist's preference at all times, but they were occasionally decided by the force of circumstances.



Figure 18: Birth by Sulaf Hijazi, 2012

For instance, Sulafa Hijazi, the acrylic painter, was drawn to digital and computer-based art because of the possible danger of someone from either forces discovering her controversial work.



Figure 19: Untitled by Sulaf Hijazi, 2012

Making digital art for her is safer because the artworks are secret files hidden somewhere in her computer. (Halasa, Omareen, & Mahfood, 2014). The artist's central preoccupation is life and death, and how death falls easily into becoming an ordinary part of life in Syria and how the massive amount of people killed on a regular basis is turning to be merely a number.

Hijazi explained in her statement that she believes the male is more attracted to violence than the female, which inspired her to illustrate two images (figures 18 & 19). The pregnant man is giving birth to weapons while the pregnant weapon is giving birth to a human being, indicating that violence will be transcended for generations to come, having a long-lasting effect on our future, and blaming the male for this violent mess. It may be simplistic, but according to her, men are predominantly responsible because they do not

experience the meaning of life as women do “I...pondered the implications of masculinity in killing, power, dictatorship and domination. I believe that if women were in charge of the world, there would be no more war. Women who give birth know the meaning of life.” (Cited in Halasa et al., 2014:13)

This is a classically feminine way to look at war, moreover it is a romantic way. If we want to discuss the role of the Syrian woman in this conflict, we can look at her social and educational roles to raise awareness in the society starting from her own children and family, to try to avoid violence and more specifically to cure the Islamic extremism attitude that is currently growing massively in Syria. This mentality of men we see is the result of both their parents' ideology and beliefs. Women, who are half of society, are as responsible as men. In several cases reported to the media, we saw the mother giving blessings to her child to go and fight besides the extremists in Syria from different parts of the world. Hijazi's view is unrealistic, in which the man is the monster and the women is the peaceful princess. Such romantic and unrealistic views could lead to confusion and might create untruthful conclusions about the whole situation.

Going back to talk about artists adapting to the force of the circumstances of war, the next sample is from the *Kartoneh* movement which means 'cardboard'. It consists of a group of unknown artists and relied on writing

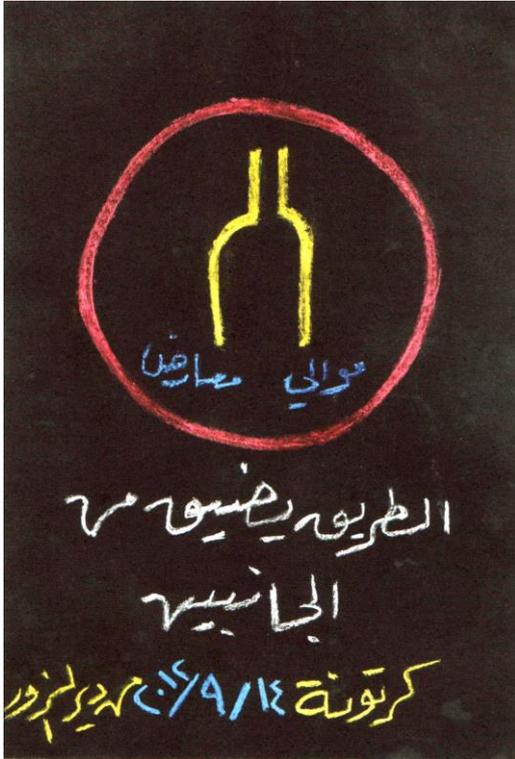


Figure 20: 'The roads narrows ahead- oppositions or pro-regime?' Kartoneh, Deir al-Zour, 14 September 2012.

simple but powerful messages using colourful chalk on black cardboard. Because of lack of resources, from electricity for computers to paint and brushes, some artists used these most basic materials from cardboard and chalks to express their statements. Their artwork turned out to be simple, witty, and typography-based posters. This activity became famous on online forums that people started to share the posters and print them in order to

support the creators, who in return kept using the same tools to declare their pride in what they do (see figure 20 for example).

Using basic tools to design their posters they respond to the war in both ways: conceptually and materially. The lack of artistic tools is an obvious result after having a lack of basic survival needs like water and bread, besides the difficult living circumstances and lack of shelter and safety. This all makes using basic tools to express their ideas relevant as well as sensible. Also, as we notice from the artists' statement, that even when the more advanced tools are available, the artists insist in keeping the use of the basics, as if the war has stolen everything 'artificial and contrived' from them: "We still insist on expressing ourselves in the same simple way in which we started. We reject

contemporary design techniques, and instead use chalk and writing that is not artificial or contrived.”(Cited in Halasa et al., 2014:62).

Referring now to a different medium used in response to the crisis, which is that of photography: “an unofficial groups of citizen - photographers have been risking their lives in order to document their country’s destruction and post their findings on Facebook. Collectively, they join under the banner of *Lens Young*...They use whatever photographic equipment us at their disposal, from mobile phones to DSLR camera, to cover the war.” (Halasa et al., 2014:123)



Figure 21: Destruction, Deaa, Lens Young Homs, 2013

As the writers noticed, some photographs function as documentary images of the Syrian reality (see figure 21), and they offer at the same time artistic appearances and concepts using a black and white effect and other colouring effect on the images (see figures 22 & 23 as examples). However, not all contributors to *Lens Young* dealt with the project as an artistic one but as a way to document destruction, unfortunate happenings, and many other details of the war using the available means in their hands. “The non-

professional photographs in Lens Young are less interested in the aesthetics of photographic framing and composition than in capturing the moment.” (Halasa et al., 2014:123).

According to the writers, those photographs also respond to many people’s need to know what happened to their home after they had to leave it in hurry, and to know how their street and their city look after they had to escape the danger of death (Halasa et al., 2014). All of this makes this type of art activity a demand by the community filling a gap of people’s knowledge about the happenings in their city left-behind, and that is exactly what makes this movement important and appreciated in the time of war (see figure 22 as an example). In addition to this photographic activity, a large number of photos has been taken by random Syrian users of Facebook and other social media websites that documented in one way or another the happenings of the Syrian war from the inside.

Nevertheless, these kinds of photos, in addition to some of Lens Young’s examples, can be universal, typical war images full of destruction, ruins, and the aftermath of fights and shelling. Yet, some of them can also offer a personal feeling (see figure 23 – for instance). The photo of *Lovers* by Deaa, Lens Young Homs offers a close up look at the destruction on a human level, a personal and engaging one. In this instance, a photo of a couple is displaced, lost and has been the only proof of their love to ever existed. In this photo, the distance is shortened with affected people, we feel that we have a better idea about them. This in a way makes the impact of the war clearer and in many ways more painful. Examples by Lens Young:



Figure 22: Graffiti, 'Homs, We are leaving our hearts here but we will be back', Lens Young Homs, 2013



Figure 23: Lovers, Deaa, Young Lens Homs, 2013

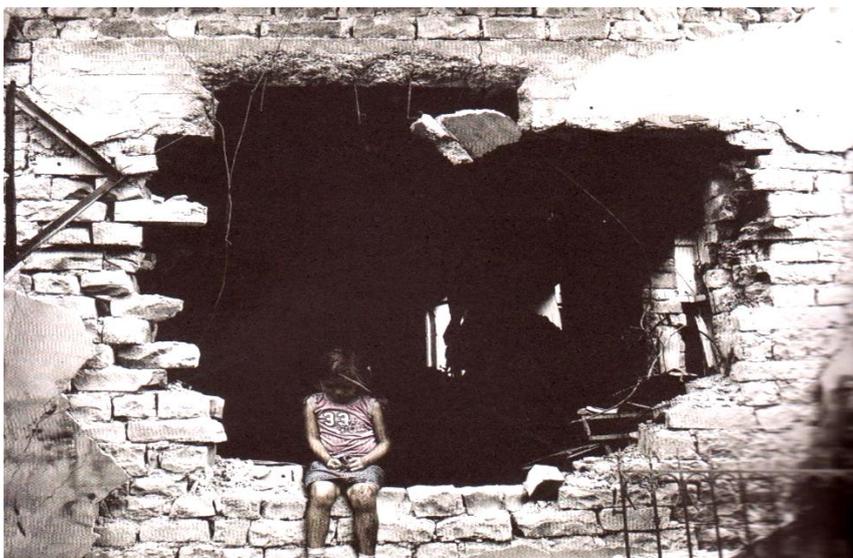


Figure 24: Waiting, Lens Young Homs, 2013

Thus far I have gone through a number of Syrian fine art pieces that opened a discussion about captivating ideas, which in return reflect on my project's evolvement. I referred to a number of paintings which all have something in common: the drama of the tragedy. I've also noticed that the war circumstances forced artists to bend and adapt their tools from being canvas-based to become digital and computer-based, and from using design and advanced software to go back to use the most basic tools to produce artwork, which reflect the whole state of being in war and the need for artists to become minimal and practical.

The review stopped at amateur photography, particularly a group of photographers who documented the aftermath in Syrian cities and shared them online for the rest of the world to see. Some of these photographers had an artistic interest and some were doing it for the purpose of sharing the information. This activity became a demand, especially by people who wanted to see what happened to their country after they had to escape it. Some of these pictures seem to perpetuate a universal and a clichéd style, producing more typical war images. Only when a closer look takes a place can we see that the photograph offers a unique and personal perception.

I will now discuss a number of videos made by Syrian artists in response to the conflict.

Several video art festivals took place during the war in and outside of Syria and several video art movements concerned with the politics of the Syrian conflict have produced a large number of short and long videos in response to the war, sometimes by taking a general political approach and sometimes by getting to know affected people on the land, interviewing them and adding their own creative touch to the documentary footage. Reviewing some examples here is important towards shaping the context of my project, especially that these videos do not only have the same concern of my project but they used the moving image as medium of expression.

My focus will be on the humanistic videos, videos that are concerned with people's matters, depended on personal testimonies, and telling real stories of living the war. For the review, I chose a number of different short videos that didn't take a political side promoting a particular party against another, but took a humanistic side, namely listening to what affected people have to say. All were produced by emerging Syrian art movements like Shr3, Bidayyat, Kayani, and Abunaddara, which supported a large number of video artists. Some had their names known to the public and others remained anonymous.



Figure 25: Snapshot, *Being Good So Far*, by Orwa Moqdad, 2013

The first video to review is *Being Good So Far*¹⁶ meaning: they are still alive and surviving - a short video directed by Orwa Moqdad in 2013. According to the statement of the film, it is being made to record what is noticeably absent from the media "*Being Good So Far* is a simple spotlight on what has been forgotten, for "regular" life amid the destruction, the human ability of continuation, that generates life and last and resist." (Moqdad, 2013)

As the statement explains, the video focuses on the human side of the war by taking spontaneous shots in one of the destroyed markets in Aleppo city, which is still suffering from shelling on a daily basis. The video also includes a few brief interviews with 'simple people' around the streets like sandwich and sweet sellers, who are still very much alive, positive, and trying to carry on with their lives putting the war behind, and depending on their God to protect them from the non-stop gunfire.

¹⁶To watch the video please see this link http://bidayyat.org/films_article.php?id=30#.VMyx8nnyHIV

The filmmaker stated that: "there is a deep desire in life surrounded by death... That's the human itself naked from all the usual forms and depleted headlines of media which is been overloaded with" (Moqdad, 2013). He is concerned with exactly what my project is concerned with, namely showing what is hidden from the regular viewer of the news. However, the only difference is that the maker and the actual making of the film took place in Syria. This doesn't only offer a closer look at the issue but allows the maker to comprehend the whole atmosphere and circumstances of the war. On the other hand, my making of the piece depends on the visual and audio material sent to me and on interviews with the participants via Skype or mobile phone, which differs from collecting the material myself or interviewing the participants in person. Although we are both interested in giving a voice to the personal story, we are offering it from two different platforms, which lead to two different representations of the issue.



Figure 26: snapshot, *Blue*, by Abu Gabi, 2014

The second video to review, *Blue*¹⁷, has more similarities to my approach. It is a short video produced by Bidayyat and Rad Fael and directed by Abu Gabi in 2014. The video is taking a personal perspective in looking at the issue but similarly the creator of the film lived outside Syria and asked a group of his friend(s) inside the country to help filming and contribute to the film via Skype video calls.

The other interesting feature about this video is that it is talking about minority lives in Syria who had to face war, displacement, siege, and the hardest circumstances at two stages in their lives, before they fled Palestine in struggle with the Israeli forces and escape to Syria, to create a new life and a small town as part of Damascus called 'Yarmouk Camp'. This part of Damascus is lived in by Palestinian refugees and is filled with their buildings, restaurants, shops, institutions, and every aspect of civilised, safe features of

¹⁷To watch the film please see this link http://bidayyat.org/films_article.php?id=155#.VMyyHnnyHIU

life, until the struggle started in Syria and Yarmouk became one of the affected areas of the capital from shelling, lack of energy, food, and water.

In the video, the filmmaker talks about his life story in the camp and about his memories in the place, which are presented by random shots around his neighbourhood (sometimes from an ambulance's perspective) and combined by a footage of his friend Ayham playing the piano in the middle of the destroyed Yarmouk whilst other friends are singing with him. It seems to be a sign of hope and insistence on surviving, however, according to Ayham he is playing the music because he can't think of anything else: according to him, there is no future to think of so he keeps himself busy with making and playing music. A very moving scene shows that in the video. The creator wrote poetically about the video: "Here, there is no geography, a place between two times, the first is a tent and the second is bags packed for other conquests..." (Abo Gabi, 2014)

As similar as the approach sounds to my project, this video has a different feeling to my work. I believe here comes the individuality of each artist to create a difference and a touch of originality within each piece. Each project has a different feeling to it, which leads to produce a different impact. Although both are concerned with similar issues around the impact of the Syrian war on individuals, both projects offer their response in a diverse mode and direction. Also, Abu Gabi's video noticeably tended to show the destruction of the neighbourhood, something I tend to avoid in my shooting where possible as stated frequently throughout the thesis.



Figure 27: Snapshot, *Colour White*, by Nabil Al-Sayes, 2014

*Colour White*¹⁸ directed by Nabil Al-Sayes in 2014. The video takes a similar approach to *Being Good So Far*, but this time it focused on one little girl called Rama, who fled Syria and lived in a refugee camp. “Rama hides her most valuable things, her dreams and hopes in one small plastic bag that she took along with her from Syria. She always keeps an eye on it, waiting impatiently to return to Syria.” (Alsayes, 2014)

It is a touching piece of moving image, in which the camera focuses mostly on Rama, sitting in the tent and walking around the camp and answering the interviewer’s questions innocently. The video is a good example to look at, especially in terms of creating questions to ask a child in such a situation and what could possibly be recorded in order to convey the atmosphere Rama lives in. Wondering with obvious big questions like what kind of future is waiting for her and how she will ever get past what had happened to her

¹⁸To watch the film please see this link http://bidayyat.org/films_article.php?id=143#.VMyzC3nyHIU

family, are painful questions and perhaps unethical to ask. However, the interviewer was asking indirect questions about that and trying to focus on Rama's wishes, memories, and things she likes to say.

I experienced a difficulty in creating a list of questions to ask my participants especially the young people in them - most of them had to live in similar circumstances to Rama in one way or another. Despite the difficult nature of the project, as I stated in a previous chapter '*Take my hand*', I am committed in this project to be sensitive to both the viewer and the participant's emotions. The creator in this video didn't consider that a priority at all points. For instance, he asked Rama if she knows where her mother is, which I believe it is an unethical question to ask. That brings one of my experiments into the discussion, which is about a little Syrian girl with the same name *Rama*¹⁹. In this experiment (through my friend T.A.) I asked Rama's friends if they know where Rama is, knowing that Rama was killed by a sniper. At the time of making the video I didn't consider it to be an unethical question. I was interested to know what her friends think of that horrible reality and how they are dealing with it. However, after watching and reviewing *Colour White*, I am convinced that such question is an inappropriate one and this part was later discarded from my video.

Going back to the mainstream type of short documentary film about the Syrian conflict, here is an example that doesn't depend on interviews, questions or conversations of any kind but on the power of the moving image itself that

¹⁹To watch *Rama* please see *From Rochester with Love* chapter

succeeds to tell dozens of stories; *Shower*²⁰ created by Ahmad Khalil and Alia Khashouq in 2013.



Figure 28: Snapshot, *Shower*, by Ahmed Khaili and Alia Khashoq, 2013

This video is all about the image and what you can see, smell and feel, feel the coldness and hunger, the need for safety and shelter and above all the need to have hope for the future. It is wordless apart from the few words that come out within the context of the video, the approach that I found gripping in this case. It follows a day journey of Muhammed, a nine year old boy, who has a duty on daily basis to collect anything useful or edible he finds in the garbage to bring 'home'. Muhammed and thousands of children like him had lost their school and home and they with the rest of whom left from their families need to find all ways to survive. The video also records a special time, in which kids have the chance to clean up and have a 'bath'. Here, the loveliness and sadness come together in one scene, in which the kids are very natural, spontaneous and happy, while their reality is so painful.

²⁰To watch the film please see this link <http://vimeo.com/76216157>

As expected in war-related documentary videos, there is an emotion of sadness, but it also has a hint of novelty that I find insightful and inspiring to be applied to some aspects of my practice. Particularly, I notice that the power of the image when combined with silence becomes stronger than the spoken word. This is inspiring especially when I come across an unspeakable situation or a story that can't be expressed by words, only by image. This is what Rancière is looking for (as previously discussed in chapter 2), the alternative image that depends on the power of emotions more than anything else. (Rancière, 2009).



Figure 29: Snapshot, *Home Sweet Home*, Amro Khito, 2013

The next video to review is called *Home Sweet Home*²¹ directed by Amro Khito in 2012. I included this video because it sheds light on a crucial part of the current Syrian reality. Children fled Syria leaving school behind, ending up taking refuge in abandoned schools in a neighbouring country. This irony shows the threat that our children are facing in terms of lack of basic survival

²¹To watch the film please see this link <http://vimeo.com/76339446>

conditions and lack of education too. Luckily, some of the children interviewed in the video managed to attend school but not all children in the same situation have the same opportunity. You can hear only the answers of the interviewed children living in the school, which I find an exciting way to edit the video and make it captivating. What is also interesting to pay attention to is the other side of their suffering that the director focused on, which is not the state of refuge of the children but their longing to their home, memories and friends. As he described it: "Their entire suffering today lies in their ever-present memories of what they had witnessed in Syria and what they left behind: their friends, neighbourhoods and beautiful houses." (Khito, 2013)

In addition to these few videos we have come across here, there are a lot of other video experiments that have been exhibited in documentary film festivals and shared online that highlight the difficulties surrounding affected Syrian children, raise awareness of their situation, and explore how the current war left a devastating impact on their mental health, physical health, education, and above all their future. I likewise put a good amount of focus on the same concern throughout my young participants - my two nieces and nephews and Rama my friends' niece. Such videos are a necessity to be made, watched and shared because they draw attention to the most important affected side in the conflict: the children who have no role what so ever in what caused the current situation.



Figure 30: *Homs I will stay*, by Kayani, 2012

The next video I would like to discuss is called *Homs I will stay*²² made by Kayani in 2012. It's a short interview with an old lady called mother of Yhya, who refused to flee her destroyed city and almost destroyed house. Her main statement is that she prefers to die in her home rather than to be safe somewhere else. The video is short but effective and the combination of a few shots of her house with the interview succeeded in giving us the feeling of the circumstances this mother of Yhya lives in. The most interesting feeling about this video is that it combines the domestic with the unwelcoming, warmth with the unhospitable emotions at the same time and place. The contrasted feelings; between the insistence on survival and staying in her house, which she talks about it with warmth and love, and the horrendous destruction, danger and the un-homey that fill the space extends the meaning of this piece and spotlights the contradictions that fill life after war. With a will to live and survive among ruins of stones, victims and memories, this video presents the everyday battle Syrian people have to face.

²²To watch the film please see this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TVgNzzQ-QWM>



Figure 31: Snapshot from 'Our Daily Fu**ing Meal' by Waw-Al-Wasel, 2013

Speaking about this unique perspective that reveals a whole new view from the inside, a video by Waw – Al Wasel (a group of Syrian artists) works perfectly as a relevant example called *Our Daily Fu**ing Meal*²³ 2013. The video shows a group of Syrian women in one of the destroyed villages, which suffers from lack of food and particularly bread. The women, throughout an informal interview, speak about their experience and explain how they make their own bread using the old traditional method. The method of interviewing is an insightful example and represents a good instance for a discussion with afflicted people. Because we can feel that the interviewer is close to the women or she is known to them and we can also feel the domestic sense of the place, which might have encouraged the participants to open up. In my case, interviewing family and close friends helped them to open up and helped me to collect good quality data. Therefore, I believe that the

²³ To watch this film please see this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rw-RpaNVrXA>

relationship between the interviewer/artist is very important in forming the video and collecting the data especially that the subject is sensitive and personal.

So far, all video examples I reviewed take the classic approach of documentary through interviews and subtle shots of the surrounding area giving us a background of the place. However, I am looking to explore a hybrid practice that meets with my own experimental approach, an imaginative one that combines documental methods with creativity. Therefore, in the next few videos I bring methods that could be closer to what I am aiming at and clarify what I would be inspired from, what I would avoid and why.



Figure 32: Snap shots from *Jasmenco* 2013 by Wathec Salman

For example, a video by Wathec Salman called *Jasmenco*²⁴2013 didn't follow the classic documentary style. It was created to recall great memories and at the same time to resist destruction. The flamenco dancers in the video refuse

²⁴ To watch this film please see this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4FQusLobiQ>

to accept the reality of their distorted place that used to be their studio and theatre to entertain people, instead, they dance on the ruins of the destroyed place. “*Jasmenco* is a dance of life in the time of war. Jasmenco’s name came from Jasmine city the symbol of Damascus and the word flamenco.” (Salman, 2013).

This example shows how to respond to the war’s difficult reality in a unique way. The creator chose a changed way of response that refuses the ruins and destruction to be the typical image of war. Instead he created a new image that is the opposite of destruction. He chose the image of dancing, which celebrates life and resists demolition. It invites people to feel the passion for life instead of violence. In this short film, without a script or interviews, we manage to understand the dancers’ background, their stories, what they used to do before war and how their lives used to be.

This video meets the criteria for inclusion in my project as I am trying to resist the destruction and the clichéd representation of war by giving people a voice to speak about their experiences. Even when this video shows ruins, it was shown to be rejected and to discard the traditional war image. That’s what my project is trying to achieve: to resist the typical image of war and create a new one which is all about the participants’ testimonies. What is noticeable in my participants’ statements is their resistance to the destruction and to the war effect on their spirit. They have stated on many occasions that they will remain strong and hopeful, and that they are trying to enjoy life and refusing to give

up. That meets with the message of this film, emphasising the importance of resistance and life continuity.



Figure 33: Snapshot from 'War on Famous Canvas' by Amjad Wardeh 2014

Another creative example by Amjad Wardeh called *War on Famous Canvas*²⁵ 2014, a literal title of the video, in which Wardeh demonstrated some recordings and sounds of the Syrian war fights combined with a number of the most famous worldwide paintings ever created in the history of art like paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci, Salvador Dalí, Pieter Brueghel and Paul Gauguin. By creating this piece the artist claimed that: “war can happen anytime and destroy cultural heritage”. (“Euromed Audiovisual: Amjad Wardeh,” 2014).

The video is original in respect of offering a new way to look at the Syrian war and reminding us throughout those famous paintings that war is can occur any time at any place. Even during those times that the peaceful paintings

²⁵ To watch this film please see this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJLz7Z4NCxI>

are being shown they could be attacked by tanks, weapons, and endless explosions. However, what I would avoid here is to show those instruments of war very clearly and loudly in front of the viewer, instead, I would prefer referring to them or give a hint about them. In that way, the video could have offered not only an exciting way of response but also in an indirect way. The later way is what I am trying to achieve in my practice and making sure to stay away from the obvious element of my subject, which is violence.



Figure 34: Snapshot from 'Passing' by Amr Kokash & Ghiath Alhaddad 2014

Amr Kokash and Ghiath Alhaddad's *Passing*²⁶ 2014, shows the chaos of the Syrian war although the statement of the artists claim to avoid showing it ("Euromed Audiovisual: Amr Kokash & Ghiath Alhaddad," 2014). The chaos is represented by lots of family and friends' photos combined with footage from news, animal-human documentary, and other material of visual noise, violence and disorder. In relation to my project, this video has an element in common which is embracing the memories, family and friends' presence, however, the video goes on mostly to demonstrate the violence with visual

²⁶ To watch the film please see this link <https://vimeo.com/80850388>

violence and disturbance, which I am intentionally and carefully avoiding to show in my practice. Despite that, I think this video is a good example to look at and avoid going into creating equivalent visual violence to the war violence, which might push the viewer away as it represents what the viewer regularly sees. The video aims at visual noise and to make the viewer feel uncomfortable while surrounded by a big amount of visual information and images. It is also general and there is no specific focus apart from the violence and chaos, which can lead to a visual confusion and discomfort, something that I would avoid while being considerate to both my viewer and participant.



Figure 35: Snapshot from 'Story from Damascus' by Waseem Marzouki 2014

The last Syrian example to discuss is *Story from Damascus*²⁷ (2014) by Waseem Al Marzouki. It is an animated story that tells a historical tale about Damascus in the form of ancient Persian and Arabic storytelling, told from the female entertainer, who is called Shahrazad in the ancient tales to the king,

²⁷ To watch the film please see this link
<http://euromediaaudiovisuel.net/p.aspx?t=videos&mid=103&l=en&did=1888>

who is called Shahrayar. In Damascus: “many tyrants passed and got defeated just like a raindrop falling into its river, shakes but never mud”(“Story from Damascus by Waseem Al Marzouki - Syria - 20/04/2014 - Videos & Photos - Euromed Audiovisual,”).

What is successful about this video is the attempt to respond to the ferocity by delicate drawings, to transpose the cultural atmosphere of Damascus and combining it with Syrian music. It also demonstrates some historical facts in a romantic and poetic way. In relation to my project, this video stands out as a good example of embracing the Syrian culture instead of focusing on its current destruction, in which the reference to the current unfortunate situation is not represented directly. Although inspired by this approach, I would still bear in mind not to fall under the clichéd Middle Eastern type of art that could lead to celebrating the culture at the expense of showing the reality of affected people.

Middle Eastern art in response to home related issues:

In this section I review a number of Middle Eastern art²⁸ examples that are concerned with issues around home and conflict to be put in dialogue with my project's approach.



Figure 36: *Like Every Day*

By Chadi Ghadirian 2000/2001



Figure 37: *Like Every Day*

By Chadi Ghadirian 2000/2001

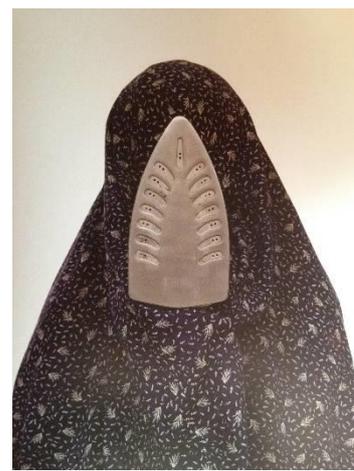


Figure 38: *Like Every Day*

By Chadi Ghadirian 2000/2001

Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East book holds a collection of art from the Middle East exhibited by Saatchi Gallery 2007. An example from this book is created by an Iranian artist with Armenian roots, Shadi Ghadirian. Seven photographed portraits of women entitled *Like Every Day* 2000-2001 (see above). By covering her head-body with fabric and covering her face with a kitchen implement, the artist is claiming that these tools (a symbol of domestic activity) can erase the woman's personality and identity leaving her soulless and purposeless except from doing housework. I find this way of

²⁸ Videos reviewed in this section are part of *Resistance[s]* collection; a three part DVD series of avant-garde Middle Eastern and Northern African experimental films produced by Lowave in 2006, 2007 and 2010.

representation of the role of women in some Middle Eastern societies to be, besides realistic, simple, and powerful. This approach can be applied to photographs and the results are accessible. However, to be applied to a moving image practice, as in the case of my project, will shift the project to a symbolic representation of people's states and feelings and it will change its path from being documental and personal into being emblematic and generic, something that I try to avoid in my practice. Instead I focus on the individual and their emotions.



Figure 39: Snapshot from *Endless* by Hala Georges 2013

Nonetheless, I used the approach of symbolism in one of my experiments *Endless*²⁹ 2013. A bath tub was filled with blood gradually, was flushed away, and then was refilled again to represent the violence in the country of Syria, which goes up and down and yet is not finished. This video remains different from other videos in the series, yet, it was an important experiment towards

²⁹ For more details about this video please see *Appendix*

finding my focused and more personal form of response. Therefore, it is kept as a proof of progress towards the current point of focus.



Figure 40: Snapshot from 'Resonance' by Ismail Bahri 2008

The inspirational piece for this video is called *Resonance*, 2008, by Ismail Bahri (Lowave, 2010). It starts with representing memories from childhood around the bathroom and specifically around the bath tub. Then Arabic words about home and memories fill the top gradually until the water slowly touches them and they start to mix with water making a beautiful blend before they dissolve. The approach of thinking and responding to the subject matter is strong, has a visual impact and aesthetics, and gives the time to receive the visual and conceptual information. It is inspiring and visually successful especially with the still shots, however, it remains general without a specific focus or a personal involvement, which is again far from my focused approach.



Figure 41: Snapshot from *Illumines* by Halida Boughriet 2007

While talking about a focused approach, I would like to bring a relevant example that takes a personal perspective: *Les Illumines* 2007 by Halida Boughriet (Lowave, 2010). The short film shows a criss-crossed and obscured view to the world while walking in public. The viewer can't figure out the details but is exposed to the world from this unique perspective and having most people looking at the camera in curiosity, fear and censure. Only at the end, the camera becomes a third person and shows the unveiled women with black burka walking in public. The film showed the world from this woman's perspective and invited us to feel her feelings while she walks behind the heavy black fabric within a minute and a half. This video although short, manages to shed light on the subject and find a quick and clever way to leave an impact. Short videos can be effective and influential at once but they might also struggle to go in depth into the subject, a fact that I consider when making short films.



Figure 42: Snapshot from 'Revolution' by Khaled Hafez 2011

A different example of moving image in response to home-related issues is called *Revolution 2011* by Khaled Hafez (Lowave, 2010). The short film is concerned with the Egyptian revolution and it shows the situation from three perspectives: the militant, the farmer, and the business person. The three perspectives deal with the revolution and resulting changes in their own way:

“what remains of the broken promises are the social equity of the military gun, the pseudo-liberty of the multinational transcontinental corporations and the unity of chopping heads representing the worldwide rising right wing religious fundamentalism” (“Lowave - film and curator label - Khaled Hafez,” 2010).

This piece offers perspectives of native sources and representatives of the community, however, the difference between Hafez’s approach and mine is that my practice is not concerned with the political aspects of the Syrian crisis but with the private side of it. This video is demonstrable, in a way it feels educational and not in any sense charming, which I try to apply on my

experiments. In contrast to this example, I am not aiming to only inform people with facts but to win their hearts and engage them on a humanistic level.



Figure 43: Snapshot of 'Smell of Sex' by Danielle Arbid 2007

Speaking about the human side of a subject, the short film by Danielle Arbid called *The Smell of Sex* 2007 (Lowave, 2010) is relevant here. In the film Arbid focuses on the human side of a group of young people by expanding the boundaries of the privacy of each of the participants. Although the participants are unknown, their voices are present and powerful. The viewer feels he/she is getting to know those people through listening to only their voices talking about their personal and sex life. It is a captivating approach to a taboo subject in the Middle East that the creator wanted to raise awareness about. The combined footage of girls walking in the street looks random, innocent, and natural, it doesn't necessarily connect to the voice over that talks about the sex life of the interviewees, the approach that I found interesting in terms of motivating the viewer to create new meanings and

connections between image and sound. Apparently, the artist couldn't use a related or direct footage of the interviews because most likely the participants didn't want their faces to appear. This approach gives the freedom to the viewer to analyse and understand the work according to their background and preferences; it relies on the viewer's imagination. I tried that approach in one of the project's sketches called *Here & There*³⁰ 2014, in which I not only disconnected the image from the sound but also created a contrast and contradiction between the two in response to the content of the film, which is the difference between living in a peaceful place like London and living in disordered Damascus during the same time.



Figure 44: Snapshot from 'Nouba' by Katia Kameli 2005

Nouba 2005 by Katia Kameli (Lowave, 2007), on the other hand, which is about an Arabic women-celebration of a wedding, showed me what I should avoid and not apply in my practice. It is a fascinating video to watch with multiple visual effects and captivating Arabic music, however, it is general; it

³⁰ For more details about this video please see *From Rochester with Love* chapter

could be taking a place anywhere at any time and representing any issue related to Middle East culture. Although, it shed the light on the Middle Eastern wedding rituals, but it could be taking a place in any Arabic country. It is more entertaining than enlightening without a tendency to respond to a specific story like in my case. In comparison, my practice embraces the individual, their personality, and their untold stories, and on top of that it is concerned with particular case happening in particular time and place with particular people, which inherently effect the artistic direction of my practice to be specific and taking a storytelling approach. On a similar level, I would also avoid the usage of extensive visual and musical effects. I believe the reason it is been applied in this video is because of the lack of narrative and focus, therefore, the creator needed supporting visual and musical material to enhance the result.



Figure 45: Snapshot from 'Straight Stories' part 1 by Bouchra Khaili 2006

Straight Stories part 1 (Lowave, 2007) by Bouchra Khaili on the other hand took a similar approach to mine by taking the story telling to represent individual concerns and experiences. Each person she interviews in the film is an immigrant, who has a story to tell about their dreams, plans and what they expected from their journey far from home. The relationship between image and sound in this video is thought-provoking: all you can see is the landscapes that travellers themselves can see during their journey taken by train, ship, or other transports. Their voices in the meantime are accompanying the moving images and motivating us to create the link between the person and the place. It invites us to question the relationship between the person (the immigrant here) and the places he passes through but never belongs to. It is a good example in my research process that shows how to respond to a personal story in an indirect way, in which the video is about the power of the story. It is simple, minimal in effects, gives a space to receive the story, think of the words, listen to the sound, and observe all the

details. I applied similar approach in the video *From Rochester with Love*³¹, in which you can see different views of the town of Rochester while I am describing my immigration experience to the UK, and in contrast my hometown Damascus, and the memories of living there. The content of the sound and image is again not necessarily connected but still creates new meanings out of their combination, meanings that refer to the relationship between the person speaking and the moving image being shown - how much she is related to this place, how much she misses her other place, what the differences are between the place or image shown and the place she is talking about and other questions that would probably be provoked by such an approach.



Figure 46: Snapshot from *Dansons* by Zoulikha Bouabdellah 2003

Moving on to talk about *Dansons* 2003 (Lowave, 2006), which means 'let's dance'. "It makes a strong commentary on cultural identity and hybridity, as she belly dances to the French national anthem" ("Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base: Zoulikha

³¹ For more details about this video, please see *From Rochester with Love* chapter

Bouabdellah,” 2003.). Zoulikha succeeded in leaving an impact on the viewer as she focused in her short video on claiming one message, which is embracing the interactive cultural relationship between the Middle East and France, which I found influential as an approach, that is, to respond to one statement in one simple and unexpected way. However, as I stated earlier, for my project to focus on the story of the Syrian individual, the art direction of my practice tends to go towards the story telling approach instead of the conceptual and symbolic³² approach which applies on *Dansons* video.



Figure 47: Snapshot from *From Beirut with love* by Wael Nouredine 2005

The last example to discuss is *From Beirut with Love* 2005 by Wael Nouredine, which inspired the title of my video *From Rochester with Love* 2013. This video is a documentary about the city of Beirut, the terrorist attacks that take place from time to time, the militant presence in the city and random scenes from everyday life in the city. Nouredine focused at the end of this

³²For the purpose of experimentation and trying different approaches I've made an experiment in response to *Dansons* called *Rhythm of Revolution* in 2013. Please see *appendix*. The type of experiments included in *appendix* is an important record of trial towards eventually developing the practice that in contrast focused on the private account and avoided symbolisation and implication.

rich documentary piece on a personal or domestic side of the Lebanese situation by filming a group of young men who are using heroin and other drugs to offset the effects of living in those difficult circumstances. This last part interests me the most because it offered inspiring way of informally interviewing participants. They didn't say much, yet, the artist succeeded in transforming the sense of their condition and the atmosphere they live in. It is centred on the movements and behaviours of people shown in the video more than on what it said about the situation. I was inspired and I applied that in few of my videos, in which I didn't have a verbal message to say rather a sense of living to represent. Examples from my project that are inspired from this approach are *A Letter from Luna* 2012, *Lamitta* 2014 and *Here & There* 2014³³. This tactic is mainly focused on conveying the domestic feeling and the atmosphere in which the participants are living in, instead of focusing on the written script. It is when the viewer has the most space to draw their conclusion on the sentiment of the imagery they are faced with.

This contextual review has exposed me to different rich ideas and approaches to the subject, which helped to shape further my own way, find and analyse the similarities and differences to other relevant Arabic and Syrian artworks. It helped to clarify what approaches I would avoid, and what I would be inspired from and consider in creating my creative response. Overall, it informed my practice and assisted to take its position in the circle of moving image practice about the Middle East social and political complications and specifically about the Syrian war.

³³ Those videos are discussed in details in *From Rochester with Love & Appendix* chapters.

Several results I concluded throughout the review, which are related to my personal experience and connected directly to the progress and direction of the project. Starting from explaining the effect of my immigration and the Syrian war on my interest in research and hence on my art practice. That in return helps to give the audience a new perspective about the Syrian war far from the mainstream representation of war. I also, on many occasions, explained that my project offers a personal perspective focused on the individual far from the cliché of war representation. I demonstrated the effect of the trauma on some Syrian artists' artwork and on mine, which led to have a black and white visual effect on the footage of my early experiments.

Some of the artworks were similar to my approach and some were the opposite or different in some aspects. I noted similarities with videos, in which the artist embraced the beautiful home-culture instead of focusing on its current destruction and embraced memories, family and friends' presence. I brought to the discussion videos that are humanistic, concerned with people's stories and depend on personal testimonies and on other hand I brought general videos, without a specific narrative focus. Some of the reviewed videos were creative and layered and others were obscure and full of visual effects. All put in dialogue with my aimed-at-approach.

While applying a comparison between my practice and some reviewed pieces we noticed that despite the similarities, each artist has their own blueprint to add to the piece, especially when we have a different starting point to the video either outside or from inside the country, which lead to two

different representations of the issue. Another reviewed video presented an ethical issue. It pointed out to the importance of asking the right questions to the participants who are living very difficult circumstances and facing the loss of their families for war, especially when dealing with children. Added approach we came across is the non-verbal one that included only few words and depended on the power of the story itself and emotions involved.

Furthermore, we register several videos concerned with affected Syrian children and the devastating impact on their mental and physical health, education, and above all their future. The same concern that my project highlights on many occasions, throughout interviews with my nieces and nephews, which lead to state that such videos are a necessity to be made and shared. We also reviewed a video that combines the contrasted feelings; between the insistence on survival, warmth and love, and the horrendous destruction, danger and the un-homey, which reflect the contradictions of life-after-war.

Some pieces offered a fascinating approach to introduce the story, which is a disconnection between image and sound. This approach is inspiring because it gives the freedom to the viewer to understand the work according to their background and preferences and pushes to create new meanings out of the image and sound combination. I also found that being focused like in some reviewed examples on particular people affects the art direction of the practice. This leads to be specific and to take a minimal and narrative approach that gives a space to observe all the details throughout the video.

Conversely, I would avoid demonstrating the violence directly with visual noise and strong effects. Instead, I would focus on the story, the person himself/herself and what they have to say. Also as much as a symbolic approach to the subject seems thought-provoking, I would also avoid it to focus on the specificity of the narrative without going into making general statements that won't add anything new to our knowledge about the Syrian war.

Over all, this rich review of artwork and videos has been insightful and inspiring. It helped to broaden the context of the project and make several points in relation to my project.

'So much I want to say'

Mona Hatoum case study

After examining a number of Syrian and Middle Eastern artists' relevant artworks, highlighting differences and similarities with my approach, I examine one more in-depth case. That is to enrich the contextual review with a specific case that has many similarities to my situation and to position further my practice within the circle of contemporary Arabic art. In here I examine how Hatoum developed concepts in response to a difficult reality such as civil war and explore her practice and particularly the video work. This case study presents a dialogue between Hatoum's work and mine and finishes with couple videos in response to the study.

Points in common

The common points between the Anglo-Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum and myself made my choice to investigate her work essential. One such shared characteristic is that of being an Arabic artist based in the UK, experiencing distance and displacement from one's country, while going through such a difficult time enduring a violent and vicious war happening in one's homeland. While I bear unhealable emotional wounds as a result of the current crisis, Hatoum had to endure a similar situation when she was in the UK. She faced the sudden destruction of the place she grew up in and people she grew up with.

Although I am from a different generation, we are from the same region, which is called the nation of Sham or The Big/Natural Syria. This nation is now part of the Arabic world, but it was once united as one country separate from the other Arabic nations. Foreign occupation divided the country into the several states known today as Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan post WWI (Hajjar, 1999). They still share similar Arabic dialects, cuisine, atmosphere, traditions and importantly, culture. I share with Hatoum the same connection to the land, sense of loss, and memories of our home falling apart. We watched the trauma when we were living in the UK, the place that offered us the same free space of expression.

While Hatoum was born in Beirut in 1952, she was never awarded Lebanese nationality. Her family escaped from the Palestinian- Israeli conflict and never returned to their homeland. Like most of the Palestinian people who settled in different places around the world after 1948, they would not be given the new country's citizenship even if they were born and lived there so as not to lose their national identity. Hatoum experienced exile twice in her life; firstly when she was living in Lebanon and secondly when she travelled and settled in Britain. Although she has an English passport, she never felt that she could belong to another land, she only belonged to her Palestine. (Jopling & White Cube, 2006)

Hatoum created several art themes and gradually developed her autobiography. Many elements have played a major role in that artistic and conceptual development. First the displacement she experienced had

affected her work dramatically: after her short visit to London in 1975 she could not return to Lebanon once the civil war began. Nor could she go to the place her family were originally from - Haifa in Palestine. In addition, by living in an international capital like London she represented a 'third-world' person in a Western community. This led her work to take a different approach, unique amongst her student peers and different even from those who worked with minimalism and material installation (Brett, 1997). As Guy Brett described the elements that affected her work: "Place of origin, place of work, place of exhibition. Each tied to a fourth notion of place." (Brett, 1997:36)

At some point, she took an isolated position. In the mid-1980s she was extreme in some of her representation of what her family and people were going through, by building a separate place or *world* inside an art gallery. She was indicating her isolation from home and the feeling of separation from her people, who were not aware of her suffering or the suffering within the *world of her gallery*. In the *Hidden From the Prying Eyes* installation in 1987, she isolated herself and used part of the gallery as a clean and calm place, claiming an isolation and separation from the rest of the world.

Similarly, the horrendous war in my country has impacted on me and caused feelings of isolation and separation from my people, home country as well as from people in England. My concerns about my country's situation that only seem to exist in the news and in my consciousness create a feeling that I am living in a different world full of fears and grief that surrounds only me and no-one else. Responding to those feeling, I chose to build a new connection with

home, family and friends. By that I am converting my feelings of isolation into a contribution.

The content of Hatoum's work responded to the long term violence in the Middle East and its effects on society. As an Arabic woman she also explored the sexual and social politics in the Middle East. The displacement and exile she experienced reflected directly on her work and illustrates the anger she felt towards the events in her life; violence and expatriation. When reviewing what has been written about Mona Hatoum and her artwork, we notice she continuously developed different art themes from her student days right up until the present. She used several media of expression starting from free experiment and small-scale installation, to embracing the concept of phenomenology and using her female body to represent her statements, then experimenting with moving image video and via an interactive video with the audience, until the artist came back to installation and more material-based work.

The following text will explore the themes she developed over the years in chronological order and go into depth with some examples which directly relate to my project. Understanding how she approached examining concerns, that we share, will reflect on creating and realizing my own practice. In light of this I discuss two experiments I produced in response to the study.

Self & Everyday Objects 1975 to 1981

By applying free experiments, Hatoum used different objects to represent her ideas. Some of her experiments at that stage were the seeds for her later work which went into more depth and were presented on a bigger scale. Her projects were provocative and suggested danger and features of violence “which hovered on a borderline between artistic and technological experiment, with a mischievous influx of everyday life.” (Archer.et.al., 1997:37). For example she used household objects like a comb, a corkscrew, scissors, a colander connected to electricity in a series of untitled installations in the late 70s (“ArtAsiaPacific: Domestic Insecurities Mona Hatoum,” 2008). In addition to her attraction to using everyday objects to respond to political issues, Hatoum’s interest in using the body and body-elements like hair, nails, and skin appeared at this early stage of her practice, which led her to develop a practice of performance using her body later on.

Because of what was considered ‘dangerous’ in her proposals at the Slade School, she shifted the method of idea representation to take the shape of a performance instead of using materials. This art theme allowed the artist to describe her concepts in a distinctive way, a way that was similar to her existence in that place at that time. Her insistence of using materials that represented violence in her homeland and later had been transformed into a performance practice was certainly an early artistic attitude which featured in her biography. Although other art students and artists might have taken a similar approach to hers at the time, they did not necessarily share her source

of inspiration and motivation. Her representation was pointed at the Middle Eastern society and the free space she had when moving to the UK allowed her to express that in using objects from everyday life.

What is fascinating here for my project, is her use of everyday objects to refer to the pain, suffering, and danger her people were experiencing. Likewise, I am intending to use my family and friends' everyday stories and experiences to represent the war's effects on everyday life. In this way I mean to offer a closer and domestic look at the subject.

Self & the Other: 1982 to 1988

Hatoum at this stage of her life tried a direct way of reaching and speaking to the audience. She chose to wear outfits that fit within the projects' context and paused, walked or crawled between crowds to make her statements as noticeable as possible.

Topics of the work were again concerned with the violence in the Middle East, but this time she used her body, emphasizing her womanhood and in some cases her Middle Eastern womanhood. The artist was not only the creator but also the performer. She believed in the embodiment application and expressing her artistic and conceptual statement physically. She felt this was always more fulfilling and effective. In her reply to Michael Archer's question about relating body to mind in her work she said:

“We relate to the world through our senses. You first experience an artwork physically. I like the work to operate on both sensual and

intellectual levels. Meanings, connotations and associations come after the initial physical experience as your imagination, intellect, psyche are fired off by what you have seen...”(Hatoum 1997, cited in Archer.et.al., 1997:8)

This statement and her tendency to use the body and body-material from an early stage in her practice, demonstrate Hatoum’s phenomenological approach, which emphasises the concept of perceiving the world through our bodies. According to phenomenology, we are embodied subjects involved in existence. The significance of this concept is the replacement of the body as the primary site of the world instead of consciousness. Embodiment, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the natural response of being in the world; we exist in the world and then we perceive it through our embodied existence. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002)

During her performances in the mid-1980s she represented the two main stereotypical categories that a Palestinian person was associated with in the West, according to her; either a ‘terrorist’ or a ‘victim’. Hatoum referred to the ‘terrorist’ classification and highlighted this prejudiced view in a couple of performances; *Discord and Divisions* and in *Them and Us...and Other Divisions*, both in 1984. (Ankori, 2006)

Them and Us...and Other Divisions (see figure 48) was a 50 minute performance in South Hill Park Arts Centre at Berkshire, where the artist wore a boiler suit and crawled very slowly along the ground in a straight line

through the chairs and tables interrupting people's lunch. When she reached a garden wall, she started to scrub the stone step with a red paint brush. After that she set fire to a screen of newspapers, which burned away to reveal a wall chalked with racist graffiti. Here, she was representing the 'others' in front of the society which categorized people and considered the artist as one of 'them', who had come to their land and became a threat, a terrorist, or a 'bad guy'. As a Palestinian person, she stated that she always felt she is one of 'them'. She wrote; "Living in the west as a person from the third world...I was aware of being an outsider, relegated to a marginal position, of being defined as 'others' or as one of 'them'" (Hatoum 1997, Cited in Ankori, 2006:126).



Figure 48: Still from performance *'Them and Us and Other Divisions'* by Mona Hatoum, 1984

The 'others' in the artist's perspective are all the minority among the majority that could be considered a danger to the society and the racist graffiti was against Jews, gays, Arabs, black, and other minorities (Ankori, 2006). As Gannit Ankori put it:

“By showing how fear and xenophobia transformed human being such as herself into homogenized, threatening ‘others’, these performances protested against the danger of racism and questioned deep-rooted assumptions about the very categories that divide people into ‘them’ and ‘us’.” (Ankori, 2006:126).

Hatoum represented the ‘terrorist’ classification in that work. She went directly to face people who are part of London. She wanted to confront them into seeing the ‘other’ in action. Her performance was very direct, bold and achieved its purpose of drawing their attention.



Figure 49: Still from performance *Under Siege* by Mona Hatoum, 1982

Another performance titled *Under Siege*, 1982, lasted for seven hours and “was a gruelling performance in which she was naked, literally and figuratively ‘under siege’ within a plastic

cell.” (Ankori, 2006: 127). Here she represented the role of a ‘victim’. It was made shortly before the actual Israeli siege around the Lebanese capital Beirut. Interestingly enough, Hatoum described the performance by referring to herself as a third person:

“A human figure reduced to a form covered with clay, trapped, confined within a small structure, struggling to stand up again and again...shipping and falling again and again...the live action was repeated over a duration of seven hours and was occupied by three

different sound tapes repeatedly blasting the space from different directions creating a collage of sounds; revolutionary songs, news reports and statement in English, French, and Arabic.” (Hatoum, 2006:128).

From her words, we learn that the artist was expressing her feelings of estrangement and unsteadiness at that point. On another occasion she claimed this work to be a ‘rite of a passage’, and that it was the first work to announce her survival against a constant feeling of entrapment. (Jopling & White Cube, 2006). It represents the confusion and stress of living simultaneously two different worlds, something I relate to when living safely in the UK while a war is destroying my home country.



Figure 50: Still from performance *Position: Suspended* by Mona Hatoum, 1986

Another interesting example of embodiment performance is *Position: Suspended* 1986 (see figure 50). It lasted for the whole day inside a passage

at the Laing gallery in Newcastle, UK. There, the artist referred to imprisonment, poverty, unemployment and wasted creative energies, which were combined with considerable physical dignity, which was expressed by the way she was moving and standing. Covered with mud and hanging several working tools in front of her she was inside a cage or a siege again. She was not using these tools, rather she was around them only wasting time and effort. In the afore-mentioned examples and in other performances, the artist involved herself in the art work and emerged with the expressive implements using herself as the starting point.

Noticeably, Hatoum's work is concerned with the Arabic person through using her own body and point of view to speak for the rest of her nation. Her concerns are always on our mind but she chose a unique angle to look from, which is her own. In terms of my approach of responding to the Syrian war, its impact of poverty, suffering, grief, and other consequences, I notice some similarities and differences with Hatoum's approach. To start with, I chose not to give the project a universal implication, rather to focus on personal stories, in which I don't ask clichéd questions that introduce the participant as a victim or as a terrorist but as a human being with a story to share. Alternatively, I find Hatoum's approach of taking herself as the starting point inspiring and relevant to my approach: what matters in my project is the focus on the individual, the personal and what it offers to a new look at the subject.

A war was fought between Lebanon and Israel in 1982, and her parents were trapped in the Lebanese capital. She felt isolated from the tremendous event, hopeless, being a witness living in England and observing what was happening to her home and people. Her feeling as a witness was stronger than being a part of this tragic experience, which might have pushed her to choose a relevant medium of expression - the video practice, in which the creator and the viewer can no longer interact but can only witness and observe what is going on. As Archer puts it:

“Hatoum not only felt separated from them, but also felt dislocated in her position in England as a ‘witness’ of a turmoil that was unknown to the society around her. A turning point was the heinous, organized massacre of Palestine refugees in the camps of Sabra and Chatilla outside Beriut, which took place in September 1982, and which the artist described as ‘the most shattering experience of my life’” (Archer, et. Al. 1997:38-42).

This truth reminds me of the reason I chose to incorporate the video practice into my project, having come from a graphic design and painting background. In March 2011 when the Syrian crisis started, I experienced the feeling of being a witness to the tragedy without being able to help or even communicate with my family due to the difficult circumstances they are living in. My way of response to this situation could not stop at using papers and colours but moved towards using sound and moving image. The practice had to move, speak up, and tell stories; the moving image was the best and most

suitable medium for that purpose. It helped to communicate the sense of the domestic and convey the voice and emotions of all participants including me.

The Domestic: Late 80s till now

Hatoum went back to installation but this time by applying bigger scales and developing her ideas from her student days. At that time of her career the artist thought of performance as a very direct tool of expression and preferred to use installations to speak about her concepts. She invited the viewer to be involved in the aesthetic and the conceptual experience without her physically being the centre of the work as she had done in previous works. Hatoum explains her perspective about installation saying:

“With the installation work, I wanted to implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation where the experience is more physical and direct. I wanted the visual aspect of the work to engage the viewer in a physical, sensual, maybe even emotional way; the associations and search for meaning come after that.”(Hatoum 1998, cited in Antoni, 1998).

Here Hatoum began to share the experience of exploring questions around the subject with the viewer, inviting them to wonder with her, instead of concluding with a fact. This brings Rancière’s invitation to emancipate the spectator from the artist’s superiority, which invites both artist and viewer to explore the subject together, emphasising equality in knowledge between the two (Rancière, 2009). Similarly, Hatoum is not claiming any power of knowledge against the viewer but responding to her emotions while asking

them to be part of the journey of exploration. We see that Hatoum at this point had developed her art conceptually by inviting the viewer to the space of the artwork to question and make their own conclusions instead of being a receiver of her ready-made message through a performance.



Figure 51: *Present Tense* by Mona Hatoum, 1996

For instance, the installation of *Present Tense* (1996), was a piece that occupied the central part of the floor of a small gallery in the largely Arab part of East Jerusalem, and consisted of a grid formation of blocks of white soap. Palestinian families traditionally made this soap from handmade olive oil. The entire surface of the soap was covered in a complex pattern made by pricking little holes with a nail and filling each with a red bead. The abstract drawing on the soap formed the map of the Oslo Peace Agreement of 1993; the first phase of a process by which Israel would give back to the Palestine Authority certain separated and dispersed areas of the country. (Jopling & White Cube, 2006)

We notice from this example of installation that the artist tended to use domestic items associated with the place. By using the soap, she referred to the most famous homemade tradition and the most attached industry to the country, which symbolises the land of Palestine itself; the land of olives. Thus

referring to the feeling of belonging to the land. The handmade soap imparts the domestic feeling to the viewer. All the pricking of beads into the surface of the soap strongly refers to the obstacles and difficulties the agreement had to face. In a domestic fashion, she questioned the purpose of Oslo Peace Agreement, inviting viewers to wonder about it, and refreshed our view about the whole Palestine – Israel conflict.



Figure 52: *First Step* by Mona Hatoum, 1996

The same concept can be applied to understanding some other artworks by Hatoum. In *First Step* (1996) and other pieces resultant from her residency at Sabbathday Lake in France, she expressed her simple everyday life there and used objects like a colander, a shaker, a milk strainer and other kitchen utensils. She wanted to represent the familiarity with the place and the belonging to it, even if temporarily. The idea behind this type of work expressed the domestic feeling and it also allowed the artist to show a personal side, invite the viewer to feel closer to her and experience the

closeness to the place. Although she used installation as a medium of expression, it still is relevant to my moving image approach as I am addressing the Syrian war from a domestic angle, in which I highlight the personal experience of the war and invite the audience to conclude their understanding of the situation. Through my practice they are invited to know about the participants' private emotions and the difficult experience of fighting to survive, in addition to their and my mixed feelings of nostalgia, displacement, longing and many other private sentiments.

A closer look & my response



Figure 53: Snapshot from 'So Much I Want to Say' by Mona Hatoum, 1983

Being an Arabic Palestinian woman was a great element of the videos' components. However, she was not happy to consider her origin and the circumstances she grew up in as the only source of inspiration for her work. In 1998 she stated: "the concerns in my work are as much about the facts of my origins as they are a reflection on or an insight into the Western institutional and power structures I have found myself existing in for the last 20-odd years."(Hatoum 1998, cited in Antoni, 1998)

An important example to bring to the discussion is *So Much I Want to Say* 1983 (see figure 53). The video consists of a sequence of images that clarifies every few seconds, exposing her face in a close up. While two male hands constantly cover her mouth, the words 'So much I want to say' recurs frequently on the soundtrack. ("So Much I Want To Say | Video Out -

Vancouver, British Columbia,” 1983). Elizabeth Manchester in reviewing this video for the Tate gallery wrote:

“the male hands, which gag Hatoum's mouth, form a physical and visual barrier between the artist and her audience, which seems on one level to prevent her from being seen, heard or understood. They provide a symbol for a cultural elite which stifles the voice of society's dispossessed, those who are alienated through their race, nationality and gender.” (Manchester, 2000)

The video does not refer directly to any social or political context, yet it clearly calls for freedom of speech and fights any restrictions over the right of expression. The hands covering her mouth repeatedly shows that desire of expression and by repeating the words ‘So much I want to say’ in a steady and calm tone she refers not only to her right of speech but also to speak as much as she needs and in the manner she prefers. The transition between a series of fixed photos is slow and invites the viewer to expect a change in the image, but that does not happen. The photos keep sweeping from the screen, from top to bottom, every eight seconds. The slow motion gives the video a deeper effect and a space for thinking and analysing the repeated phrase. As Therese Beyler puts it “This slowing of the action has had an effect on the way tension and emotion are communicated.” (Beyler, 2005)

Using male hands to prevent her from speaking created not only a barrier but a gender barrier between her ideas and the viewer. What she wants to say might be political, social, or personal, it didn't matter; what mattered for her to make clear is that all possibilities of the content are forbidden to be declared. Her ideas are not allowed to leave her mind in the masculine society she lived in, so she chose art to be the platform of expression.



Figure 54: Snapshot from 'Measures of Distance' by Mona Hatoum, 1988

Measures of Distance 1988 is another important video by Hatoum that should be considered. The video shows the artist's mother taking a shower while Arabic handwriting letters move over the screen. At the same time, Hatoum reads a letter in English while a conversation between her and her mother is taking a place in the background. The conversation is casual, her mother opens up and they share memories of old times.

This video contextualized the image of her mother within a social and political sphere, which reflected on her reality of exile and displacement and represented their close relationship (Antoni, 1998). Hatoum described it as a quite significant work for her and "...spoke of the complexities of exile, displacement, the sense of loss and separation caused by war" (Antoni, 1998).

Interestingly, while answering Antoni's questions about this video Hatoum mentioned the term 'feminism' and said "At the time, feminism had so problematized the issue of presentation of woman that images of woman vacated the frame, they became absent. It was quite depressing." (Hatoum 1998, cited in Antoni, 1998). From her claim we understand that feminism had an impact on her demonstrated by both videos *So Much I want to Say* and *Measures of Distance* especially that it was a growing concept, spreading quickly in the public consciousness and awareness in the 80-90s.

In relation to my approach to the subject, I take a similar position on the conflict, which is poetic, not feminist but feminine, through personal observation where feelings and emotions are the base of the response. I embrace a close relationship with participants, which helped tremendously to broaden the space between us, which led to them sharing emotions they wouldn't necessarily share with a stranger. *Measures of distance*, shows the artist's close relationship with her mother, who also mentions her relationship with the father and that he was not happy about Mona taking pictures in the shower. In this way, it brings the sense of the whole family into the frame.

While she was far from them, their issues still formed an axis of her life and considering their opinions and traditions is also important. In this video Hatoum not only spoke about her exile but also of her need to be close to her parents. That is completely understandable especially for an Arabic person. In the Arabic culture, daughters and sons do not leave the family home until the moment they decide to establish their own family. The unity of family is permanent for an Arabic person. It could take different shapes or forms with time but it never diminishes. As a Syrian person myself who grew up in the same region I can clearly tell that this artwork is mostly a message of nostalgia to that family unity.

Equally, my project is concerned with my family and friend's experiences during the Syrian war, and my practice is representing their daily lives under those circumstances in a form of moving image practice. The main concern of my project is to represent the current situation in Syria, however, by choosing the closest people as the participants, I am expressing my homesickness, the necessity of keeping in contact, and feeling their pain and be with them in this difficult time. On other note, Hatoum's video is hybrid, creative and far from the classic documentary style, something I aim at in my project.



Figure 55: Snapshot from 'After a Visit to Home' video experiment by Hala Georges, 2013

In response to Hatoum's approach, I was inspired to make two short experiments using my body, voice and perspective.

When I came back from an urgent visit to Syria in 2013, all I could hear was the sound of bombs, guns, and the explosion that almost killed me and my mother in Damascus on the 23th of April 2013. *After a Visit to Home* responds to the shock of coming back from a war zone and the heavy grief at that time. In here I keep asking in a mantra form to 'stop the sounds, stop the noises' while I am awake, asleep, or sitting on the floor in front my dad's portrait I had just completed. This experiment reacted to studying Hatoum's work using my body and emotions as a starting point.



Figure 56: Snapshot from 'My Day Time' video by Hala Georges, 2013

My Day Time is another experiment that developed to become a video piece in response to Hatoum's approach. It is a self-portrait trying to cope and go on with life while the soundtrack repeats the same phrases 'Stop the pain, Stop the grief, Stop killing, Stop the death,...'. Again, Hatoum's effect is clear in this piece, which helped to express my emotions and give a close look at the impact of war on my daily life.

In both pieces, the starting point is the self-accompanied with the usage of a mantra in a frame of a performance. All these elements are inspired from Hatoum's practice. She pushed me to discover a new potential for my practice and to experiment with new methods like creating a sound track that relies on self-expression producing a repetitive word-track and using my body language as a means of expression. Her practice is insightful in this way, and informing in another, in which I avoid the emphasis on a universal issue. Instead I chose to focus on the individual. In both pieces I was

encouraged to throw myself in front of the camera and try to get my emotions out. With no performance experience, that wasn't at all easy. Hence the first experiment remained a diary- experimentation, while *My Day Time* improved to join the final collection of the practice. Here I managed to focus on the portrait thus making complications of a performance more manageable, while emphasising the meaning of the mantra and enhancing the power of emotions from grief and displacement. Later on music was added to the video in relation to its context³⁴.

Through these two examples, my practice met Hatoum's ultimate concern, which is the individual. The individual and later the personal that she was concerned with from the beginning but expressed it gradually in different media, in addition to her interest in representing the pain of being far from home and family and the passion to express her free self. My project on the other hand is drawn into the war impact on individuals, and looking from that domestic perspective at the subject. That leads to say that the individual is a common concern between me and Hatoum, which remains a source of motivation and an inspiration for both.

³⁴ More about this video in *Rochester with Love* chapter

Through art themes created by Hatoum, from free experiments, to performance, moving image till making installations and item sculptures we notice that she approached concerns by making *herself* the centre of the artwork. The fact that she grew up in exile, being far from her homeland and had to live the exile again in England, created a defensive feeling. At some points she expressed her feelings of nostalgia, injustice and anger in an extreme way using tools that create an extreme or dangerous situation; such as the installations in which she used water and electricity simultaneously during her early practice.

Not all her work was about the difficult circumstances she had to face, but what came afterwards, such as the life of an Arabic person in the Western world. Through her performances in mid 80s she represented the two main stereotypical categories that a Palestinian person is usually associated with in the West: either a 'terrorist' or a 'victim'.

Even though Hatoum did not have the chance to enjoy living in her motherland secured and protected, she succeeded in building a feeling of familiarity with a place and show a sense of belonging even if only for a short time, as demonstrated by her work using domestic tools and objects in the shape of installations, like the work that came out of her residency in France in 1996. Using the domestic approach referred not only to feelings of familiarity with her surroundings but also responded to the violence, suffering, and unsettlement she faced. Hatoum used homely items to respond to the most unhomely of situations, in this way offering her perspective. She proved

conceptual development of her work when she involved the viewer, invited her to the space of an installation to wonder and ask questions about the subject matter. In this way, she was calling to emancipate the spectator from the expected ready-made statement.

Both Mona Hatoum and I suffered from loss, we both lost our homes, we both lived by force far from home, family and friends and stayed in the UK. We also both chose art as a way of expression, and above all we can only play the role of a witness of the tragic event. Hatoum, showed me an example of how to turn my pain, displacement, and grief into art and how to approach the issue from a personal and domestic perspective, which reconfigures the whole way we look at the subject.

From Rochester with Love

Moving image practice

So far the research has looked at the ethical issues of war images and investigated an alternative creative response that focuses on the personal standpoint, explored relevant literature and creative artwork by Syrian and Middle Eastern artists and examined in depth Mona Hatoum's work. These research steps have all prepared me to produce a collection of short videos and present a visualisation of the final exhibition. Videos are created in response to collected interviews and materials from participants living the Syrian war and to my personal monologues living far from this radical event that changed my life and the lives of so many.

When it wasn't at all possible to collect data from Syria I created a number of illustrations³⁵ in response to two major events during war that had a personal impact on me and to some of the videos' contents. However the illustrations remain 'supporting material' to the project and not the main creative practice, hence they are included in the appendix. I choose to keep them as they represent the fragmented nature of the project due to the difficult circumstances and weak connection with participants. They are a record of experimentation and effort to find alternative solution when there was no way to collect any sound or visuals from inside the conflict. Equally to their position

³⁵ For illustrations please see *Appendix*

in the project, a number of illustrations will appear at the thesis exhibition as supporting visual material on walls.

The Syrian war has harmed all 27 million Syrians enormously: half of them are misplaced, and 6% have been killed or injured. More than half of children of school age are out of school resulting in four years delay in schooling. Besides, the poor humanitarian situation that 80% of people left in Syria are suffering from poverty lacking food and drinking water, this in addition to the lack of fuel, energy, and means of communication. Life expectancy has been reduced by 27%. The Syrian economy has lost more 200 billion dollars and has fallen behind by thirty years. Syrians have been suffering from all this extremely unhealthy situation under the constant threat of death for the last five years and now entering into the sixth one. (Syria's war | World news | The Guardian, March 2015)

My practice comes to raise awareness of the impact of this war on Syrians' everyday lives, not by repeating facts and numbers produced by United Nations reports, which are fully accessible and available for people to learn about, but by giving a voice to the untold and hidden stories of affected Syrian citizens. This is aiming to generate a better understanding of the humanitarian situation of the Syrians, which is expanding to exist in the surrounding areas as well like Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt to name a few.

What makes the situation more complicated is that some of the parties involved in the war are based on religious or unannounced agendas leading to add more confusion to the Syrian citizen - from armed rebels to extremists Islamists. Extremists, who came not only from Syria but from all over the world, are now leading the picture and trying to take over Syrian areas gradually (Middle East | News | The Independent," June 2015), so that the northern part of Syria, from which both of my parents came, is completely taken over by ISIS including my family's country house and olive groves. This religious extremism is not only a national threat but it is expanding to become an international one. (Middle East | News | The Independent, June 2015)

The following video collection addresses small personal stories that symbolise a million similar situations that have been caused or will be caused by a long brutal, religious and confusing war like this one. In the text, I present the final practice experiments, reflect on them, and discuss their context, the practice progression, in addition to snapshots of the videos and their online links. Eventually, I present my suggestion for the final exhibition of the resultant material.

Interviews with my family members and friends inspire the visual, and they are the keys for my art-work. The process of making the experiments and collecting data from Syria involved a huge amount of stress and emotional time, and required a lot of patience and endurance, due to the circumstances that I point out and explain throughout the text in relation to each video.

Each video is a result of the research and the emotional journey of the time of making it. Some experiments, however, didn't join the final practice collection for different reasons: either they didn't add anything new, as they repeated similar concerns or methodologies to other videos, or they were too personal so that they blurred the message behind them, or they approached the Syrian crisis from a wide and clichéd general perspective. All three outcomes I was attempting to avoid throughout the project. However, these experiments³⁶ remain crucial towards the development and realisation of the final focus and proving its gradual progress, so the reader can see the process that the project went through in order to evolve.

Accordingly, I had experimented with different methods, concepts and visuals in order to find my own style of response. I explored general topics related to the Syrian war, then gradually, throughout my research, I re-focused the project on the personal and that is, as my writing demonstrated so far, to emancipate the spectator from war-image clichés and to offer an insider perspective on the conflict. It responded to the impact of violence by listening to stories happened during the war. In that way, the practice aimed to find a new path to represent the Syrian crisis far away from the usual disturbing war imagery.

From the start I experimented with two approaches: the first one depended on much editing, visual and sound effects, while the other one offered less editing and took more of a narrative path. Now, because the project is

³⁶ For these experiments please *Appendix*

focused on taking the domestic and personal approach, it doesn't depend on a great amount of editing and visual effects, rather on the power of the story itself. I believe that this approach doesn't only offer a new perspective but also opens a unique potential for my practice. What I found really fascinating is the connection between the art direction (visual effects and editing) and the content. To explain more, when the project was taking general topics about the Syrian war, there was more room for sound and visual effects because the content was ambiguous and unspecific, which made me seek supporting material to enhance the meaning. However, when I focused the project on a specific interest, the video seems to be independent from artificial visual and sound effects. The story of each video is powerful by itself, and doesn't need additional effects. This reminds me of Frederick Wiseman's belief in the idea of long and static takes and minimal editing for highly structured documentary (Anderson & Benson, 1991). However, my minimal approach has been always responsive to emotions and the power of the story, so when it is needed to use sound effects, it would be a result of the narrative itself and emotions involved³⁷.

Another note is that most of the early experiments were black and white, and that's for a personal reason. I was at the beginning of my grief, which reflected on my choices of colours in everyday life till it reached my practice too. Now, I have started to accept colours and I am slowly restoring my passion for them.

³⁷ This will be explained in *Portrait* video later in the chapter

In Chapter One 'Outside the Frame', I have explained the hybrid mixed nature of the practice and how it doesn't fall into the classic type of documentary filmmaking. Instead, it combines creativity with elements inspired or taken from reality. It is also experimental, offering an associational form³⁸ in some places such as examples I will soon present: *Here & There* and *Skype Call with Mum*. It can also be rhetorical and moving, depending on arguments from source³⁹ such as in *A Letter from Luna*, *Portrait*, and *Rama*. Hence, I am not claiming one clear categorization for my practice, on the contrary, it is a fusion of documentary and experimentation.

³⁸ Please see *Outside the Frame*, David Bordwell theory, 27 – 28

³⁹ Please see *Outside the Frame*, David Bordwell theory, 27 – 28

14 Final videos, descriptions, self-reflection and visualisation of the final exhibition:

The following order takes the dynamic format of a map, moving forward to visit some videos and then backward to stop at others. That is to give each video its context, and to show what I have learned, focused on and avoided while creating the practice.

Skype Call with Mum: 2012 – 01:01 min

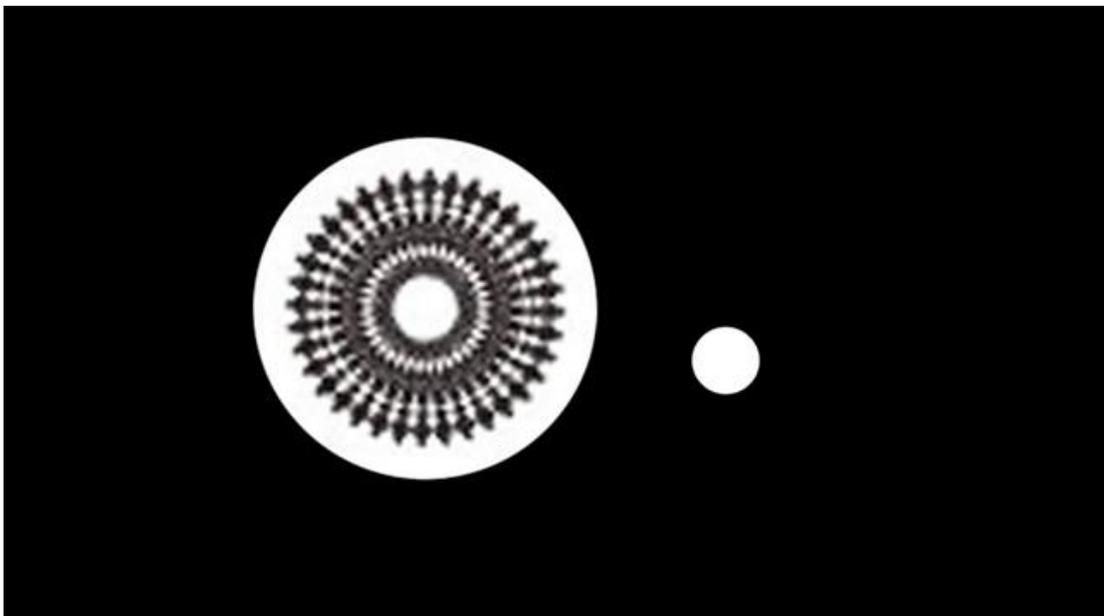


Figure 57: Snapshot from 'Skype Call with Mum' 2012 by Hala Georges

This experiment is the spark of the practice. I lost connection with home and family in Syria for a long time. Therefore, I decided to record my mother's voice the first time I had a chance to speak with her. The sound of violence around mother was louder than her voice and the call was interrupted and eventually disconnected. It responds to the 52 seconds conversation over Skype.

The video represents the motivation behind going into this subject in the first place; being drawn into communicating the personal stories of being in a war zone without having to show scenes involving violence. Although we can hear the sounds of war being clearly intensive (since its part of the recording), the video stands on its own as a result of that time, and my knowledge and mind state affected by the sudden ferocity of violence in Syria. The sound of war as it existed in the piece remains a reference to the bigger picture and the broader context of the video; the lack of communication with affected people, the horror, the feelings of loss and confusion, the waiting, and many other mixed feelings.

The visual language here is interpreting involved emotions supporting the project's main goal, which is to empower and translate emotions involved in each story. It is the only piece in which I used animation as a medium of response. Graphic and Arabesque shapes represent my voice and mother's voice, while the mixed feelings are represented using solid colours. I didn't use animation afterwards because of the new direction of storytelling that the practice took, which inspired me to rely on visual and sound material collected from interviews instead, a fact that indicates the connection between the content and the art direction in the project.

The process of making this video depended on recording phone conversations whenever possible and selecting the clearest and best conversation for the video. The reason this particular conversation was chosen is because of the clear and strong sound of war in the background.

My mother had to be very close to the window to get the strongest and clearest sounds, which was very dangerous and risky to her life. I of course, had to enhance the volume of the violence to emphasise its effect.

This piece means a lot to me because I made it in response to my personal need to document this difficult and long-term situation and it was the beginning of realising the importance of individual experiences. Remembering that the longest conversation with home during 2012 lasted for five minutes and it happened only every few months.

Please see *Skype Call with Mum* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

From Rochester with Love: 2013 - 09:09 min



Figure 58: Snapshot from 'From Rochester with Love' 2013 by Hala Georges

The video is a short journey in my place and surroundings while I open up to talk about my favourite city and unforgettable memories. It combines the voice and image of two different and contrasting parts of the world while exploring the state of someone had to leave their home country and everything behind in order to survive. It wonders about the future and embraces the past while having a painful present, which reflects the state of most of the Syrian's or any other war's victims.

There is a similarity between this video and '*News from Home*' 1977 by Chantal Akerman, which shows long shots of New York while the creator is reading letters sent to her by her mother between 1971-1973 when she was living in the city. However, this video wasn't created in response to Akerman's video but to my reality and the fact that I live in Rochester while the war is

shattering my country and distancing my family. Ackerman's video is nostalgic indication, sending a message of longing and sharing a sense of place with her mother, which is what exists in my video to some extent yet it's not the main focus. In this video, there is a contrast between the spoken word and the image so that the difference between the warmth of the words and coldness in the image works as an invitation to engage the viewer and involve them emotionally.

The monologue approach in *From Rochester with Love* led the video to have minimal visual effects and the music is part of the video context and not a sound effect, it is diegetic, and present by the action of the video itself. The focus is on the spoken words, the power of the story and emotions coming through the voice, which is what Rancière believed in as a way to represent the un-representable. According to him, the alternative and more truthful way of expression means to depend on the power of emotions and feelings, (Rancière, 2014), in here they are manifested in the power of the spoken spontaneous words. The long shots on the other hand transfer the atmosphere of living in an isolated place, which differs from home in many ways, and can only be seen in shades of grey. This piece embodies the core of my practice and involves me as an observer-participant in the project. The methodology that added not only a personal aspect but a true one that relies on the inside power of sentiments opening up private emotions to the viewer and inviting them to be part of this private side of my life. This was a difficult challenge; to open up feelings I only confronted while making the video. However, making it was a critical statement supporting the project's

argument; to offer a unique perspective about the effect of war that becomes possible by the medium of art.

Please see *From Rochester with Love* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

Five Letters to Mother: 2014 – 08:03 min



Figure 59: Snapshot from 'Five Letters to Mother' 2014 by Hala Georges

The video is inspired by a poem *Five Letters to Mother* written by the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani⁴⁰, who is famous and loved for writing about longing for his hometown Damascus and his passionate relationship with his family and country while he lived abroad. I re-edited the poem in relation to my reality and changed several words to relate it to the current Syrian situation. The views are taken from Rochester town as I am reading the letters to my mother introducing the place I am living in.

⁴⁰ Nizar Qabbani “was a Syrian diplomat, poet and publisher. His poetic style combines simplicity and elegance in exploring themes of love, eroticism, feminism, religion, and Arab nationalism. Qabbani is one of the most revered contemporary poets in the Arab world.” (Wikipedia, Nizar Qabbani, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nizar_Qabbani (Accessed on 26,12,15))

The musical background on the other hand forms an important part of the piece, because of the attachment between this particular music and the Syrian morning. As most of the Syrian morning rituals since the 1970s involve waking up while listening to the songs of Fairouz⁴¹, her songs had to be included in the video. She would be on every TV channel and radio station around the country for the early hours of every morning. Noting that the video was taken in Rochester during morning time and the poem is mainly a morning greeting. Furthermore, the poem refers to the forced distance with Damascus and by using it, I refer to my forced distance with home and family.

I applied a minimal visual effect to enhance the coldness of the place and gave the viewer the space to have a sense of the place and the experienced feelings, and process the visual and verbal information. In some places throughout the video there is a direct visual interpretation of the words like the scene of the empty bench when the poem says 'I am alone...', however, that doesn't happen very often and that is to give the space for the viewer to create their own interpretation and connection between the spoken word and the image.

Every scene is reaching to give the viewer the sense of place I live in and how it feels; quiet, empty, beautiful, yet, distant and cold, which is the exact contrast to how home feels; warm full of memories and familiarity. It is poetic,

⁴¹ Fairouz "is a Lebanese singer who is one of the most widely admired and deeply respected living singers in the Arab world. Her songs are constantly heard throughout the region." (Wikipedia, *Fairouz*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fairuz>, (Accessed on 26, 12, 15)

representative of my personal experience of living outside the war zone and has a nostalgic feeling for a sense of belonging. Searching through the image for a sense of fitting-in and acceptance whilst at once thinking about my home country is what the video is concerned with. It represents a sense of conflict between here, there, and the power of emotions. It combines the poetic word, the distant image, and the power of inner world to form a piece that offers that unique perspective I am looking for, and once again invites the viewer to a private and emotional part of an immigrant life.

Although it is similar to *From Rochester with Love's* approach, the experimentation with a new form of expression through poetry has added to my series of experiments a new and exciting dimension. Finally, it is worth mentioning that I regularly spend time meditating, looking at that water and bridge shown in the video, the fact that makes the water scenes relevant. Since the video is an act of sharing the sense of place I live in, these scenes become essential to include. They give the viewer an idea about the place I spend most my time in reflecting on my emotions and realising their effects on my life and hence on my practice. Please see *Five Letters to Mother* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

From My Car's Window: 2014 – 04:00 min



Figure 60: Snapshot from 'From my Car's Window' 2014 by Hala Georges

Still inspired by poetry, this video combines Syrian folk music, Syrian poetry by Nizar Qabbani (translated to English), and shots from London in winter-time. The shots that were taken from my car's window show four minutes from rainy London while talking about the city of Damascus and the relationship between a displaced one far from their torn home town. In this way, it combines two contrasting worlds in one frame, rejoices them and celebrates both.

It is a poetic and simple approach to the subject similar to the *Five Letters to Mother* video giving the viewer a space to reflect on the words. It is a nostalgic statement and a reflection on what could be the reality of any Syrian immigrant or war-escaper while living in a foreign city. This complicated relationship and homesickness is a constant feeling that accompanies myself and most immigrants, therefore, I find this piece to highlight an important side of my life

and hence it had to take a place in the practice. Especially that the video responds to intimate emotions that have been enhanced because of the war and the sense of loss and displacement. It is personal, which is what the practice focuses on, yet, it can be universal as it shows what any immigrant might feel from experiencing the merging of two different worlds: the warm unreachable home and the cold, distant but fascinating place we live in being lived in one state of mind: in one frame.

Please see *From my Car's Window* on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.



Figure 61: Snapshot from 'Sweeps Festival' 2014 by Hala Georges

Every summer the city of Rochester celebrates spring by a festival called 'The Sweeps', in which people use sweeps and sticks to dance the Morris dance and also create and wear fascinating costumes and make-up. The video is a response to my experience of going to the festival and experiencing living the contradiction between the reality here in England: the peaceful, celebratory and happy aspects of life while thinking of the reality of my family in Syria, who have been missing out on any aspect of life outside their shelter, neither celebrating sun, spring, or even the outside space. The video is simple, relies on long shots and on spontaneous and heartfelt commentary, yet I consider it to be an important statement to make as it reflects a struggle I have been facing for a long time, as do my family in relation to the impact of the war on our everyday life.

The piece is a tribute to my three year old niece back home. As I have been always told that they can't let kids go outside and because of that they miss

the sun and the outdoor activities. When I went down to the festival, the emotional impact was stronger than I expected, and I was eager to respond to my mixed feelings. I also wanted to share the energetic activities with my nieces and nephews, knowing that they are captivated by any outside culture and they would be very happy to see the Morris dancers and their customs.

This video carries an irony and illogicality between two massively different worlds. Myself as an observer-participant is the only link between these two worlds. Similar to *From my Window's Car*, which also addresses two different realms at the same time. However, the later video rejoices differences, celebrates them and poetically describes them, while *Sweeps Festival* doesn't celebrate that contradiction, conversely, it wonders about it and disapproves it, as I am overwhelmed with the amount of joy out there in comparison to the misery and stress Syrians are living.

I threw myself into this festival, which is a manifestation of happiness and peace, while at the same time, a horrible war is wrecking my country. These two contradicted realms, when they come together, can push the boundaries of one's ability to balance and distinguish between two completely different realities happening at the same time. It puts a pressure to accept the unjustified violence in my home country while on my doorstep people are dancing and screaming with joy. The video depends on the power of emotions, on the power of the story, and on the contradictory image all to form a unique combination that opens up the effects of war on one's soul.

Please see *Sweeps Festival* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.



Figure 62: Snapshot from 'Here & There' 2014 by Hala Georges

Here & There combines a day out in London with a friend and a phone conversation with my sister in Syria. Both events happened at separate times and places but are combined in this video. It shows my friend having an ordinary day in the city while the phone conversation is talking about an extraordinary reality happening in the other part of the world. This strong contradiction between here and there is important to respond to, especially that it forms a part of my daily life and every war-escaper, who has to face this illogicality between living a usual life while their country is being shattered. The footage shows a peaceful normal life in London out in the street and from the car, whereas the voice is talking about not being able to go out or to go back home or for kids to go back to school. It shows a literal contradiction, while the only mutual element in these two realities is myself coming from there and living here. It is offering that exceptional outlook that has the privilege to live outside the danger, yet, it is struggling to accept the huge difference in peace between here and there. The struggle that apparently had a big impact on my practice since a number of videos have

addressed the same issue but through different participants and through taking different perspectives. In this piece and in *Sweeps Festival* there is a sense of resistance to come to terms with differences between here and there, in where I took a realistic approach depending on reflective commentary and a direct encounter with participant. While in *From my Car's Window* I took a poetic approach and celebrated the differences between the two realities.

We also notice the close relation with the subject comes to the surface and affects creative choices, which, as explained earlier, is a benefit, since it allows me to create a new vision that would have not been possible if not for that close position and personal attachment with the subject. The video has been re-edited in two stages. In the last stage the footage has been shortened and focused on a few shots and the script has been condensed to include only the highlights of the interview without having to go through the several disconnections of the phone conversation. Please see *Here & There* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

My day time: 2013 - 02:30 min



Figure 63: Snapshot from 'My Day Time' 2013 by Hala Georges

As mentioned before in the previous chapter, *My Day Time* is inspired by Mona Hatoum's video *So much I want to Say* 1983.

After visiting Syria for my dad's funeral in 2013 all I wanted was for the grief and pain to stop. The video is a literal response to what was happening to me at that time. The emotional state I was in had affected my life dramatically and hence my practice. Although, some aspects of this video could be changed and enhanced, I look at it as a natural and unstructured result of that stage and an unavoidable one. Afterwards, the practice started to be less dramatic as I gradually started to recover. I also made sure in later experiments to avoid using the sound of violence and horror and tried to find alternatives and indirect ways of expression. I consider this experiment to be a critical point of the practice in that it showed what to avoid of direct reference to the violence, how to react to a life-changing event and how to act in a self-focused performance. It also points the practice development towards a slightly more

distant and balanced perspective between the personal and what can be shared, said, and shown; 'the sensible' as Rancière calls it. Yet, this experiment remains a representational image of my individual state at that time, which can't be changed, improved or re-edited.

Music 'Roubama' by Trio Joubran means 'maybe' in Arabic, it indicates the vagueness of the situation, the blurriness, wanting not to be faced directly and sharply with the horrible truth. This also is shown by the blurry image itself and the effect that is applied on the portrait, which is inspired from the power of grief. The music was added later and mixed with the sound track to enhance the dramatic nature of the video.

Please see *My Day Time* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

Waiting: 2015: 4:00 min

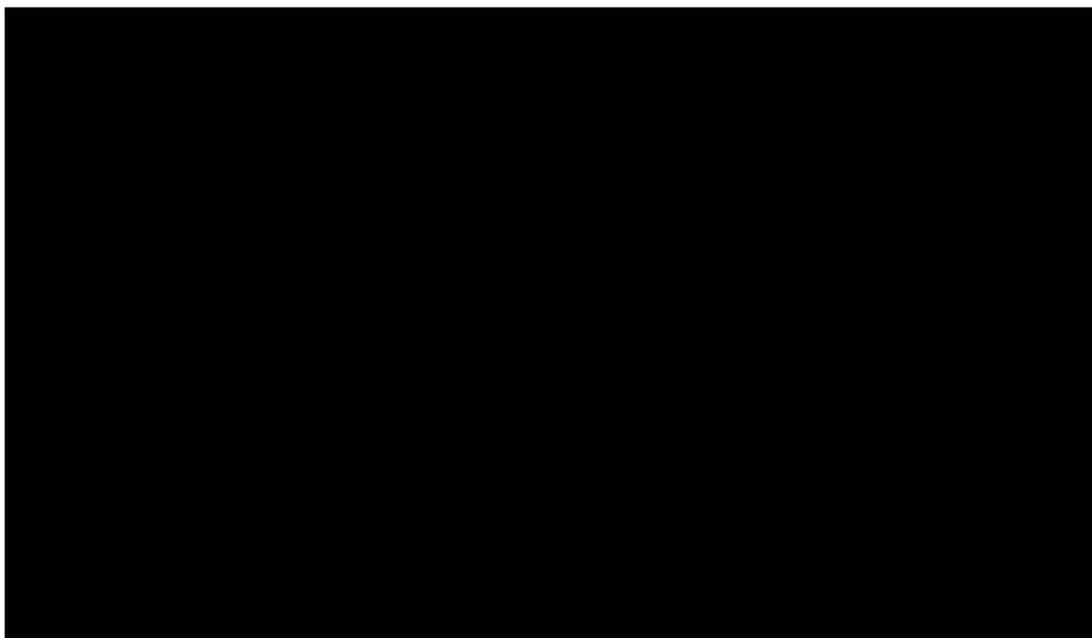


Figure 64: Snapshot from 'Waiting' 2015 by Hala Georges

This piece is the simplest of all videos, yet, it is controversial and moving one. It represents the core of my research methodology; asking for material, trying to conduct interviews, and waiting for a voice, a written message or a hint of life from Syria.

All I have been waiting for during the last three years is some information to come from home. Any data; images, letters, texts, anything that can add to my understanding of the situation and give me a basis to use in my practice. However, in the last part of 2013 and 2014 the connection was so bad that I didn't succeed in gathering as much material as I wished and I ended up finding other forms of replacement, like creating illustrations and personal videos and producing monologues to be realised in videos like *From Rochester with Love*, *Sweeps Festivals* and others mentioned previously.

This video came to respond to that state of waiting for a sign to come from any participant. The blackness, emptiness and silence as Rancière argued could be the best media to represent the un-representable (Rancière, 2014); my feeling of looking for a signal of life from what it feels like the unreachable side of the world. The duration of the video is also symbolic, it is a number of minutes that takes the average duration of my videos signifying what feels like unlimited and endless state of waiting. It is silent so the viewer can live a similar state while watching the nothingness.

Please see *Waiting* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

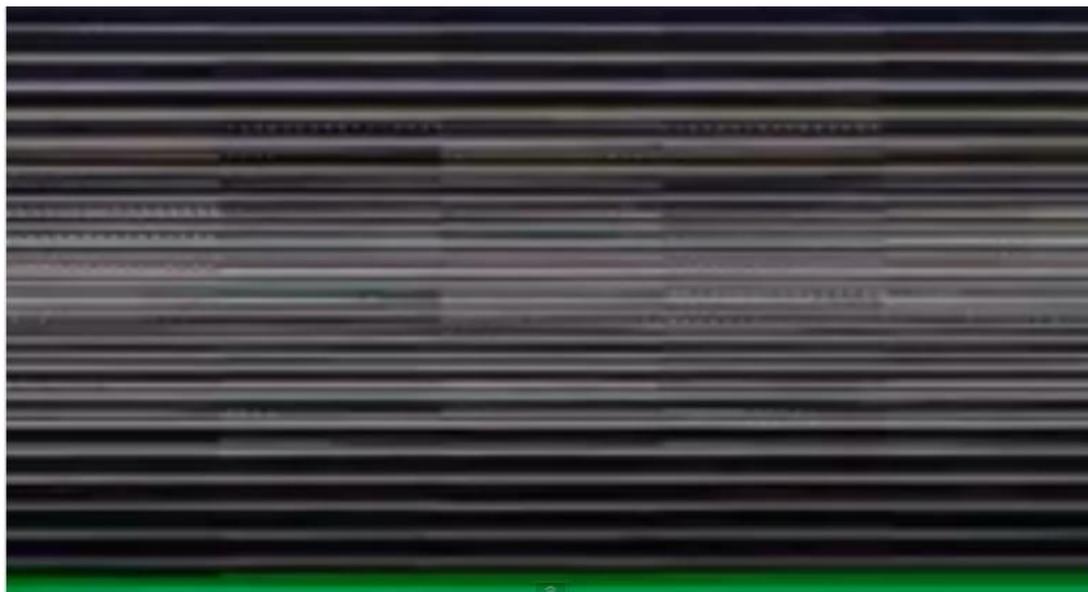


Figure 65: Snapshot from 'Faces' 2015 by Hala Georges

Faces is the last piece I've made towards the practice. Before making this video, I was asking my participants to record a video message and send it to me. The message could have been about anything related to their daily lives, a diary message and unscripted one. In return I haven't heard back from them for months, until one day I received a video message over *What's App* from my sister. When I first opened the video it was black, empty and then it started to be filled with stripes. I initially thought that the image would clear up but it didn't. All I could see was abstract lines moving up and down. It was obvious, however, that the lines were moving with the voices of my sister and two nieces having a casual chat, telling me different stories and singing.

I was eager to respond to this message, particularly, to my strong shock and disappointment at not being able to see their faces. Even watching a pixelated image of them was no longer an option, and the communication with family and the rest of the participants have been the worse since the project started.

I was frustrated, sad, and felt forced to deal with these abstract ambiguous lines as a video message from home and how home looks and feels like. In a way, the image of home has been forced to change and take the shape of cold lines that I can't relate to. For all those reasons, I decided to speak up my feelings about the nature of this message accompanied with Syrian traditional music⁴², which led to me adding a mixture of my voice over and music to the original video. The original video then has been worked on in response to the speed and the rhythm of the music. The input that makes the video a visual response not only to the music used in the piece but to the state of emotions from and devastation to see features of my beloved people taking the shape of ambiguous lines. Hence, the dramatic nature of the final result of the video is an attempt to convey the horror I felt when I was watching the video-message. The material gathering reached almost an impossible point and the communication was becoming worse every day that the small data, which I used to be able to gather in six months it would take a year or longer in the current circumstances of the Syrian war.

The interesting observation here is that this difficulty led to going back involuntarily to the starting point, to the language of abstraction. The bad connection of the internet and telephone, the lack of power, and the difficult time they are going through forced the project to deal with the graphic language once more after leaving motion graphic at the first piece *Skype Call with Mum* 2012. Although this abstract language in particular was not created on purpose nor intentional but processed and developed from the original

⁴² Masar by Trio Joubran

video message, it is still offering an abstract substitute to the realistic footage. In a way, this has created a cycle that my practice completed from and to the use of abstract language. However, it inadvertently resembles an abstract video that is resultant from the actual shape the video message took. This confirms my coherent approach to rely on the power of narrative rather than on visual effects and sets the difference between my work and other abstract video art. The video was a result of the event, which led, with the synchronisation between motion, music and the meaning of words, to represent the un-representable. Please see *Faces* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.



Figure 66: Snapshot from 'A Letter from Luna' 2012 by Hala Georges

When I asked my niece Luna, 10 years old, to describe her daily life and how her recent birthday party was, she wrote me this letter in English over Skype. The video shows Luna in her living place trying to cope with her new life without going to school or seeing friends, in which she describes her feelings and fears. I didn't change a word in her letter.

It is similar to *From Rochester with Love* in terms of simplicity of approach, visual effects, and editing. It doesn't have a voice over, it depends on subtitles instead. The sound track⁴³ succeeded in conveying the atmosphere of danger that my niece is living in, yet, the normal life she seems to have is completely contradicting and challenging the sound. That helps the video to embody the message behind it. The video in shades of grey focuses on the isolated life she is living, while her family are trying to give her as close as possible to the normal upbringing. It is a sign of hope and resistance against

⁴³ Mn Zaman by Trio Joubran

the violence. They refuse to stay hidden in the basement all days and nights, they need to practice their rights of being a human being, her mother confirms (Georges, 2012). Again, the spoken word here plays the major role in conveying the message together with shots of her being active and happy. The image challenges the script that is opening up about a harsh reality of a little child, which creates an exciting combination. Two different factors play in front of the viewer to communicate the horror of the war and at the same time the strong will of survival.

The process of making this video, as the connection was very bad with home especially at that time, meant that I had to call Luna's mother to explain the purpose of the video and also to speak to Luna, which took quite a long time to happen. After I had the permission to use her letter that she left for me over Skype, I asked her to live a normal day while the camera is rolling and to be as natural as possible. While that was happening, I called my sister on the phone while she was filming using her iPad to give her a guideline. The connection dropped several times while we were filming and some of the shots were taken by my sister on her own. We tried to pick a relatively quiet part of the day to film, otherwise they would have to stay far from windows and there would be less movement around the house.

Please see *A Letter from Luna* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

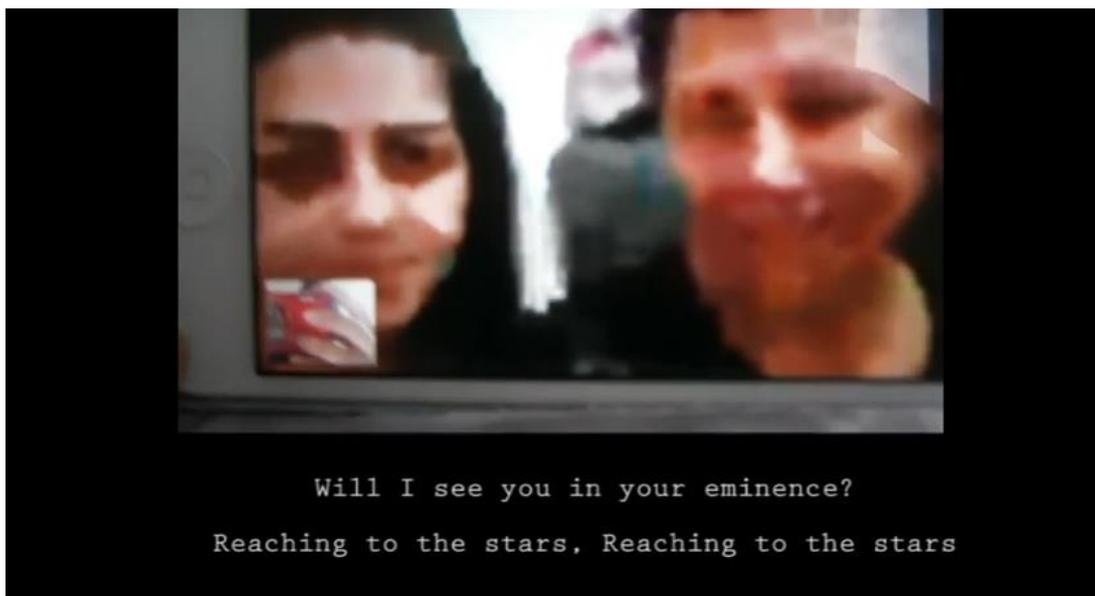


Figure 67: Snapshot from 'My Homeland' 2014 by Hala Georges

The video starts with the anthem of Palestine and Iraq called my 'My Homeland' being sung in the Latin Catholic Church of Lattakia, Syria in 2014. The anthem was written for Palestine since the struggle started with Israel. Iraq then adopted it by the American invasion of Iraq in 2004, to be followed by Syrian churches adopting the same anthem. This adoption of a national hymn that is associated with a country's struggle made it very popular, and it has been memorised and liked by every Syrian going through similar circumstances to Iraqis and Palestinians creating a sense of unity and solitude between these affected nations.

The video uses the display of this anthem on a Sunday mass to represent what the notion of 'homeland' after the war and how it came to take on a different meaning. The anthem supports the video message in many ways as its melody is nostalgic while its words have heartfelt meanings.

Throughout the video, Skype video-calls between myself and my family and some video messages between us emerge that show a timeline of my relationship with my homeland since almost one year earlier, which is the time it took me to collect the footage. It shows that the notion of homeland changes from belonging to a country to belonging to faces of people we care for, which are only visible through the computer/phone screen (if the connection is possible) and the image is pixilated and blurry with bad and interrupted sound. One might argue that this piece is very personal and can only be applied to my personal situation. About that I say, the situation shown in the video, that is the change of home concept to faces we see through a digital screen, the lack and difficulty of communication, the new technological means of communication through Skype, Viber, Facebook among other applications, that all apply on most of the immigrants, refugees, and exiled people who left their home for any reason and had to deal with similar situation to mine.

Here, the power of emotions, the spoken word, and the image altogether reveal a personal struggle and conflict. As much of our communication nowadays relies on digital screens, this piece comes to point out that but in the context of a relationship between an immigrant and family in war time, which makes the situation inherently more challenging.

The footage of the Sunday mass was shot by one of my friends on his mobile and sent to me by Google Drive via the Internet. The fact that shows the power of technology and proves useful to making this video, in addition to making

staying in contact possible. Hence, on the melody of nostalgia and words of resistance, passion and love for homeland, this video spotlights the new means of communication with homeland, while referring to that dramatic change of the meaning of this homeland.

Please see *My Homeland* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

Rama: 2013 – 05:15 min

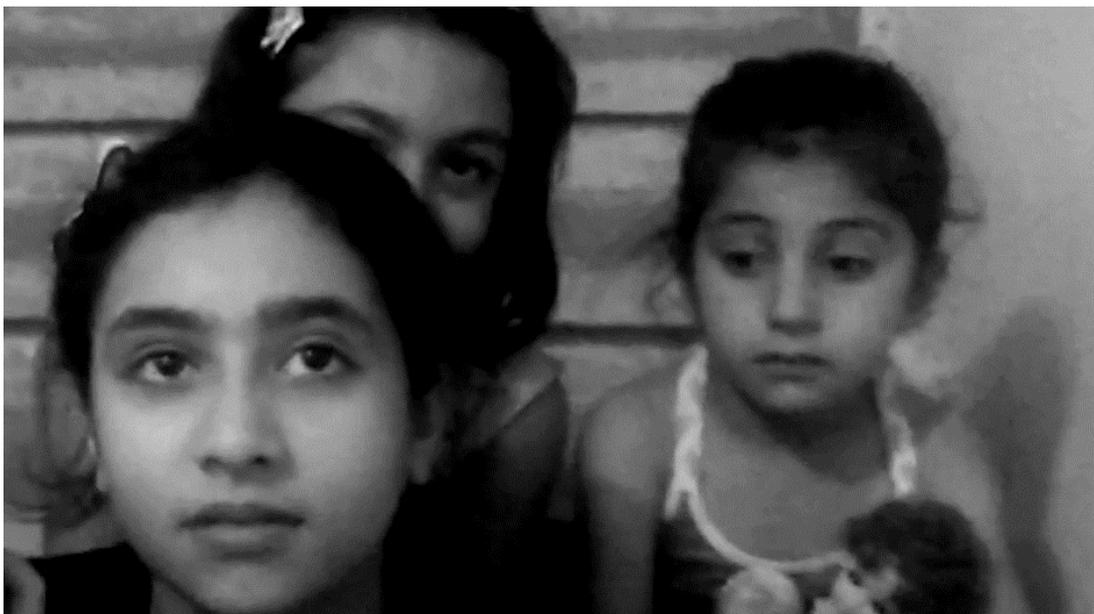


Figure 68: Snapshot from 'Rama' 2013 by Hala Georges

The video tells the story of my friend's niece Rama and what happened to her during the Syrian war. It is similar to the *A Letter from Luna* approach in terms of visual effects (black and white) and taking long shots, however, it doesn't have sound effects or music. Another difference is that I tried to re-create the story in an exciting way instead of having continuous and unbroken footage.

As an attempt to explore a different way of storytelling, I introduced Rama's friends, hobbies and her place of living before revealing the tragic accident. It was a challenge to achieve a sense of balance between being transparent and leaving a space for my creativity. Believing that my artistic input is important to take a place, otherwise, stories might look like a home-video without a purpose. This piece depends on the power of the story and similarly on the power of imagination.

The process of making this video is unusual and different from all other videos, as the circumstances of making it were very dangerous and extremely challenging. T. A., my friend, Rama's uncle, agreed to conduct the interviews with Rama's friends and to shoot around Rama's house and garden while I am guiding him on the phone and sending him the briefs and descriptions via emails and text messages. The actual process took longer than usual because it was difficult for him to move around and to go out to the garden. At the time of making the video, he was advised, like the rest of the Damascene people, to stay at a basement or in an underground shelter. The sounds of war are clear in the shots of the garden and swing. The connection was very poor, yet, I tried to be with him on the phone or online when he is shooting for as long as possible.

Please see *Rama* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

Portrait: 2013 – 2:26 min

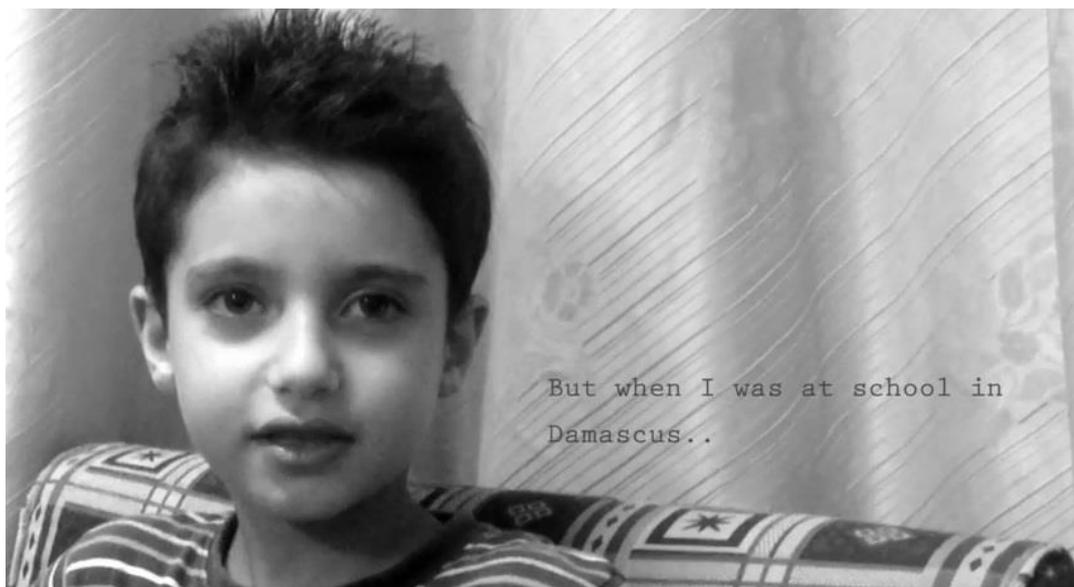


Figure 69: Snapshot from 'Portrait' 2013 by Hala Georges

This is a portrait of my nephew Novy and an interview about his life and what he has to say about his experience of the war. He sings during the video and we can't hear his voice very clearly. Focusing on his singing voice is an attempt to wish that he is not really saying these words, instead, he is singing and enjoying his time as he is supposed to.

I consider this video to be an important stage in my experimentation; a different way to convey the script of the interview. So far, I tried monologue, subtitles and voiceover. Here, I wanted to try the subtitles while the voiceover is taking us somewhere else and suggesting a different reality. It is representing a state of denial and refusing the truth the little boy is telling us about.

In the first experiment his voice was gentle and introduced one layer of singing. In the later stages of editing I have shortened the duration and added another layer of his voice at different stages throughout the video. That is to

enhance the purpose of using his singing and to empower the innocent sense over telling tragic events that might affect his childhood. This pushed me to try to distract and somehow eliminate his words. It was my way to respond to the reality that I didn't want to believe while shortening the duration to make it pass faster. Although, this meant more use of editing, it relies on the power of imagination to recreate the narrative and let the power of emotions from the inner-self lead the creative solution. This example shows that the approach of the project was intelligible all along, even when much editing was required it was at once responsive to the strong presence of feelings, which included denial of the spoken words.

Here I realise the impact of the personal attachment with the subject and refusing (as the maker of the video) to fully hear his voice talking. Although I translated the conversation and provided the viewer with subtitles to read, the tragic story has not been yet accepted or sat comfortably in the piece. Therefore, one can feel the rush, the hurry to reach the end of the video and it finishes quickly by him saying 'I want to go home'. This video is one of the personal videos that I couldn't create an objective distance with even when I came back to it time after time to re-edit it.

In many ways, this piece depends on the power of emotions but this time the personal emotions of the maker that blurred the distance between creativity and the content. But as argued previously, this could work as an advantage for the project not the opposite. Because of the close relationship with the

participant I am able to see the subject from a unique angle and invite the viewer to share this vision with me.

The process of making this video is similar to the *A Letter from Luna*. I guided my sister over the phone about how to shoot, from what angle, what to focus on and which questions to ask. The video took a long time to be completed similarly to other videos, due to the bad power and connection. The singing part I recorded when I asked my nephew over Skype to sing a song from his choice that he prefers to be in the video.

Please see *Portrait* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

Suha: 2015 – 05:50 min



Figure 70: Snapshot from 'Suha' 2015 by Hala Georges

In this video I respond to the telephone interview with my eldest sister Suha Georges, in which she speaks of her experience of the war telling us how she and her family had to flee their home town Damascus and leave schools, their jobs and everything behind. For this particular interview two videos have been made; this one and *Here & There*.

This video has been chosen for the final collection because it is based on the participant presence, minutes from her daily life while she is trying to adapt with a completely different way of living. In one of the shots the electricity goes off so they search for candles, the footage is natural, not arranged or acted which reflects the practice nature; spontaneous, not constructed and based on true experiences.

Throughout the video we can have a sense of Suha's suffering. The atmosphere of the footage doesn't feel happy or content despite the absence

of war sounds and fighting, which she escaped. The moving image conveys that atmosphere indirectly by documenting usual moments of unusual circumstances. The opening scene shows that the participant only wears black due to a latest tragedy in the family, which she talks briefly about in the video.

This video represents the focus of my practice; the focus on the domestic and the personal perspective. It's also the core of the methodology, in which I direct from distance to produce the footage and depend on casual yet heart-to-heart interviews, in which the participant opens up, responds to personal questions and makes genuine statements. It is simple, doesn't depend on much editing and effects, rather on the power of the story and emotions resultant from both the interview and the footage. In many ways, this video represents the model of practice I aimed at. The process of making the video is reliant on collecting the footage when possible, hence, the black gaps in the video refer to the weak connection and frequent interruption of the call. My other sister was shooting, while I was giving her technical and directional guidance through the phone.

Please see *Suha* video on the attached DVD: 'Final Practice'.

The Exhibition:

From Rochester with Love: Conversations in the Midst of the Syrian conflict

In here I present the final practice resultant from investigating the research question: *How can a visual researcher address and respond to the personal impact of the current Syrian conflict and the inherent ideological battles without resorting to standard forms of war images?*

Description: The show consists of the fourteen final short videos displayed on fourteen screens with headphones and one projector. Each screen will display one of the videos, while the projector will display a loop of 3-4 videos from the collection. Complementary material from Illustrations and calligraphy will appear on the side walls. The opposite space to the main display will be used to build an installation of an ordinary home left in a hurry- just like my family home and thousands others who had to escape the danger of death suddenly leaving objects to tell their stories behind. The installation will include a sofa, coffee table, and a few everyday objects that can be found in every living room, in addition to a carpet that was used at my Damascene home for the last 30 years. The carpet is cut into pieces by my mother so each piece can be posted separately to the UK to be displayed at the exhibition. They are sent by post via Lebanon or Turkey or via a messenger, this depends on circumstances and the available means.

The set embraces the perspective the project takes, namely the personal and domestic, hence there is the invitation to approach the screens and to engage with videos on a one-to-one basis. It also reflects the nature of the fragmented and disrupted research process of collecting data from Syria in the time of war. It is offering an experience of the screen-based relationship that is established over the last few years between myself and the participants. The multi-screens choice is essential because it strongly represents the change in the form of my connection with family and friends, hence my relation to home, which led to a new form of home. Through an exaggerated number of monitors, the communication becomes extremely dispersed till it feels and looks almost unreal. Yet, with a closer look, each screen will offer a one-to-one encounter with the participant, introducing them on a human level while unravelling their personal small history. This encounter will spotlight their daily suffering and shorten the distance between them and the viewer. The supporting material (the illustrations and Arabic calligraphy) show an alternative way of responding to the subject when it wasn't at all possible to connect with Syria. This forms an unavoidable stage of my research and creative process therefore they are included in the final show as a complementary material on walls. They also give a Syrian presence, complement the videos and the whole look of the show.

On the other hand, creating an abandoned domestic interior with physical objects that have specific meaning enriches the exhibition and the involvement of getting to know the participants. The sofa set invites people to sit and familiarise themselves with the left-behind objects around them from

a book, glasses and family photos. For the amount of time they will visit the gallery, they are invited to get to know those people who used to live in a similar space. This embraces the perspective my project is taking; the perspective from behind closed doors, a perspective from the living room. The Syrian homey but torn carpet tells the story of the challenging and restricted communication with family and home. It also represents the devastating destruction and destroyed homes and misplaced families all around Syria.

Together, the multi-screens, the drawings and the installation are the manifestation of the creative response to the contextual and theoretical investigation and to the collected material between England and Syria. The show as a whole embodies the thesis findings and presents the creative outcome of the last few years of study.



Figure 71: Visualization of 'From Rochester with Love: Conversations in the Midst of the Syrian Conflict' Exhibition

Conclusion:

This collection of videos is a journey of discoveries throughout experimentation. Every experiment was in its own way important towards the final realisation of the practice. While creating the practice I've been careful to consider the viewer's and the participants' feelings by taking a step away from representing the cliché of war images, by producing poetic and personal ones. All videos have been inspired by true stories, then they have been recreated, putting care and creativity into their content. Standing against the mainstream of war images and offering a view onto the neglected side of the war relied on participants and collaboration to make this project alive. I asked for the viewer's empathy and understanding of the whole situation and the emotional difficulty and risks involved. To be fair to both sides the practice had a high standard of ethical consideration standing away from depicting the violence and refusing to deal with the audience as passive receiver of violent images and refusing to deal with participants as victims. On the contrary the participants were very much brought to the practice as they should be - humans with identity and history to be saved and told. They become the main contributors to the project and their stories inspired the visuals and pushed the practice to explore new ways of expression.

To achieve the aim and bring the hidden stories to light I had to rely on technology and every possible means of modern communication such as Skype, smart phone apps, landline and mobile phones. I had to direct from a distance and collaborate with my participants to not only open up emotionally

but also to film for the project, take risks, and take my guidance from a distance. Every piece is a result of many factors coming together, starting from applying an extensive contextual review to develop an awareness of the current relevant Middle Eastern and Syrian art to exploring theories that support my interest in the inner-self and support my ethical standards. All these factors aim to offer the viewer not only a creative solution to painful stories but also a distinctive approach combining the true story, the intimate and the painful with creativity, while considering a wider, non-Syrian audience at the other end.

By producing this collection of videos, I have tried to touch base on different subjects in relation to conversations in the midst of the Syrian conflict. Each video is either concerned with a particular participant's story or highlighting an important issue in relation to the Syrian crisis. All at once, they are experimental, took a diary based-on-monologue form at some places and listening to stories at other places. In parallel, they documented the creative process itself while giving a space for creativity to take a place.

When the connection with Syria wasn't at all possible, this pushed me to invent new ways of expression, and here I found myself listening to my own participation and incorporating my experience of being far from the event but spiritually and mentally very close. I responded to my personal thoughts, which added a participant-observer methodology to the research approach and enriched the creative results. This close-distant position enriched the project and inspired me to take advantage of it to produce pieces like *From*

My Car's Window and personal-monologue pieces that added to the practice an intimate touch like *From Rochester with Love*. Whereas *Waiting* addressed the state of asking for information and continually waiting for material to arrive from home.

The practice is a result of feelings of pain, displacement, exile, and hopelessness or a result of having full empathy towards the participant that would affect my creative choices such as in *Portrait. My Day Time* is another example in where the personal was shortening the distance with the subject that it was almost inseparable. At some other stages I took a further position applying a relatively more objective approach, which produced transparently documentary-creative pieces like *Suha, Here & There* and *Rama*. In the latter video, I also had to face the challenge of producing ethical questions for children affected by war.

In *Skype Call with Mum* the visuals interpreted the emotions using graphics, Arabesque designs and solid colours, whereas *Five Letters to Mother* took a poetic approach to represent a personal experience while searching through the image for a sense of acceptance. *Sweeps Festival* on the other hand, carried an irony and illogicality between two massively different realms. *Faces* combined the true event with creativity and embraced the language of abstraction, conversely, in *A Letter from Luna* the spoken word played the major role as well as the language of the spontaneous image produced from distance. While the last piece pointed out the current way of communication through technology, *My Homeland* celebrated these new means of staying in

contact with home and referred to the dramatic change of the meaning of home.

As a result, each video dealt with the subject from a different angle making the practice diverse and un-repetitive. In total, the practice succeeded in keeping the passion and interest around the personal and to embrace that domestic voice. That is, by being motivated to address the conflict, which changed the educational, demographic and economic future of the region and will most likely leave its impact on the rest of the world. What helped to achieve the focus on the personal as well is being driven to retain an ethical setting that has always been to consider the participant's and the viewer's feelings. When combining the power of ethical art, emotions with the power of imagination then the practice will have the chance to leave the aspired impact and raise awareness of the histrionic results of the Syrian war.

Conclusion

Personal, Compassionate & Ethical Art

Theoretical Investigation:

In order to explore the research question, I focused my approach on looking from a personal and domestic perspective. In this way, the answer slowly started to evolve, inspired from the private moments shared between myself and participants. Hence, the project both written and visual, became a creative response to the impact of the Syrian conflict on daily life. My research logical methodology utilised a specific range of intellectual positions and artists' concepts to help understand the field and position my practice in the circle of contemporary moving image practice. Every step of investigation led to the next, in which the subtitles individually and collectively opened up inquiries into interlaced fields that met with the resultant experimental practice.

A theoretical investigation rationalised the project aim, namely to produce a personal and ethical art far from clichéd war imagery. An extensive contextual review of conducting a large number of small case studies helped to inform the practice and empower its goal to save the small hidden histories of the ordinary Syrian citizen. Interviews with participants were the key that inspired the visuals, so that the personal and domestic perspective is accessed and applied through their testimonies. My contribution as a participant as well enriched the findings and concluded in intimate accounts realised in pieces like *Sweeps Festival* and *My Day Time*.

In the *Outside the Frame* chapter, the project made a rebellious move against expected clichés from a Middle Eastern art in which the universal, cultural and political concerns are dominant. It is, on the contrary, specific about my family and friends. It is taking a place far from displaying holes in walls, screams, blood, and dismembered bodies. Instead it is human-inspired, based on the power of words and feelings. I never claimed a political art project nor a classic documentary one. I always intended to put my creativity into the collected material to produce transparent and imaginative pieces which depended on the power of the inner-self and emotions as well as on the power of reflection and imagination. All pieces are inevitably concerned with the effect of the Syrian war on the humanitarian side, which rarely provokes the media's attention. It is combining honesty with creativity and leading to a mixture of elements inspired by real stories. In this way, the project came to fill a gap with a hybrid visual response to the tragic ongoing Syrian civil war.

The following step, *Talk to Me, I'll Listen*, was made to contextualise the research objective and to explain why I am drawn to explore the impact of the Syrian war via the personal and domestic. The need to listen to my participants and what they have to say about their emotional experiences during the war established the base of inspiration while looking from that perspective. I utilised Rancière's writings to support the project's aim, that is, the need to bring the sensible closer, what can be said and heard about the Syrian war while highlighting real experiences and testimonies putting my project in the context of an opposite medium to the mainstream source of

information about the Syrian war. Rancière's belief that art cannot be separated from our emotions reinforced the fundamental argument of the project. I similarly interrogated his call to emancipate the spectator from all the war images we constantly see in media clichés and offer one a new perspective based on the power of emotions and the spoken word combined with imagination.

Exploring theories of emotion was addressed next in the context of the practice's foundation, namely that of being built upon true sentiments emphasising the subjective nature of the project. Ariella Azoulay, Lucy Soutter and Nawal Al Saadawi as well asked for a closer and deeper look at the subject instead of an artificial one that depends on a one-dimensional vision. An original view concerned with the affected people's feelings is needed, not only for the world to see but for those affected Syrian people themselves. As a demonstration I brought two opposite examples of photography both concerned with representing the impact of a conflict. This showed the critical difference in appearance and emotional impact between a vision with a generic and artificial outlook and a vision with a close, deep and personal concern. This theoretical exploration so far helped to clarify and rationalise my approach that is, taking the personal and domestic while creating an emotional connection with the participants.

While looking at the subject from this lens I became at a very close distance with both viewer and participant. Therefore, there was a need to explore the ethics behind war imagery and clarify the project's standpoint. Throughout

Take My Hand I look at theories that support my practice. With help of Rancière's writings, I clarify the project's goal to interrupt the overflow of typical violent images, to eliminate the intolerable image and the true horror of war. Instead I aimed at creating new relations between what can be said, heard and shared about the Syrian war by distributing the common sense, believing that embracing humanity and respecting the participant's and the viewer's feelings are the key for creating a practice that could leave a true impact. This in some cases included taking refuge in the nothingness, blackness and silence to represent the unrepresentable.

Moreover, 'photographs of people' is what the project evolved around avoiding what Elkins describes as 'pictures of body in pain' (Elkins, 2011). With help from Soutter I refused using art as an excuse to expose the viewer to the unbearable image. While Azoulay's *Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) allowed me to call for regulating and ethically considering the kind of images we include as part of our art history and our daily visual information. On the other hand, Immanuel Kant's theory of ethics supported the core of my argument for a more principled practice.

A dialogue between Butler, Sontag, Meiselas and my approach led to describe the project's qualities, in which the camera works as a moral witness to the brutality of the war. Confirming that the act of listening, the act of responding artistically, the act of sharing participants' tales, are all acts of kindness towards helping them instead of considering them as a tool to fill personal objectives. I ultimately propose to rethink and rearrange our

priorities as artists entering the hot zone. I am applying this principle by not victimising the participant, or taking advantage of the situation, rather by considering their feelings and the viewer's, and at last producing an ethical art.

Contextual Investigation:

After this theoretical examination that rationalised the methodology and objectives of the research, the following steps all decant into an extensive contextual review, which enabled me to develop my creative response taking its place in the field of contemporary moving image.

The beginning of the review is *Pixelated Reality*, in which I explored the occurrence of using modern technology to record the Syrian war happenings and sharing them online. They are mostly either carrying a specific political or religious agenda or aimless, ambiguous, without a context but mainly all are violent. With help of Tagg, Burgin and Soutter I question the authenticity of such moving imagery to conclude that they all directly reflect the Syrian reality but not necessarily at all times represent what actually had happened in reality.

This led me to compare the notion of the authenticity of my practice stating that it has all the intention to be genuine and authentic. The project is responding to real stories of known and trusted participants and provides a specific clear and coherent context to support each video. In contrast to most of online videos about the Syrian war we find on YouTube, this project is

specific and personal. It is aimed at writing the unknown small histories of known participants far from displaying destruction, far from the well-known images of war. Despite fundamental differences between my project and this modern phenomena, they share two common features: they are both made in extraordinary circumstances and under the danger of death, and they are only possible with the help of modern technology producing a low quality image, resolution and sound.

Moving on from positioning the project in relation to the pixelated Syrian 'reality' to a more in-depth contextual review. In *Sense of Home* I contextualise my approach more in detail and analyse similarities and differences to a large number of relevant art-works concerned with similar issues. This review has also clarified the impact of immigration and war on the notion of home and hence on my and some other Syrian artists' practices. It informed the practice and helped it to take its place in the field of Syrian and Middle Eastern moving image.

Analysing similar videos in approach and concern to the project offered possible creative solutions while taking a view from inside, from where the artist is able to listen to what affected people have to say, who in return embrace their beautiful home-culture, memories and their beloved people. Correspondingly, the review brought examples to cover critical issues such as the impact of the creator's location on the creative result i.e. whether it's made from inside or outside the conflict and the importance of asking the 'right' type of ethical question to participants affected by war, which is applied

carefully to this project's interviews. Moreover, a fair amount of videos were concerned with the impact of war on Syrian children's mental and physical health, education, and future, which is also considered in my practice focusing on a number of young participants. Some further videos offered inspiring approaches to introduce the story, for instance the disconnection between image and sound, which created new meanings out of the combination.

Conversely, reviewing opposite methodologies to the project resulted in being more adamant to avoid the demonstration of violence directly and the display of clichéd visual noise and disturbance, and strong visual and sound effects. Since all mentioned proved to be exhausting and perhaps not successful to win the viewer's sympathy. In the same way, using a symbolic approach to the subject, showed to be ambiguous and unclear or merely making general statements that won't add anything new to our knowledge about the Syrian war.

This wide comparison exercise and reflection rationalised the research methodology and made me more insistent on being coherent, specific and not at all general in addressing the Syrian war. In return, the focus on the personal story was embraced and inspired by lots of different creative methods as how to offer a new way of response through the participant's testimonies. Overall, most of the reviewed moving images were based on the presence of the person, the power of feelings and the spoken words, which in return created simple, minimal in effects and narrative approach. This

altogether fused to achieve the aim of the project while taking a step closer towards the participants to create an 'image of people'.

For further contextual investigation and due to the many in common elements between myself and Mona Hatoum humanitarially and artistically, I conducted the last case study, which is of Hatoum's creative practice; *So Much I want to Say*. In here Hatoum showed me an insightful example of how to turn pain, displacement, isolation and grief into creativity and how to approach the issue from a personal perspective, which reconfigures the whole way we look at the war.

Creative Practice:

All the preceding research steps gave rise to the final practice. The theoretical investigation rationalised the project's aims while the contextual review informed the creative outcomes and pushed it to take its position as a contemporary moving image practice in relation to the existing Syrian and Middle Eastern art. All examined art-work are concerned with issues around home and conflict so all share the same concern with the project but differ in methods of response.

The resultant collection of fourteen short videos and a number of illustrations are created dependent on collected material during the last three years. Contributors to material living inside and outside the conflict all offered a unique testament of the impact of the Syrian war on their daily lives. Modern technology had facilitated the communication and data gathering. As well as

mediating videos' direction from Rochester while a digital or mobile camera would be rolling in Damascus or Lattakia. When it wasn't possible at all to connect I found alternative solutions by either generating footage from here or by creating illustrations.

The project's aim has been the centre of all experimentations; to represent the humanitarian issues in Syria throughout stories of ordinary Syrian citizens. The fact that these citizens are my family and close friends allowed interviews to take the shape of heart-to-heart conversations. This special relationship paved the road for establishing a unique personal and domestic standpoint. The close distance with the subject as well as my experience as a participant deepened the results towards an even more intimate account. This is what the project is concerned about all along - to develop a creative response far from the unbearable and intolerant war images that the viewer is expecting, tired of and hence neglecting. Therefore, personal art was the way to create a more truthful representation that is seeking an emotional connection with both participant and viewer.

While trying to achieve this connection, ethical issues arose and I realised that producing a violent practice was a precarious trap I had to avoid. Violent practice could have easily been created when asking immoral and unethical questions to sufferers or by recycling disturbing scenes of blood and massacres. Consequently, the compassionate approach was an alternative path the practice had to take to generate the aspired ethical art.

The experimental videos covered different subjects in relation to the conversations with participants including my monologues reflecting the experience of living in the UK while a war is destroying my home. And throughout the creation process I went through many challenges and had to respond to thought-provoking concepts. For instance, to document stories while putting a reasonable amount of creativity into their narrative and final outcome.

I remained focused, relying on the power of emotions and the spoken words as well as on the power of imagination. I embraced throughout the importance of experimentation in developing the conceptual and artistic level of the project. I have also noticed a connection between the art direction and the content; when the power of the story became the emphasis, there was less room for visual effects resulting in minimal moving image. Some of the visuals interpreted emotions involved in dialogs using graphics, Arabesque designs and solid colours while other pieces relied on the language of the camera producing long static shots. In other videos I documented usual moments of unusual circumstances including the impact of war on Syrian children depending on spontaneous and genuinely domestic recordings. Further piece relied on silence, nothingness and blackness to represent the unrepresentable.

The idea of here (living in peaceful and safe UK) and there (destroyed home in war) was addressed in a few pieces in which I celebrated and embraced the differences. In a separate instance I opened up to this emotional conflict

and talked about the struggle to accept these two different worlds lived at once. Hence we see for instance in *Here & There* a disconnection between the image and the script. In some other pieces I took a refuge in the power of the spoken words, producing mantras like in *My Day Time* and *Portrait*. I used this close relationship as an advantage to develop a unique outcome that is only possible by being very close to the subject. While making a contact with participants and telling their stories, the screen-based relationship with home evolved and it is being addressed in the setting of the final exhibition.

Each video addressed a different issue in relation to the impact of the Syrian war, but keeping the passion around the private story and spotting the light on each contributor's voice. I was driven to work with ethical standards trying to establish a civil contract with the participant as much as with the viewer. I was adamant to give a loud voice to unheard ones and spotlight on veiled and small histories that happened as a result of a ferocious endless conflict which destroyed a great part of Syria, killed a half of a million people and permanently damaged the lives of several millions.

The power of truthful emotions combined with imagination led to creativity, and looking from a personal perspective unlocked unique potentials. Overall, I believe the practice prospered to distribute the sensible about what can be said and felt about the Syrian war, whilst avoided creating the intolerable image, emancipated the spectator and proposed an original and free-from-clichéd art. A personal and ethical art that introduces ordinary Syrian citizens

as they should be introduced; humans with a tale to tell seeking an emotional connection...

“It is by focusing on each part of the surface of each object, on the quality of each sensible event, that we can grasp this conjunction of art and chance that raises the clothing of the poor, the body wearing it, and the hand that mended it to the height of the sun and the stars” (Rancière, P: 254, 2013)

Further Practice - Based Research:

After looking in-depth at Syrian and Middle Eastern art concerned with home-related issues, further research should explore the potential of the hand-written word and particularly Arabic hand written calligraphy in response to the Syrian refugee crisis and their immigration towards Europe. Through following a number of refugees' journeys leaving Syria until they reach and live for a sufficient amount of time at their destination, I would look at the human-home relationship and the emerging relation with their new residence. In contrast to this PhD project of working with a close circle of family and friends, the further research would be outward-looking, concerned with the larger community of unknown people, which will open up the research inquiries in a diverse way. Methodologically it would be distinct from anthropological or sociological approaches, instead it will depend on quality research bringing provoking samples of narrative to the project. For instance, collecting inspiring personal diaries of refugees during their journey and correspondences written in Arabic, would enthuse a creative multi-media practice in response.

On a human level, the project would contribute to our understanding of the Syrian refugees' situation post their immigration to Europe. On an artistic level, it will lead to a creative response that unlocks the potential of the discipline of Arabic calligraphy, which grew over 1400 years. It would explore its rich and complex artistic forms, spotlight its heritage and its exciting relation to Sufism, while looking at its modern evolution towards free contemporary script. In this way, I open up inquiries about the discipline prospective as a spiritual and traditional but constantly-evolving type of art, which is also close to my heart.

Final word:

The Syrian war started in March 2011 with no end currently in sight. The results of the sustained violence are catastrophic. A recent UN report shows that almost half a million Syrian people have been killed during this conflict and within that figure, 70,000 died due to lack of basic amenities: "Of the 470,000 war dead counted by the SCPR, about 400,000 were directly due to violence, while the remaining 70,000 fell victim to lack of adequate health services, medicine, especially for chronic diseases, lack of food, clean water, sanitation and proper housing, especially for those displaced within conflict zones." (Black, 2016)

The number of victims climbs ever higher. Just recently, in the week between April and May 2016 more than 2300 rockets hit the city of Aleppo, resulting in 146 civil victims including 52 children. The number forever rises as there are 1103 people seriously injured (SANA, 2016). Other cities in

Syria like Damascus and Homs are suffering from daily shelling on civil areas since 2011 including inhabited places, schools and hospitals (SANA, 2016). All 27 million Syrians have been affected in one way or another and half of the population are either dead or misplaced inside or outside the country. Children, as expected, are affected so dramatically that they have five to six years delay in schooling (Syria's war | World news | The Guardian, 2015). In addition "Life expectancy has dropped from 70 in 2010 to 55.4 in 2015." and the country economic losses are beyond fast recovery "Overall economic losses are estimated at \$255bn (£175bn)" (United Nation Report, The Guardian, 2016)

The Syrian situation is more complicated than a traditional war in which two parties are in drastic disagreement. The conflict is a modern asymmetrical type; Libya and Somalia are other examples. Numerous religious and rebel parties are involved with each town in some cases having a separate group terrorise and 'control' it. The deliberate killing of innocent unarmed civilians is a standard strategy. Hiding amongst civilians is also standard. On the ground, the extremist aim for Syria to become an Islamic state has pushed into second place any original democratic aim to improve the country's political and social system. This terrorism by religious extremism in the Middle East is not only a national threat to Syria and to the region but it surely has a wider effect around the world and recently has spread to Europe as we witnessed the recent terrorist attacks in France and Belgium. (Middle East | News | The Independent, June 2015)

Inherently, doing the project while the war is taking place reflects the immediacy of the situation and arises as an urgent reaction to this ongoing situation that seems to be forgotten over the years. As a Syrian, my life has dramatically been affected, I lost my dad, my home and my job while enduring the stress of worrying about my family and friends who remained in Syria. The conflict consequences has taken over my life and reached out to take over my research interest, which naturally motivated me to find a creative response to what is shattering my country and people.

However, while this project is raising awareness of the war impact on Syrians' everyday lives, it's not focusing on facts and numbers of victims produced by The United Nations reports, but by giving a voice to the untold experiences of a sample of affected Syrians represented in the twelve participants. Throughout the videos, I addressed their daily lives that has been turned into a game of patience and endurance of the impossible situation they live in for the last six years. The research methodology aimed to generate a better understanding of their humanitarian situation and to take a step away from the dominating intolerable war image that mostly focus on them as victims more than anything else. I also aimed at making a humanitarian connection with the participant and with the viewer at once, hence, the project adopted high ethical methodology all the way through.

The war, that has been called by The Guardian 'the world's biggest humanitarian disaster and Squandering Humanity', (Black, 2016), has been shattering my country and people since early 2011. My project comes as a natural and much needed artistic response to this Syrian catastrophe.

Appendix

Part of producing the practice was the actual process of experimentation and making a number of not fully resolved experiments in order to later produce an accessible and more developed response to my project's aims and objectives. For that, I highlight in the following text a few experiments that form an important stage of experimenting, including two sound pieces and two found-footage based. In addition to three pieces based on participants' contributions. They are not included in the final project to avoid repeating similar concerns or methodologies to other videos or to avoid offering a less resolved videos. However, they still are a valuable stations the practice had to stop at in order to develop, and eventually revolve the questions at hand. Furthermore, they give the reader an idea about the practice-selecting process, development and experimentation before the final pieces came to be. Finally, I present some examples of illustrations that were created as an alternative response, explaining how they came to be and how they will take their place in the exhibition.

It's been Forever: 2013: 05:00 min: sound piece.

The piece responds to my cousin W. S.'s story of being kidnapped and held in a very small place with very little food and water for almost two months by extremists in the summer of 2012 at the city of Edlib, Syria. He describes his experience, while the sound piece invites the listener to feel his emotions by concentrating on the sound of opening and closing bars, which refers to his

confusion, feeling hopeless, and still holding onto his freedom. I tried in this sketch to represent his emotions that came across in the interview using this symbolic approach. The act of opening and closing doors repeatedly all the way through is a way of representation of his emotions and the horrible experience he had. The process of making was difficult and emotional for both parties; for myself and for my cousin. For technical reasons like in most of the other videos, the power rarely worked in my cousin's town so we recorded many times and in stages till I had a complete conversation. He had to talk about his painful experience which was a challenge for him and difficult for me to listen to. He insisted on having the interview done because he wanted people to know about his story, which according to him might give a bigger picture and a more comprehensive idea about Syrian people suffer from the war.

It is worth mentioning that this piece has been re-edited from a video that shows the prison doors in a constant movement opening and closing throughout the video to a sound piece that focuses on the sound of bars, the voice of my cousin and the English voice over. In a way it emphasizes on the sound only to give a space of imagination rather than to impose on the viewer with ready-made visuals. The final script was developed on stages and it finally took the form of a brief story of what happened and focused on the headlines of the happenings. Please listen to *It's been Forever* sound piece on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

Rasha: 2014 – 05:15 min. sound piece.

The piece tells the story of my sister Rasha who lost her house, job, and some of her family to the war. She talks openly about her experience and her family's situation after they had to escape Aleppo and leave everything behind.

It was initially made as a video offering shots of the city of Aleppo and different events before and after the war in relation to the context of the script. However, for the re-editing I eliminated the visual elements to finalize the piece as a sound production that focused on the participant's voice and its translation. Through the recording we can still hear the sounds of a live city, celebrations and other sounds in relation to the content of the monologue. In that way different flavours of sounds and noises combined with her voice became the response to the participant's story. I wanted to experiment with a different language of representation and also to give the listener a space that invites her to imagine and visualize the content and the impact of the story. Instead of offering the obvious or a direct interpretation of the words, I chose to offer a sound piece, which comes with unlimited possibilities of shapes the story can take.

Nevertheless, this piece wasn't chosen to be included in the final collection because there are similar stories told by other participants and similar issues have been addressed like in *Suha* and *Portrait* from displacement, homesickness and the effects of war on their daily lives. Therefore, avoiding the repetition, I kept this piece as an experimentation that demonstrates

moving from using the image to using sounds while realising the difference in impact of each medium. The process similar to other videos was difficult to make because of the lack of power, and weak internet connection in Syria. The monologue by my sister took a couple months of attempts to have it done and sent to me. Please listen to *Rasha* video piece on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

Heart to heart with K.H. 2013: 11:11 min



Figure 72: Snapshot from 'Heart to Heart with K. H.' by Hala Georges 2013

Over a phone interview with my friend K. H. told me his story and how he lost his girlfriend to the war. It reflects the reality of many young people in Syria, who had to leave or lose their partners or beloved ones to the war. With an English voice over translating the interview, the video shows a small part of the Syrian war destruction from a tank's perspective. Although the view from a tank over the destroyed city could be interesting to watch, it is a clichéd form of representation, which is similar to the regular news footage about the Syrian situation. Therefore, I avoided falling into this cliché in later videos. However, at that point, I was still exploring and trying to find my own individual

approach. I consider this video to be a good way of learning what to avoid, in order to produce a more developed perspective. Yet, recording the voice over, was a move forward in terms of experimenting in using both voices/languages. The process of making this video is similar to the previous one; emotional because of the personal nature of the subject and the difficulties in communication with Syria. Please see *Heart to Heart with K. H.* video on the attached DVD: 'Appendix.

Lamitta: 2014- 04:43 min



Figure 73: Snapshot from 'Lamitta' by Hala Georges 2014

Here I respond to my youngest niece's situation, which forces her to stay indoors at all times, she can't go out to play or go to school; in other words, she is suffering from an unusual and unhealthy situation far from a normal childhood. For that, the footage shows Lamitta in her domestic place, in which her mom is trying her best to entertain her, school her and keep her amused. However, we still feel that there is something missing; air, space, sun, and freedom. At the end, I ask her to accept from me a beautiful poem that talks

about nature, flowers, and the joy of freedom as an acknowledgment from my side of her suffering.

The process of making this video relied mainly on data collection from my sister. I asked her to shoot a short clip every few days and send it to me. It took me a couple of months to collect the footage in the video, as they needed the power of electricity and internet to record and send the material. This sketch responds to the impact of violence on children and how the war has affected their lives and took from them their freedom. This offers a new perspective, a domestic and insider's one. However, the issue addressed here has been already addressed in *Sweeps Festival* and in *Portrait* videos. Avoiding the repetition, this video remains an informing experiment.

Please see *Lamitta* video on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.



Figure 74: Snapshot from 'Haunted' video by Hala Georges 2012

This video responds to the conflicted state of mind of someone in exile; between nostalgia for a past life and excitement about the new one, worrying about war in the home country and hope that it will come to an end. It presents the attempt to live a normal life whilst home is being shattered. The piece shows the dance as nothing but an expression of craziness and denial, and at the same time the dancer is still haunted by her home's crisis, memories and culture. It was a good start to my experimentations because it had a conceptual dimension, left a space for the viewer to think and process the visual information and used a symbolic language of Arabesque graphics to represent Arabic culture. It is wordless inspired by nostalgia and the inner fear of loss, while the use of Arabesque symbolises the Syrian culture and integrates the moving image.

The video responded to my personal thoughts and emotions, which led later to focus the project on the personal. It also helped me to understand the relationship between moving image and still images and to learn how the two

elements come together to express the aspired message. For instance, the moving image of the girl dancing was mixed with Arabesque images, which, with some adjustments of opacity, looked as they were growing on her or they have been always part of her. These images represent culture, memory and the presence of her homeland. The experiment is not based on a script or an interview, but based instead on the power of emotions and the personal inner imagination and feelings. Responding to the main motivation behind this project, which is being inspired from that inner power helps to represent the unrepresentable and to interpret the hidden emotions. However, the message is still ambiguous not offering a specific focus similarly to the rest of the final videos, therefore it remained with experiments.

The music is 'Roubama' by Trio Joubran was added later to the video, which was re-edited in relation to the music. I chose this music because it offered the sense I was looking for; the uncertainty, being lost and overwhelmed knowing that 'Roubama' in Arabic means maybe or ambiguity. Found footage is *Home Movie* made by Man Ray in 1938, which has been re-edited and visually processed to look blurry and uncertain. I chose this particular footage because it was exactly what I was looking for, a girl who was dancing aimlessly with joy and delight. It was like a blank canvas with a great potential to put my creativity and stamp on it.

Please see *Haunted* on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.



Figure 75: Snapshot from 'Home'Sick' video by Hala Georges 2012

This piece responds to my personal state while being away from home with no possibility to visit any time soon. By re-editing and recreating found footage I addressed the fears of losing my country and family. I am homesick and home is sick at the same time, hence the title *Home'Sick*. The personal nature of the subject loaded this video with thoughts and embedded messages, which led it to be slightly ambiguous. This sketch is a good example to learn what I had to avoid; not to let the personal take over the meaning of the video. It offered an important value to learn from and that pushed the practice to improve. The music 'Shajan' by Trio Joubran in Arabic means sadness was added later and the video was re-edited in relation to the music. Based on found footage made by Tony Flacon in 2008. Please see *Home'Sick* video on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

Endless: 2013 - 05:00 min



Figure 76: Snapshot from 'Endless' video by Hala Georges 2013

This video⁴⁴ addresses the endless violence in Syria that started in 2011 and doesn't seem to have an end. It takes the idea of a blood bath and the painful process of filling it with more redness, more violence and hence more suffering. The blood bath is filled gradually to the top, it flushes away only to be filled again. All that is left are some faces of people who suffered but hopefully will never be forgotten. This piece was created in the memory of all the Syrian victims of the Syrian war since 2011.

It is a symbolic way of expression. The motivation behind this approach of the piece was to experiment with different approaches before defining the gap I want to fill via my practice. In addition to my experimentation, I was conducting my research and contextual review, which all helped to be inspired and to try different concepts to define eventually my focus. The other

⁴⁴The experiment is inspired by *Resonance* 2008 by Ismail Bahri reviewed in *Sense of Home* chapter P 149

reason behind creating this footage is a practical reason: the poor connection with Syria and the difficulty of collecting data from home encouraged me to create my own footage. Is it not based on a personal interview or monologue and it highlights the violence directly, yet, this piece remains a crucial experiment in the development of the project. It is a proof of the process development and realisation of the project's focus from the general to the personal.

The chosen music called 'Shajan' by Trio Joubran, which was added later to the videos, was re-edited in relation to the peak times and rhythms of the music while addressing the video's concept. Shajan in Arabic means sadness or suffering, it is traditional Arabic music that offered me what I was looking for in relation to the video concept. The process of making this video was not difficult practically like the other videos, but difficult emotionally. All the videos had an emotional impact on me, however, this particular one had affected me tremendously, because at that time I was disconnected from home completely and I was unaware of what was happening back there. To avoid making it less universal and an ambiguous piece, I included the letters of the word Syria in the peak moment of the video written in red ink and took a dramatic appearance. In this way, the video was contextualised and clearly concerned with the Syrian war even if the response is comprehensive, but it is still offers a point of focus. However, it is direct and uses the blood as a strong and loud reference for violence, which is what I tried to avoid later while producing other-more resolved and less direct videos. Please see *Endless* on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.



Figure 77: Snapshot from 'Rhythm of Revolution' video by Hala Georges 2013

This piece is a symbolic response⁴⁵ to the violence of the Syrian conflict. Starting with belly dancing, which embraces the Arabic and Middle Eastern culture, beauty, history and art, until it is interrupted by the current reality of violence. I represented the current reality of violence that most of Arabic countries suffer from by putting a belt of bullets around the waist in a reference to the violence that entered our culture and became part of our daily lives. The belly dancing tradition functions here as a symbol for the beautiful and cultural Arabic attributes that have been distorted since the chaos started in the Middle East in 2011. Dancing to two contradicted sounds of bombs and music points to the involvement of the current war in people's lives and to the unfortunate attachment of Arabic identity with violence since 9/11. This sketch is general in focus and responding to a general political situation and observation that relate to the Middle East. In other words, this

⁴⁵ The experiment is inspired by *Dansons* 2003 by Zoulikha Boubdellam reviewed in *Sense of Home* chapter p 156

video's approach is not taking one singular story to respond to. Therefore, in later videos, I avoided the use of a direct reference to violence, tried to find an alternative solution and to be more focused on the personal.

Please see *Rhythm of Revolution* video on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

Timo: 2014 – 01:53 min



Figure 78: Snapshot from 'Timo' video by Hala Georges 2014

In this short video I highlight the effect of the Syrian war on children. My nephew is a very good example, he has rejected all his toys, football, watching cartoons, and listening to stories, all for his new game - shooting from his plastic gun to beat his brother and take over the house. The two young boys Taim four years old, and Novy seven years old, are replicating and responding to what they are surrounded by from a bloody struggle over the authority of their country for the last few years. Naturally boys enjoy playing with plastic guns, however, when it is the only thing they are interested in while surrounded by an atmosphere of violence, then the situation develops

from having a normal childhood to living the effects of war on their present and perhaps even on their future. They lost their grandfather, home, school, going or playing outside, interacting with other kids, and the joy of having a normal childhood. This sketch is responding to the phenomenon affecting in some way or another every child in the country. The song 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm' is a classic English song to teaching and learning English in Syrian schools. It is usually taught to kids between the ages of four and six. Here I combined Timo being taken by the weapons' fascination with this symbolic song of education, as a reference to the dramatic change to his typical learning steps and to not being able to attend school on regular basis. This video depends on communicating with the viewer's sympathy and understanding. At the same time, it carries an ironic sense to a very sad situation. It offers a domestic view, a view from inside the affected children's lives. However, it remained as an experiment and didn't join the final collection because it doesn't respond to the personal emotions and the spoken word. On the contrary, it's symbolic and doesn't go in depth into the personal as much as I wish for in this project. Please see *Timo* video on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

All the videos mentioned in the appendix remain important experiments that informed the practice and contributed towards its focus, aim and refinement.

Expanding the experiments to reach illustration:

The data collection was difficult all the way through the project because of the bad connection and lack of power in Syria, which pushed me to find an alternative means of expressions; generating my own material and to create illustrations. I started creating them in response to certain events happened in Syria that had a personal impact on me, to the interviews and conversations I had with participants, and to some videos I've made introducing the videos' content to the audience. My artistic background in graphic design, illustration and painting helped me to create and develop the aspired images. Confirming their role in the project as a complementary material and not the main focus, some Illustrations will be incorporated in the final show of the project as supporting material on walls.

The style of illustrations took a graphically simple form, and sometimes used Arabic calligraphy. It also used the colour red in some places. They were created by hand and then coloured digitally.

Here are a number of examples⁴⁶:

⁴⁶ The illustrations are also available on the attached DVD: 'Appendix'.

Al Qunaya (2013)

The illustration responds to the accident of cutting the head of Virgin Mary statue in the square of Qunaya in summer 2013 by extremists. This village that is taken by ISIS now is where both of my parents came from, where I used to spend my summer holidays. The 100% Latin Catholics inhabitants of Qunaya were forced in 2013 either to convert to Islam, or leave their homes and farms and evacuate the village. (Figure 79)



A Girl after School (2013)

The illustration responds to the unspeakable shelling on and around my school Almaouna in Damascus during the last few years. In here I spent all my schooling time of 12 years and it is also the school of my two nieces 17 and 13 years old. Almaouna has been renovated lately and the girls attend it as often as it is allowed under the circumstances. (Figure 80)



A Letter from Luna (2013)

The illustration responds to *A Letter from Luna* video and shows my two nieces in their living room. (Figure 81)



It's Been Forever (2013)

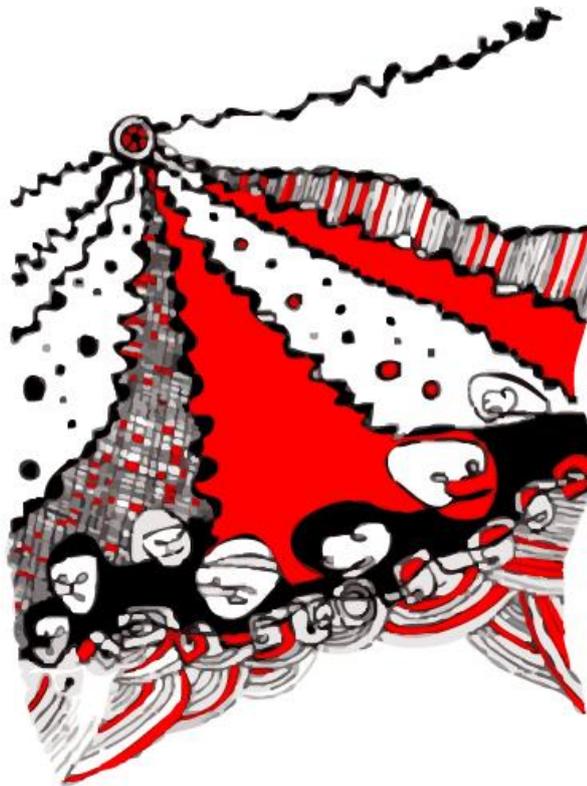
The illustration responds to *It's Been For Ever* video and shows the prison bars in motion. (Figure 82)



Endless (2013)

The illustration responds to *Endless* video. It shows faces left by the ink on the bath top reminding us of people who suffered but will never be forgotten.

(Figure 83)



Haunted (2012)

The illustration responds to the *Haunted* video. It shows the girl dancing haunted with her memories from home. (Figure 84)



Portrait (2013)

The illustration responds to the *Portrait* video. It represents my nephew's portrait surrounded by the words of the song he is singing throughout the video. (Figure 85)



Rama (2013)

The illustration responds to the *Rama* video. It shows Rama dancing and her name written in Arabic calligraphy in the background. The illustration also includes portraits of Rama's friends. (Figure 86)



My Day Time (2013)

The illustration responds to the *My Day Time* video. It represents a self-portrait put in the frame of sounds and words used in the video. (Figure 87)



Rhythm of Revolution (2013)

The illustration responds to the *Rhythm of Revolution* video. It represents the belly dancing in motion surrounded by the rhythm and words of the song used in the video. (Figure 88)



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