

CASTING A SHADOW

Reflective Documentation

Part of the thesis project “Casting a Shadow.

On Disappearance, Emptiness and the Haunting Power of Absence”

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CASTING A SHADOW.

Cristiana De Marchi

ABSTRACT

Casting a Shadow. On Disappearance, Emptiness and the Haunting Power of Absence originates from a curatorial project titled “Poetics of Absence” (Dubai, 2017). The project’s premise was based on figures of absence strictly connected to the theme of travels and separation. The research then progressively moved away from romanticised notions of longing, to develop into an examination of absence as a result of political violence and aggression.

By adopting a multifocal perspective, the research project has been declined into three individual yet interconnected directions that respectively interrogate: the use of architectural structures as tools for segregation and enforced separation, the unfathomable-ness of experiencing and witnessing violence, and lastly, its reverberation and assimilation through the work of mourning.

Absence is therefore explored through the lens of a physical removal, always inflicted; of a verbal defectiveness, either imposed or spontaneous; and of an affective suspension, primarily resulting from a deep internalisation of grief.

The title itself reveals a contradiction in terms, an impossibility: if the current meaning of the expression ‘casting a shadow’ refers to a negativity overshadowing an event or circumstance, the literal one would imply the condition of capturing an ephemeral presence, a transparency, an immateriality, and of rendering it tangible.

The research question, which initially tended to the possibility of materialising absence, has shifted to the urgency of determining how visual arts can open up critical spaces to explore violence without reinforcement or recuperation and how its political use can be understood or interpreted through the lens of art.

ABSTRAKT

„*Casting a Shadow. On Disappearance, Emptiness and the Haunting Power of Absence*“ geht auf das kuratorische Projekt „Poetics of Absence“ (Dubai, 2017) zurück, dessen Ausgangspunkt Figuren der Abwesenheit waren, die eng mit dem Thema Reisen und Trennung verbunden waren. Die Forschung entfernte sich zunehmend von romantisierten Sehnsuchtsvorstellungen und entwickelte sich zu einer Untersuchung von Abwesenheit als Folge politischer Gewalt und Aggression.

Aus einer multifokalen Perspektive betrachtet, wurde das Forschungsprojekt in drei einzelne, aber dennoch miteinander verbundene Richtungen unterteilt, die sich jeweils mit folgenden Themen befassen: der Verwendung architektonischer Strukturen als Mittel zur Segregation und erzwungenen Trennung, der Unfassbarkeit des Erlebens und Miterlebens von Gewalt und drittens ihrer Nachwirkung und Verarbeitung durch die Trauerarbeit.

Abwesenheit wird daher durch die Linse einer physischen Entfernung untersucht, die immer zugefügt wird; einer verbalen Unzulänglichkeit, entweder aufgezwungen oder spontan; und einer affektiven Aussetzung, die meist aus einer tiefen Verinnerlichung der Trauer resultiert.

Der Titel selbst offenbart einen Widerspruch in sich, eine Unmöglichkeit: Wenn sich die gängige Bedeutung des Ausdrucks „einen Schatten werfen“ auf eine Negativität bezieht, die ein Ereignis oder einen Umstand überschattet, würde die wörtliche Bedeutung den Zustand implizieren, eine flüchtige Präsenz, eine Transparenz, eine Immaterialität einzufangen und sie greifbar zu machen.

Die Forschungsfrage, die sich zunächst auf die Möglichkeit der Materialisierung von Abwesenheit konzentrierte, hat sich auf die Dringlichkeit verlagert, herauszufinden, wie die bildende Kunst. kritische Räume für die Untersuchung von Gewalt ohne Verstärkung oder Wiederherstellung öffnen kann und wie politische Gewalt durch die Linse der Kunst verstanden oder interpretiert werden kann.

[...] how much information, how much presence, how much conceptual connective tissue—an artist needs or ought to provide. And how subtracting can once again be a gift, can become content in the negative.

— Martin Herbert

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FOREWORD

The archive was an opaque hope, yet it kept slipping away as though it didn't want to be found, plundered, excavated.¹

I approach the task of writing a dissertation as an exploration and critical engagement with the archive — my own archive — positioning it as both the subject and the site of inquiry. I find it far more chaotic than expected: repetitions, inconclusiveness, lack of organisation. Still, I know that simply organising what I have collected over the past years would only result in reshuffling the disorder, without really achieving a state of cohesiveness, a state of assertiveness, as recommended. Any attempt to redistribute disarray would neither foster progress nor bring me closer to reaching conclusions if, indeed, any can be reached.

This is not only a matter of time, but one of principle, strategy, methodology, as emphasised throughout the programme. Fragmentary, dispersed, at times irreconcilable, investigative, these are the directions and the larger categories within which I operate, artistically and as a researcher. Much like the “poetic stories” of Japanese literature², the narrative occasion here is shaped by commentary on verses interspersed into the prose.

In his referential *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences* (1637), Descartes enumerates four principles that would guide him through the examination of any question, beginning with those related to mathematics, and then progressing to those pertaining to more advanced forms of knowledge, specifically philosophical inquiries.

To exclude all ground of doubt, to divide each difficulty into as many parts as possible, to move from the simplest to the more complex, and to systematically enumerate in order to avoid any omission that might invalidate the conclusions: these are the guiding principles identified by Descartes, which offer a framework for a scientific methodology that is both reliable and replicable.

Two centuries later, Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840) proposed a radically different approach as narrated by Jacques Rancière in his landmark text *Le maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*.

¹Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Punctum Books, 2018), 22.

²The *uta monogatari*, described as elegant “poetic stories,” developed in the splendour of Japanese court life, during the Heian period (794-1185). I learned about this genre as I approached the writings of Fukazawa Shichirō, and more specifically his *Narayama bushikō* (*The Narayama Ballads*).

[...] *the fact* was that his students *had learned* to speak and to write in French without the aid of expectation. He had communicated nothing to them about his science, no explications of the roots and flexions of the French language. [...] He had left them alone with the text by Fénelon, a translation – not even an interlinear like a schoolbook – and their will to learn French. He had only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered. Necessity had constrained him to leave his intelligence entirely out of the picture—that mediating intelligence of the master that relays the printed intelligence of written words to the apprentice’s.³

The students learned without the master’s explication, or even without the master’s involvement at all. We can refer to this method as “the method of equality” or “the method of the will,” whereby the students would learn solely based on their desire to learn.

I find this method more attuned and suitable to my own approach to ‘knowledge’: the lack of directionality, openness to discoveries, and a drive to delve unguided into a subject matter; the initial incompetence evolving into an acquired understanding of processes: an evolutive, evocative, transitional, recreated knowledge. Yet, it is not necessarily incompatible with the Cartesian method, as one must first acknowledge their ignorance of the specific subject matter they are going to explore as an indisputable truth, break down the process of learning into minuscule particles, and then recompose a structure moving from the simplest to more complex components, finally cataloguing those passages to logically recapitulate the points and elements of that progression.

As we move away from the directionality of a schoolmaster–pupils teaching model, with its inherent hierarchy and fixed positionality, we start venturing into the errancy of an exploratory method that delves unguided into the realms of a field where the only trajectory seems to be traced by a desire to discover. Rancière’s ignorant schoolmaster had taught something to his students, and yet he had transmitted none of his knowledge, he communicated to them nothing of his science: learning occurred nonetheless⁴.

What, then, can truly be taught? Is the simple act of creating the conditions for learning sufficient in itself? And, more importantly, how can one apprehend, discern and comprehend?

³Jacques Rancière, *The ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, transl. Kristin Ross (Stanford University Press 1991), 9.

⁴Reversely, this method of inviting without imposing rules could, within the educational field, be perceived as laziness, bordering on an anthropological approach, an impassible observation of others’ efforts to reach fluency in a field they do not yet master, without intervening, rectifying, or reinforcing. Ironically, I find myself reflecting, this resembles the Western tradition so deeply rooted in the virtues of abstinence. Abstaining from sin, from pride, from immediate gratification. In this light, the ignorant schoolmaster could well be seen as a virtuous man – undoubtedly, a man.

INTRODUCTION

To say 'Absence' is to give Presence to that which is removed from Presence.⁵

Absence is a relevant topos in the articulation of a narrative (or story), informed by European cultural and historical frameworks, and often likened to the theme of travel, which is in turn strictly connected to that of separation, displacement and the inevitability of farewells. The reverse of these affective states is the attempt to neutralise or even annihilate the evidence of severance through a series of stratagems, which are methods that voyagers, travellers and migrants have perfected over the millennial history of humanity or, individually, during the course of one's existence.

Absence is generally perceived and represented as a void, an emptiness, a negative entity that catalyses attention while negating contact. Both in its acceptance of "a state or condition in which something expected, wanted or looked for is not present or does not exist⁶", and of "a failure to be present at a usual or expected place," the notion of absence is related to that of a frustrated expectation, of an unfulfilled desire.

The temporal dimension is another crucial aspect, as absence can also be defined as "the period of time that one is absent", thus introducing a measurable component – a quantifiable variable – in the cyclical or looped experience of longing.⁷

If its connotation is therefore nearly entirely delineated in negative terms, then the research question can be formulated as such: how might absence be rendered present? Can it be materialised, physically preserved? Can absence – an immaterial presence, a tension towards an inaccessible subject – take form, translate into a cast? Can it be moulded? Can it manifest as a state of enchantment caused by a spell?

To cast embraces the dual nature of tangibility and magics. On one hand, to cast – to shape a material by pouring it into a mould – describes a technical process whose essence lies in solidifying into a shape a liquid or otherwise malleable material. It is the actualisation of potentiality, the objectification of an idea, the translation of the immaterial into a perceivable object.

⁵Antonio Prete, *Trattato della lontananza* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), 9 ("Raccontare la lontananza è dare presenza a quel che è sottratto alla presenza." My translation).

⁶For all definitions of absence quoted in this section, see: "Absence," Merriam-Webster online Dictionary, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/absence>.

⁷One of my current projects revolves around the possibility to develop a system for determining the measurability of longing, knowing that time is clearly an insufficient parameter.

To cast however can also mean to cause a magic spell to take effect: also in this acceptation, the power of a vision, or intention translates into a resulting action. In both cases, the consequence of a mental process is a visible, tangible⁸ materialisation of an initial thought, a will, a desire, or an aspiration.

Drawing from the curatorial project titled “Poetics of Absence” (Dubai, 2017⁹), whose premise was centred on a number of figures of absence, all strictly connected to the theme of travels and separation, with a specific interest in diasporic contexts (among them, “The Farewell”, “The Horizon”, “Nostalgia”, “Exile”, “The Sound of Absence”), my initial focus was directed towards, or rather originated from, the ‘Middle East’ as a site historically shaped by migration. Over the centuries, millions of people have been subjected to the logics of war, deportation, and other forms of forced displacement. Diaspora has become a painfully familiar word for millions of individuals from the region – those who, or whose ancestors, were either forcibly removed or otherwise compelled to leave their countries in search of more secure horizons, often with catastrophic consequences in terms of integration and tolerance in the new territories, alongside the recurrence of nostalgia, which operates almost as a social epidemics.

A consistent section in the exhibition was dedicated to photography¹⁰, presented as a privileged means adopted to mitigating the effects of nostalgia, and paradoxically, as one that would potentially increase those same effects. We carry images in notebooks, wallets and suitcases – and in recent decades, on telephones, computers and other electronic devices – in order to have a tangible, “objective” reminder of places and individuals of deep emotional significance, memories we cannot allow to fade or dissolve. Documentary photography, photographic archives and artistic photography seem to share a sustained interest in the collection of visual relics. However, although their approach vary considerably, spanning a spectrum from preservation to creative re-elaboration.

⁸Casting a spell is often accompanied by a ritual that renders the incantation perceptible.

⁹See “The Poetics of Absence,” curated by Cristiana de Marchi, at 1x1 art gallery, 2017
<https://www.1x1artgallery.com/exhibition/details/64>.

¹⁰The exhibition comprised photography, video, painting, sculpture and installations, and it featured the following artists: Tarek Al-Ghoussein, Reza Aramesh, Mohamad Said Baalbaki, Wafaa Bilal, John Clang, Afra bin Dhaher, Tomoko Hayashi, Lamia Joreige, Nedim Kufi, Alia Lootah, Chittrovanu Mazumdar, Youssef Nabil, Monika Weiss.

This understanding of absence is necessarily in relation to the notion of *home*¹¹. Across most cultures, *home* is primarily invested with positive associations, with ideas of permanence, possession, flourishing, origin, inheritance, and as a result, in connection with rhetorics of return, belonging, and longing. That being said, alternative interpretations introduce enriching elements to the conversation. In a series of essays¹², professor Shahram Khosravi, of the University of Stockholm, has explored the concept of the ‘impossibility of home’ in relation to that of ‘border.’

Perhaps the Swedish word for refugee more accurately conveys the condition of refugeeness than the English one. The Swedish word *flykting* means the one who is fleeing. In English the word refugee refers to a person who has found refuge and is safe. While the English word falsely illustrates arrival, becoming, a new home, the Swedish word renders an ongoing flight of those who are stuck in an infinite position of not arriving and border becoming¹³.

What does “becoming a border” mean? A border being a line, a virtual line, separating two geographical areas and, more critically two political entities, “border becoming” could literally equate to becoming a line, becoming a virtual line, the embodiment – in all its dolorous meaning, – of a separation, of a division. In response to the uncomfortable question – what do borders protect? – the possibility for an alternative position arises. In its connotation of occupying a position on both sides of a boundary, or threshold, which is the literal translation for *limen*, liminality invites a transitional process that starkly contrasts with that of border.

To survive borders, to resist becoming a border, we should reject the primary idea borders are constructed upon, namely the notion of home. From *oikos* in the ancient Greece to the current idea of homeland (nation-state), homes have primarily been sites of exclusion, not inclusion.

¹¹The concept of home is closely associated, although often unintentionally or with a variable level of consciousness, to that of household, as corroborated by the following considerations, which offer some interesting anchoring points: “The household is taken to be the neutral organising mode of society. Being a household occupant is a condition of legibility by the state for the purposes of almost all services and rights. The household is used as a basic measurement unit by the census. It is by and large the site of unseen care and social reproductive work. Over the past number of years, messaging about what demographic formation is assumed of a household took an especially socially and sexually conservative turn. On the individual level, the assumption became that one's familial, intimate, sexual, and meaningful relationships are largely represented by the people living under the same roof as you. Moments of breach expose the dangers in assuming the household as a neutral unit, that a given household is a safe, adequate and viable place to conduct a life is not guaranteed. [...] A house is separated from the wild-out-there physical world by the materials of its walls, windows and roofing. Its household is separated from the wild-out-there social world by its etiquettes and coding, spoken and unspoken” (Eimear Walshe, “The household and its moral kingdoms,” *IMMA International Summer School 2022. ART AND POLITICS. #4 self-determination*, Irish Museum of Modern Art 2022: 6).

¹²Shahram Khosravi, “Border conversations. Impossibility of home,” in *Unhomed*, catalogue of the exhibition curated by Rebecka Wigh Abrahamsson, Uppsala konstmuseum, Uppsala, Sweden (February 1st – May 10th, 2020), 20-21.
Shahram Khosravi, “The ‘illegal’ traveller: an auto-ethnography of borders,” *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie Sociale* 15, no. 3 (2007), 321–334.

¹³Khosravi, “Border conversations,” 20.

The home has been a space for domestic violence and subjugation of women, adolescents, and workers. The notion of the home nourishes sexism and racism¹⁴.

I often resort to lexicons to deepen my understanding of ideas. As one might argue, as a lexicon provides definitions, linguistic roots, and logical associations between linguistic registers and their meaningful units. Less evidently, I recur to translation. This is indeed due to a connatural aspect of my education first, and personal peregrinations later. Classical studies instilled the pleasures, and pains, of translation from ancient Greek and Latin; a university training in archaeology brought me close to an understanding of specialistic written German; a life of unsettledness favoured the apprenticing of French and Arabic.

Khosravi's 'radical homelessness' resonates at a deep level, not only de-territorialises the physical subject, but also performs a similar process on their language.

'Étranger' and 'straniero' share the same Latin root, and closely correspond to the English 'stranger': they derive from the prefix 'extra,' thus addressing the condition of being recognised as an outsider. This is also true for 'étrange', 'strano' or 'strange', nouns that all refer to a recognisable character of anomaly, of dissonance from what could be otherwise considered as normative.

Although immediacy seems difficult to discern, the stranger is soon invested with a fearful expectation of danger. From the 'étranger' to the 'uncanny' the step, which would appear to be likely a wide one, is suddenly minimised.

In Wright's "English Dialect Dictionary" (1900) the first sense of uncanny as used in Scotland and the North is "awkward, unskilful; careless; imprudent; inconvenient." The second is "Unearthly, ghostly, dangerous from supernatural causes; ominous, unlucky; of a person: possessed of supernatural powers".

From 1773, uncanny appears in popular literature from the North (Robert Fergusson, Scott), with reference to persons and in a sense of "not quite safe to trust or deal with through association with the supernatural."¹⁵

The uncanny is often associated with the 'unheimlich,' mostly by virtue of Freudian and psychoanalytical readings on the origin and recurrences of experiences long forgotten and repressed, experiences that eventually turn to be scary and eerie for the subject. 'Unheimlich' quite literally translates as 'uncanny, weird, sinister,' and shares its root, 'Heim,' meaning 'Home,' with 'Heimat,' the

¹⁴Khosravi, "Border conversations," 21.

¹⁵"Uncanny," Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed August 30, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=uncanny>.

place that defines our sense of belonging and rootedness¹⁶. Regardless of the fact that other European languages do not seem to have semantic equivalents to offer for this encroachment of home, familiarity and estrangement, this emotional tie, and all that it entails, is nevertheless a shared sentiment: a sentiment of exclusion, both active, as longing for a place left behind, for a presence that hurts in its actual absence, and passive, as turning into a weird, potentially sinister figure in someone else's familiar landscape.

By taking into consideration the socio-political dimensions of absence – such as estrangement, social erasure, and imposed invisibility – we are made aware of power structures that translate into forms of violence, segregation, and collective annihilation. In reflecting on these strategies, that are applied within the context of supposedly hosting structures, the research has progressively turned into an examination of absence as a result of political intimidation and aggression. Consequently, the focus has shifted towards the interconnection of authoritarianism, state-inflicted violence, and the ensuing processes of grief and mourning. These themes are approached through a 'poethical' lens – an ethical and aesthetic mode of inquiry¹⁷ – while privileging the use of negative spaces and liminality as conceptual tools to explore these very ideas.¹⁸

¹⁶I am introducing this association of 'unheimlich' and 'Heimat' as a rather poetic suggestion, entirely hypothetical, and etymologically unverified.

¹⁷The crisis of poetic and ethical dimensions is key to positioning this research project within a wider horizon of literary and artistic voices that have accompanied and nurtured me over the past years, and that constitute the theoretical, multifaceted, and 'undisciplined' references underpinning its development.

¹⁸This in fact happened quite soon, contextually to the process of creating *The Echo of the Void* (2021) and *Monument to the falling Wall* (2021-2022).

When asked about her ex-husband, a friend answered: “he was an engineer.” The past tense reflects the distance from the time when that specific person was a presence, and relegates him into the past. Yet, the choice of tense is incorrect, as the ex-husband is still alive. As the correct version of the same sentence would rather be: “my ex-husband is an engineer”, a multiplicity of temporalities come to coexist. The reference to the past is localised in the condition of ex-, which implies a removal or a disassimilation without negating existence to the bearer of those characters. The dimensions of presence and absence become simultaneous: a past presence, now an absence, is still present in the absolute of reality. This same apparent absurdity is incarnated in the figures of absence explored here, juggling between a specific geo-political horizon and a universal proposition.

PART I. THE PREMISES

1. THE DEFINITION OF A RESEARCH FIELD

[...] Emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.¹⁹

The research project, as initially conceived, consisted of three artworks (Separation Wall, Commemorative Stamps, and La mère), each one addressing a different declination of absence. During one of my first *privatissima* with my mentor, Professor Judith Eisler, I listed the main points—still conceived in terms of potentiality, that I was aiming to explore in relation to the research project:

Separation Wall:²⁰

- Addressing the political notion of absence instead of a romanticised one. Absence is here examined not in terms of longing and remembrance, but as the effect of a political decision to create a division, a disconnect, a gap; to annihilate those behind the wall, to hide, to negate their existence;
- From a haptic point of view, the creation of a segment of a wall through textiles introduces the notion of a soft surface: malleable, penetrable, almost a membrane, instead of a firm, solid structure;
- Reference to notions of soft power.²¹

Commemorative stamps:

- Fictionalising a correspondence between artists, writers, musicians, philosophers, thinkers, etc., about the notion of absence;
- The postal stamps are created out of litter: discarded, unwanted, abandoned materials, materials which are the result of an "absence" (of usage, of function, of appreciation);
- Correspondence as a marker, an acknowledgement of distance, of absence;

¹⁹Sara, Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10.

²⁰The project wasn't initially titled: while it clearly addressed separation walls, the connection with the notion of 'monument' developed over the course of the creation of the artwork. Indeed, the aspect of monumentality was always present, and yet the monumentalisation of the very concept of separation became progressively immanent as the textile work was growing around my own body. The refusal of the monumentalisation, rather.

²¹"The Oxford English Dictionary records the phrase "soft power" (meaning "power (of a nation, state, alliance, etc.) deriving from economic and cultural influence, rather than coercion or military strength") from 1985. Joseph Nye popularized the concept of "soft power" in the late 1980s. For Nye, power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want. There are several ways one can achieve this: one can coerce others with threats; one can induce them with payments; or one can attract and co-opt them to want what one wants. This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes one wants – co-opts people rather than coerces them."

"Soft Power," Wikipedia, accessed January 8, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power.

- Core questions: poetry, hybridity, exophonic practice, in relation to the question of impermanence, which is intrinsic to that of absence;
- Introducing a playful component in the work, lightening the heaviness of the subject – a counterbalance;

La mère:

- Based on Isadora Duncan's choreography *Mother*: a re-enactment by several dancers (either professional or mothers who have lost their children, both physically or to a court, in terms of custody and continuity of care²²), thus considering the notion of repetition as always individualised, regardless of the striking similarities between mourning gestures and rituals through cultures and times;
- "Polyphonic dance," almost a relay race: reflecting on a kinship of sorts, among mourners, although the concept could be easily dismissed at a rational level;
- Therapeutic process: reference to artistic, performative and theatrical therapy as they are portrayed to help ease the work of mourning, and the process of grief elaboration. The question around the healing potential of mourning is tempting, and yet dubious.

To summarise, *Monument to the Falling Wall*, as the work was eventually titled, sought to address the political dimension of absence as the outcome of deliberate acts of division, and the negation of the existence of the "other". The resulting artwork, a hand-knitted 631x125 cm module of a hypothetical separation wall, turns the hardness of the architectural element into a malleable and penetrable body, a movable, re-arrangeable and ultimately reversible structure, enabling a process of empowerment and alternative truth creation²³.

'Commemorative Stamps' fictionalises a correspondence about the notion of absence, thus touching upon more theoretical and philosophical questions.²⁴ By adopting the very idea of correspondence as an acknowledgement of distance and ultimately, of absence, this segment of the project investigates the potential for alternative, de-centralised strategies of knowledge sharing while also contrasting a generalised idea that associates absence with a certain degree of passive acceptance.

²²This aspect was consistently present in the research: the loss of custody and the inability to provide care represent an often undocumented experience of a devastating absence. I focussed particularly on the Middle Eastern context, which I am more familiar with, and where minors' custody is governed by religious courts. In this context, women accused of adultery or deemed to have psychological instability, based on dubious testimonies and unverified medical reports, are routinely stripped of custody rights over their children.

²³"I wanted to talk about confinement but situating the action in the open air", in Wajdi Mouawad, *Littoral. Le sang des promesses / 1* (Leméac / Actes Sud, 1999, 2009), 15 ("...je voulais parler d'enfermement mais en situant l'action en plein air.", my translation).

"... acting in a theatre stems from the same need to give meaning to what has none", Mouawad, *Littoral*, . 44 ("... jouer au théâtre procède de la même nécessité de redonner un sens à ce qui n'en a pas," my translation)

²⁴The component of dissemination pertaining to the correspondence evokes a sentiment of separateness that implicitly introduces the question of whether it is possible to fill the gap or neutralise absence. This question might remain unanswered, as the very missives could be unreceived; on the contrary they could be responded and dialectically launched into a wider conversation.

The opening towards a physical exploration of loss is crucial to 'La mère'²⁵ as it investigates the universal nature of mourning, of its process, sometimes of its progress, and more often of its circularity. The resulting performance was eventually based on a partial theatrical text that associates poetic, intimate, diaristic literature with more scientific approaches to the work of mourning. This dramaturgic text, which was destined to be choreographed rather than recited, perceives the body as the lieu where the process of healing could potentially initiate -while also contemplating, the role of re-enactment in addressing the gaps, the omissions and erasures which have been neglected, un-recorded, unwritten, or intentionally distorted in prevailing versions of history.

2. AN AESTHETIC PARADOX

Within the discourse centred on absence and presence, an aesthetic paradox emerges: the attempt to give form to that-which-is not-here, creating something from a 'nothingness' in order to capture or purge its presence. This antithesis is an invitation to examine a vast diversity of figurative strategies that confront the concept of absence, and to speak not just of one but of a variety of aesthetics of absence. Blank spaces, silences, omissions, erasures and invisibility may be imperative conditions for revelation, the pauses necessary to a poetic syntax. Those who are subjected to absence have to bridge the void that threatens their established expectations and practices. This aesthetic strategy finds expression globally and is of central importance wherever people of different cultural backgrounds mutually exist in power-inflected spaces of diaspora, post-or neo-colonialism, and cultural or economic segregation. Both "here" and "there", radical upheavals, loss, displacement and separation lead to a situation where knowledge that was previously established and categorised is now perceived as incomplete, partial and contested. The temporal dimension is indeed an essential category, not only in the general acceptation that absence is "the period of time that one is absent,"²⁶ but also in the now scientifically acknowledged dimension of epigenetics, that is in the growing knowledge around a genetic inheritance of sentiments of separateness, loss, and absence.

We need to see how everyone, at every age, in the smallest things as in the greatest challenges, seeks a territory, tolerates or carries out deterritorializations, and is re-territorialized on almost anything — memory, fetish, or dream.²⁷

²⁵The resulting artwork has been later titled *The Atlas of the Impossible*. See Part II, chapter 12.

²⁶See note 6.

²⁷Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 68.

As I reflect on my own aesthetic strategies, I begin to recognise the significance of time, as a fundamental category in my practice, which can be viewed – in its entirety – as a durational performance.

The insistence on producing all my textile works by hand, even though faster, and more efficient techniques are readily available, reflects my intention to incorporate a temporal component into the work, as well as to consider the work as an extension of my own body.

Although the practice is deterritorialised, intentionally unanchored geographically in its making, it is nevertheless “temporalised,” fully rooted in the chronology of making. Territoriality returns, in fact, under the premises of the body, regarded as the only admissible place of belonging. Deterritorialisation is, therefore, only referred to as a set geographic value system that responds to international codes but is widely disregarded as ineffective in reflecting instances of belonging.

3. TOWARDS A METHOD

It's the job of artists to open doors, and invite in prophesies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. Scientists, too, as Robert J. Oppenheimer once remarked, "live always at the 'edge of mystery'-the boundary of the unknown." But they transform the unknown into the known, haul it in like fishermen; artists get you out into that dark sea.²⁸

Even as I approach the conclusive stages of my doctoral studies, I must admit my reluctance to formulate a clear and definite statement about my artistic research method. Here, I present my procedural steps, the process I tend to apply and follow, and the guiding principles I sometimes disregard.²⁹

1. Formulating a research question.

Most of my artistic projects originate from a desire to explore socio-political questions (borders' distribution and their historical variations and constant renegotiation; power games in defined societies and regions; abortion laws and their consequences on women's reproductive rights and, eventually, on their lives; capital punishment; climate change impact, etc). The question is therefore

²⁸Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Canongate Books, 2006), 5.

²⁹“The theory and practice of Artistic Research are concerned with ludic methods of approaching art and science and epistemic things (*Erkenntnisgegenstände*), insights achieved through research. Their goals are written fictitiously, presented participatively and made public processually. The methods of artistic research comprise contradictions, and are found in feedback between peers... between radical artistic uniqueness and the claim of universal validity.” (Margarete Jahrmann, "LUDIC GAMES: PLAYFUL FORMS OF INSIGHT," in *Teaching Artistic Research: Conversations Across Cultures*, ed. Ruth Mateus-Berr and Richard Jochum (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 30.

directly linked to the subject matter, and is always supported by a research phase that precedes the creation of the artwork. Moving beyond the data and information collected during the preliminary phase, it addresses the complexities and implications of its factual components and turns towards an understanding of the problem itself in its variables and declinations.

2. Visualising the question.

The research component, being a constituent part of the project, is followed by the definition of visual strategies to answer the question. How can an idea, a philosophical, ethical, or moral question translate into an artwork that can be experienced as an aesthetic object? The answer varies according to the nature of the question, but this is the recurrent, consistent and omnipresent core question I ask myself every time I start a new project. The strategies of visualisation, therefore, will shift according to the overarching proposition and on its nature: densely gridded maps are often adopted to materialise issues related to borders and relationships – such as the interaction between public and private sphere, territorial claims, and migration. Games and playful instruments have been at the centre of my quest on identity (dice, playing cards, dominos, etc.)³⁰, whilst repurposed litter is instrumental to the investigation on the transience of life. Finally, the intersection between visual language and text—and particularly poetry—represents the ideal instrument to manifest empowerment and assert agency³¹.

3. Answering the question.

One aspect of the work claims to participate in a general paradigm, within a discourse that can be shared and which is manufactured according to certain criteria. [...] On the other hand, artistic research projects in many cases also lay claim to singularity. They create a certain artistic set up, which claims to be relatively unique and produces its own field of reference and logic³²

The work can only pose the question, it can generate a discussion, it can open eyes, it can encourage dialogue but because of the very nature of the questions which are asked, it can never univocally answer them. The nature of the work is dialogical, fluid, ethereal, ideally impermanent. Creating the artwork constitutes a continuity in frequenting the problem.

³⁰The application of poetic play practices as a research method is perfectly enunciated by Margarete Jahrmann: “As an artistic research method, Ludics investigates research topics, applying poetic practices to the subject and introducing specific rules of investigative inter-play to it. This conception elucidates philosophical reflections of the process of research and its methods, and can be identified as artistic play with scientific theories. At its core, Ludics’ methodological approach appropriates the practices of playfulness and the mechanics of games for art production and research purposes” (Jahrmann, “LUDIC GAMES,” 39).

³¹“The multilinguality of artistic research implies that artistic research is an act of translation. It takes part in at least two languages and can in some cases create new ones” (Hito Steyerl, “Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict,” *mahkuzine* no. 8 (winter 2010): 4).

³²*Ibid.*

4. Asking the über-question, once again (filtering the tangible in search of the knowledge relating to the object).

[...] conventional thinking [...] forces us to accept art as a way of “making things” instead of a way of knowing—with or without the production of “things.”³³

[...] even if we accept art as a form that produces tangible things, if the result is really art the artist communicates more than material presence and technical expertise.³⁴

The persistent question that tends to underlie the creation of each work, in its final “physical” outcome, is the question about the interaction of these two apparently remote languages and realms of perception. That is, how does one navigate the space between posing an ethical or philosophical interrogation and providing an aestheticised answer, with the implied risk of beautifying the subject matter, while relating to moral questioning by artistic means? Is it appropriate? And if yes, to which extent?

The formulation of this meta-question is recurrent, incessant and progressive, as each work leads to further reflections on the appropriateness of its materialisation in response and in relation to the references and contexts that represent the core of the initial questioning.

5. Offering to peer feedback and public viewing: the decisive test (Loop after this).

Awe [...] reveals something previously hidden: new meanings or the possibility to make new meanings. [...] awe is not a property of the object, but of how our knowledge relates with the object.³⁵

As I live and work, operate and act within a society where the level of self-awareness about what is allowed and what is not is acutely present, to the extent of engendering a process of self-censorship intrinsically attached to the creation of each work, the exposure of works of political nature is often negated. Peer review remains confined to secure territories, either those of small, trusted communities, or to those few contexts that have been granted an institutional status of neutrality. Peer feedback and public viewing serve as occasions for discussion on the work, which is characterised by novel approaches, generous associations, and the non infrequent revelation of connections that may not have been fully acknowledged, or internalised.

This is the basis for actively observing, and absorbing – for abserving or obsorbing – the knowledge

³³Luis Camnitzer, “Let’s Call It Art!,” *e-flux Journal*, 143, no.3 (2024), 2.

³⁴Ibid., 4

³⁵Ibid, 4

pertaining to the object and the unobjective qualities it manifests.

Ab- and ob- are prefixes that imply different modes of relationality: ab- indicates an awayness, a detachment, a provenance, and also implies the idea of source; whereas ob- denotes meeting or facing (sometimes with hostile, resisting connotations), implying an exposure, a towardsness, and a tension toward. This dynamic reflects an openness and receptivity to assimilate, integrate, and incorporate the unknown, the possible and emergent meaning that “is not a property of the object,” but manifests through it, as Camnitzer highlights with synthetic eloquence.

3.1 ARTIST-THINKER AND THE QUESTION OF EXPERTISE

Here once more, it's to do with the way someone's own work can lead to unexpected convergences, and new implications, new directions, in other people's work. And no special status should be assigned to any particular field, whether philosophy, science, art, or literature. (Deleuze 1995: 30)³⁶

Green quotes Deleuze, I quote Green quoting Deleuze. A system of references, both simultaneously internalised and externalised. These reflections on artistic practice as research introduce the notion of convergence and discovery, with convergence leading to discovery, while also considering all involved disciplines as equally dignified. I find myself compelled to reflect on my own approach to artistic practice as research, to the adoption of a variety of media and techniques (textile, video, performance), of modalities (handmade processuality, manipulation, repetition, removal, layering, etc.) to create convergences, to invite a discovery, to facilitate and potentially capture a revelation.

The designation ‘artist-thinkers’, as I’m using it, refers to those who are driven by the above-mentioned modes of ‘curiosity, sustained questioning, and analysis’ to realise their creations — despite, and with an awareness of, the complexity of their life conditions, no matter what the consequences.³⁷

What most artist-thinkers face, because they are compelled to follow paths that may not intersect with directions afforded by capitalist-logic, is the effort to create the space within which to work and think, however that may manifest itself.³⁸

The effort to create the space within which to work and think, within which to manifest the self-determination against impelling, prevailing market strategies, is a primary need to allow the

³⁶Renée Green, “Paradoxes experienced by artist-thinkers,” in *Intellectual Birdhouse. Artistic Practice as Research*, Eds. Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis, Michael Schwab (Walther König 2012), 291-307, 292.

Green quotes Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations*. Columbia University Press, 1995.

³⁷Ibid., 292.

³⁸Ibid., 292.

manifestation of a complex aggregation of concepts and thoughts, with their consequent (and prescient) visualisations. This anti-commodification approach is nevertheless neither entirely sincere nor entirely effective. Even when we do not actively participate in market-driven forms of promotion of our artistic creations, we inevitably succumb to the alluring voice of institutional or non-for-profit displays and events. We enthusiastically embrace the enticement, the flattery of a museum acquisition, and at times we partially deviate from our original intention when our texts undergo significant editorial interventions that render the initial proposition unrecognisable.

The questions [...] Am I an expert? What might I be an expert of? What can expertise now signify? What does it allow and entail? How is it determined? How does it matter? How does it matter in relationship to art? To research? To research in relation to art? In what kind of relation? The question of expertise is a crucial question for the themes of 'striking back', the institutionalisation of knowledge, and how this practice is currently deployed and particularly in relation to what we call art.³⁹

The question of expertise is a haunting one, as I try to comply with:

- a. the academic expectations of completing a PhD programme;
- b. the supposed "elevation" in status of my artistic practice, in the above-mentioned process and, more importantly, in its achievement;
- c. the relevance of expertise (and the transfer of scientific, dignifying modes of research) as it comes to Artistic Research, or to art altogether.

I don't feel compelled by this need to prove myself authorised to approach the field, to demonstrate expertise (*"What might I be an expert of?"*), to prove the significance of expertise in conjunction with an artistic practice (*How does it matter in relationship to art?*). Artistic practice - volatile as it often is, and regardless of how well documented it might be -, tends to drift across multiple domains of knowledge, without settling into a specific, defined perimeter of action. Sometimes it does so, when serving the purpose of a cause. But I must admit that I struggle with this functionality of art, unless it manages to maintain a certain level of poetic universality – which could well coincide with a highly individualised exemplification – to allow an entry point, to relate from a position of awe and viscosity, rather than from that of a well-informed alignment.

Hence, I would rather embrace Luis Camnitzer's provocative defence of an ignorant generalism as a claim to a certain level of competence without ever attaining, nor having the ambition to, the status of an expert.

³⁹Ibid., 297.

As an artist and knowledge worker, I prefer to define myself as an “ignorant generalist” and enjoy my freedom. Being an ignorant generalist does not preclude knowing some things better than other people do. It only opens up the possibility of exploring those interstices that fragmentation overlooks. It rescues ignorance from the danger of its own fragmentation.⁴⁰

Research in the arts is quite different from research in engineering, which in turn is different from scientific research. It is more akin to the humanities in its attention to the particular rather than the systemic, but it creates knowledge via aesthetic as well as critical inquiry, and engages material and embodied experience as well as concepts.

Like other modes of research, art research generates portable knowledge: it generates insights, how-to's, why's that can be shared by more than one individual; what is learned in the context of one art project can be applied in a different one.

Like research in other domains, art research has its own archive, but whereas historians use textual archives, and anthropologists use materials gathered in fieldwork, art research's 'body of literature' is the body of prior works and the critical commentaries surrounding them. Like other research, art research is not the same as art practice. Why should that be the case? Not every artist shares her working knowledge with her peers, nor need she do so. Art practices range widely, and a large part of their vitality comes from their autonomous ways of making. (Sha 2008)⁴¹

Reclaiming these positions is liberating, as it comes to the process I follow: the intuitive movement between concepts and aesthetic investigation; the attention to the particular; embracing an embodied experience that “creates knowledge via aesthetic as well as critical inquiry”: the growing corpus of why's and how-to's that accumulates from one project to another, reverberating into other contexts, when a tangential occurrence happens; the archive as an accumulation of “prior works and the critical commentaries surrounding them”, often contained within a regionalised context; the autonomy of making, its dissociation from showing—I mean from showing to a broad audience.

The point is becoming and a becoming is always double. (Stengers s.d.)⁴²

Becoming is double—not only in the act of thinking alongside another. It is double, as it duplicates the individual in the very midst of metamorphosis. In the process of becoming, the old self and the new emerging self converge for a brief moment and then depart.

⁴⁰Camnitzer, “Let's Call It Art,” 4.

⁴¹Green, “Paradoxes experienced,” 299. Green quotes Sha, Xin Wei. *Art Research?* Unpublished manuscript. Concordia University, Montréal, 2008.

⁴²Green, “Paradoxes experienced,” 306. Green quotes Stengers, Isabelle. *Gilles Deleuze's last message*. Online, s.d. <http://www.recalcitrance.com/deleuzelast.htm> (consulted 20.06.2010).

3.2 THE QUESTION OF SOFTNESS

[...] art research is open-ended, we cannot declare in advance what is the 'deliverable': if we already know the answer, then we would not need to do the research.⁴³

The technique is one aspect, often a guiding instrument for refining ideas while pushing the material to explore innovative solutions. In my practice, I have often submitted the technique to the concept I intended to research, or the question I was addressing. I rarely granted it the freedom to guide me in a new direction, enjoying the pleasure of losing myself in the materiality of the medium. Unlike painting or sculpture, I didn't allow myself to make a mess, mix colours, or to splash clay on the floor while getting my hands dirty. I kept the space pristine, intentionally lowering the temperature to avoid sweating, and packed the progressing work away each day after I completed my practice. Like a ritual, I prepared the table, officiated the function, and changed my clothes afterwards. Yet, on a conscious level, I am hostile to rituals and the ritualisation of human experience. Ultimately, I must admit that I don't know how to reconcile the contradiction.

This tension seeps into my practice, particularly in relation to form and presentation – what I have come to understand as the problem of 'smoothness'. The question of smoothness—and its relevance within the process—is one I continually revisit. It is a concern often painfully entangled with a preoccupation of softening, of diluting the problem, of over-aestheticising it. Yet, I do recognise great qualities to the materiality of the medium, to its ability to metamorphose, to its malleability, to its plasticity, which are all indeed sculptural qualities. It is probably when I started thinking of these characters of the material, "as an aggregated material", that I also started thinking about the potential to create sculptural pieces out of wool. What is important here is also the notion of aggregation: the thread is linear, somehow directional, if tensed. It is only through the process of twisting it, of submitting it to the repeated back and forth transfer between iron sticks that it acquires the qualities we recognise to it: its softness, plasticity, and malleability. It becomes resistant by means of softness.

This is an important point regarding the research project, which also reflects on the potential of exploring alternative solutions and of reversing masculine approaches. I am not suggesting that these alternative positions, this feminine, intimate, domestic approach can solve the problem. Perhaps, by taking them outside of the domestic sphere, one is already addressing a possible new way to look at the question.

⁴³Ibid., 299. Green quotes Sha, *Art Research?*

The translation of one material (solid, rigid, impenetrable) to another (soft and malleable) introduces the possibility for the body to interact with the surface by pushing into it so that it conforms to the body.

Hardness is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others.⁴⁴

Paraphrasing Sara Ahmed on her framing of hardness⁴⁵, I argue the possibility of applying similar categories to the analysis of softness, which, therefore wouldn't be portrayed as the absence of determination, or self-empowerment but rather as a different way of embodying it. A claim for the right to alternative power, a soft power which isn't mellifluous, but direct, yet not confrontational, non-violent, argumentative -or maybe even more so, characterised by emotional intelligence, a subtle yet poignant way of addressing relevant socio-political issues.

4. PRESENTING ABSENCE BY FRAMING THE VOID

“Presenting absence by framing the void” is an approach I have developed over the past decade (*Disappearing Waters, Mare Nostrum, Engulfed*). It is a tool for reversing perspective, forcing the viewer to look from the opposite angle, readjust their perception, and progressively recompose the picture from that new position. This same approach has been explored within the current research (*The Eclipse of Words, Nation / Narration, The material Thickness of Time*).

The process is radically different according to the medium: when rendered in knitting, the emergence of the silhouette is progressive, almost defiant of the background. On the contrary, with embroidered pieces, the impression of a negative space suggested by the embossed silhouette stands out from the background as a negative presence. In both cases, the background, also in conceptual terms, plays a major role, as it contextualises, anchors and references the subject of investigation. It sets the boundaries, and broadens them at once. It relativises the absoluteness of the form by projecting it over a scenery, which could be as simple as a monochrome framework. Because indeed the framework here is not a scene, it doesn't contain any binding reference, any unequivocal connecting element: the neutrality of the backcloth universalises the representation, it removes it from the relativism I am too often inclined to claim, in personal debates and discussions. The very question of the context lies in the emergence of an evidence.

5. ‘NO SUCH LINEAR NARRATIVE’

⁴⁴Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 4.

⁴⁵Ahmed is here specifically referring to the hardness of British far right public opinion with regards to immigration policies.

It had a beginning and an end, and exists as a recorded passage of time. My own journey follows no such linear narrative. It started at the moment I found the photograph but has meandered ever since, through uncharted research and to no obvious destination. It has become a passage into history along the line that divides fact from fiction, and is more like a journey through an underworld of chance intervention and epic encounter than any place I recognize. My story is about coincidence, and about what is invited and what is not.⁴⁶

The lack of linearity applies to various levels of my practice, but if I focus on the practice itself, it appears to be a deliberate frustration. The process that leads to the creation of my hand-made textiles –equally with embroidery, knitting and crochet– is playfully and painfully rigorous at once. Hand-traced, a grid of often unevenly spaced lines is superimposed on a previously prepared drawing. The tracing bears abundant occasions of incurring into or introducing mistakes to the intentionally methodic display of a coordinates' system. Regardless of the strict, geometric, gridded preparatory procedure, the material (cross-stitches canvas, or the growing canvas created by the process of knitting or crocheting) adopted to realise the work frustrates the expectation of linearity, faithfulness, and correspondence to the original. Like in the case of any translating occurrence, an inevitable and even generative level of approximation must be introduced, accepted and welcomed. In its transfer from one material to another, the artistic practice, like a translation between languages, implies a level of betrayal that is only beneficial for the proper manifestation, understanding, and communicability of idiomatic expressions.

I enjoy the oddness of my research: I'm not here with a purpose, I'm not supposed to follow a specific trajectory, to deliver an academic paper.

I've been invited to explore, to interact with the archive, to respond. I start with a few open quests, entries to enter the archive, its thickness, a protective shield, like an undergrowth. I need to find my way, one document leading to the second one, then to a third one and so on. There is no straight progression.

Similarly to that, I walk in circles: my daily walks, usually along a canal that displays like a more or less sinuous line, are here concentric. The place is still new, under construction: I follow the road until it ends, then turn – right or left, according to the street impediments, more often I need to U turn, literally to go back and step again my own steps. Until I reach a new street, not yet explored and I venture in that direction.

⁴⁶Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): 12. FosterFoster, "An Archival Impulse," quotes "*Tacita Dean*, p. 12." I wasn't able to retrace the bibliographic reference.

*This resemblance of proceedings – the walking pattern and the archival exploration, – is perhaps more a revelation than what I found so far. Enjoyable as it is, to discover something about others – people and places alike, – nothing compares to the revelations about the self.*⁴⁷

6. THE WORK AS A TERRAIN OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

It seems to me, that your way of exploring things by the use of materials always starts with a deeply reflective analysis and many theoretical thoughts on the notions, that you process through your artwork. I have the impression, that your approach is sensual and conceptual at the same time. I found it difficult to have only access to the conceptual part of your presentation, as there was no documentation material to see.⁴⁸

This need to be in the presence of the work, in order to fully perceive its conceptual implications, brings to the foreground the primacy of the work as a terrain of knowledge production. While visually engaging the audience in contemplation of the artwork—which can prove to be demanding, with its technical use of elisions, inversions, overlapping, and omissions—, the research question emerges or is raised: in the space of that encounter lies the possibility to suggest, insinuate or instil a doubt. This approach refutes the prevalence of the concept, a construct and perception of artworks that is fully mediated by its conceptual premise, and so often unmatched by the work itself.

If practice can be regarded as a method—the very exercise of doing—then the conditions of staging it would contribute to the conceptual frame of my research. All aspects of the inquiry, from the formulation of the research question to its procedural exploration, the ‘against-approach’ that dissects and eviscerates in search of essence, that point beyond which no more subtraction seems possible, yet it is each time pushed a bit further – would then collectively form the conceptual framework of my work.

⁴⁷Cristiana de Marchi, *Hidden Ways of Courting Memory*, 2024. Artist book, 61.

⁴⁸Micha Payer, direct message to the author, May 12, 2021.

PART II. ARTWORKS

1 UNTITLED⁴⁹

The border-regime exposes transgressive refugees/travellers to death through consigning them to 'the zones of exemption where the sovereign power cease to function' (Rajaram and Gryndy-Warr 2004: 38)⁵⁰

Connecting private and public dimensions, walls indeed represent the liminal space between inside (the private dimension of intimacy and individual nostalgia) and outside (the public space of collective mourning, amplified in cases of reclaimed territorialities). However, a wall can also simply create a separation within a public space, resulting in two sides of an urban area: in this case the connotation of safety is often claimed on one side, with a detrimental effect and deterring action on the other.

The work *Untitled* explores this political irreconcilability as a declination of absence, in contrast with the romanticised, nostalgic approach, more generally associated with the concept, which is primarily identified with a sense of longing and reminiscence⁵¹. Absence is here investigated as the result of conscious decisions, as the effect of a political determination, and as an act of violence that creates a division, a disconnection, a gap, that literally aims at hiding, removing, and annihilating the physical presence of those who are behind or on the other side of the wall, ultimately negating their existence, to the extent of denying them existence⁵².

The reproduction of a 'separation wall' has been first explored on a sample scale: the material, with its soft, malleable, and penetrable texture, plays a major role in contrast to the firm, solid structure it signifies. This counterposition in materiality allows for the introduction of notions of power balance, imbalance and potentially, or rather ideally, rebalance.

I began by creating a series of knitted maquettes intended to be at a 1:10 scale⁵³. I realised four

⁴⁹*Untitled*, 2020-2021. Hand knitted wool, dimensions variable.

⁵⁰Khosravi, "Illegal traveller," 330. Khosravi quotes P.K. Rajaram and C. Gryndy-Warr, "The irregular migrant as Homo sacer: migration and detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand," *International Migration* 42 (2004), 33-63.

⁵¹If trespassing, thereby evading the restriction on one's own right to free circulation and movement, is viewed as an exceptional achievement, then repeatedly moving in and out- along with the forced acceptance and the resulting humiliation of been subjected to endless controls on one's identity and the reasons for moving through, any questionable reason that the zealous officer might find justifiable to investigate – can conversely be seen as a failure, as a subjugation to a rule that one would prefer to subvert instead of comply with.

⁵²See Khosravi, "Border conversations," 20. "When targeting a body, rather than just lines separating states, borders become a series of practices that generate spatial and temporal stretching of exclusion and abandonment. Being exposed to incessant bordering practices the targeted body becomes the border itself. When facing the same border you just have crossed, again and again, you will realize the impossibility of crossing, of arrival. You will realize the impossibility of being at home, having a home. Hannah Arendt, a philosopher escaping a dark time in Europe in the last century, memorably said: "what is unprecedented is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one".

flexible, adjustable and modular pieces (each measuring 80 cm in height, with varying articulation and extension). I also experimented on colours, trying white, black and two different shades of grey, which proved to be more satisfactory in their evocation of the actual cement surface of several separation walls⁵⁴. The pieces were conceived as samples for a scaled-up installation, although they could also function as smaller sculptures to be integrated in a larger composition.

Thinking of the process itself, the very act of sampling, and of testing from the perspective of expanding the work brings to mind the idea of prototypes, a step into the experimentation within a research methodology. It also fits quite well into a wider sculptural tradition where smaller models, or models realised in different, less expensive or more accessible materials was, and still is, the preliminary step to verify the feasibility of the artwork, to envisage its visual outcome and, in many cases, to rectify it based on any dissatisfaction.

The idea of creating sculptural pieces out of textiles also represents an investigation into traditional sculpture, which is commonly made of and identified with marble and other stones or bronze. While also questioning the very nature of sculpture and renouncing its intrinsic monumentality, I was, in fact, reflecting on the softness which characterises a considerable segment of my practice, and on ways to give the material a more solid form. It is indeed a circular process, as the works are informed by socio-political issues that I attempt to translate through textiles: the hardness from which the project conceptually originates morphs into the softness of the material, which I then harden and tend to assume a solidified shape.

The question, therefore, revolves around the necessity of this double passage, which returns the material, at least in its physical appearance, closer to the original yet remains significantly different. As if I were working on altering water multiple times, from a liquid to a solid and then to a gaseous state: something will inevitably be lost. But the question is: would something also be "acquired" in the process?

If we set aside the question of materiality for now and return to the formal aspect of these pieces, we are reminded of their status as samples, therefore almost sketches, unpretentiously standing on the very premise of their incompleteness and undeliverability. Conversely, rather than seeing them as single components for a larger piece to be completed—similar to a puzzle or mosaic—these specimens could also be perceived as fragments, serving as a metaphor for the dismantling of a wall. Fragments are typically the result of a destructive process, something that remains after an object

⁵³Initially, the wall segment to realise at a real size was set to reference the separation wall between Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories, which is designed as 8 m high. Due to a series of technical restraints in relation to the exhibition space where the work was first shown in 2022 and to additional considerations on the opportunity to reference a specific reality or otherwise to adopt a size and ratio evocative of multiple similar cases, the final piece turned out to be 631x125 cm.

⁵⁴The white and black models find their *raison d'être* in my textile practice, which adopts and pushes monochrome to the limits of representation. They were the first ones to be realised, later juxtaposed to their grey counterparts.

underwent a physically traumatic experience and lost its integrity, resulting in a collection of pieces which, even in the eventuality of a possible re-composition, cannot restore the smoothness and continuity of the original surface. I realise as I write it, the appropriateness of the noun, as “fragments” is precisely what I am looking into and for: the impossibility of filling up, of bridging the gap that separates the ‘before’ and the ‘after,’ the irreconcilability of the interruption, of the fissure.

As we shall see later⁵⁵, this is especially pertinent to the “Labour of Missing”, as theorised by Lebanese artist and writer Walid Sadek⁵⁶.



The reflection around the wall has been the central focus of the first segment of my artistic research. Ideas around its realisation and finality evolved as I started questioning the work’s purpose and how it could be integrated into an expanded perspective: a perspective of historic reparation. The permeability of the material and its smoothness are elements that intrinsically refuse, negate and oppose the fixity, rigidity and inalterability of the cement wall the artwork took as a reference. In mediating the relation between the aesthetic and the ethical, I aimed at engaging the audience with a physical experience, where the emotional aspect would be dominant, and the viewers would be called to respond from a place which is of bodily involvement, without forgetting the load of related

⁵⁵Part II, Chapter 3.1.

⁵⁶The labour of missing is a political, aesthetic gesture claiming that those who disappeared are here and present. As a form of re-appropriation, a political act, refusing the state authority to determine the condition of the disappeared, through the labour of missing we can claim agency, and substantiate absence.

information attached to this architectural entity. The prevailing sentiment solicited in the public aimed to be one of being overwhelmed by the presence of an imposing, haunting barrier, which might only be perceived in its softness and malleability as a secondary consideration. Once this sense of vulnerability is successfully conveyed, potential questions may arise about how to break free (from the actual situation, which remains fictional); how it would be to live in a context where the wall is inescapable (through a process of identification); and again, how to break free (from the real, referenced wall)⁵⁷.

I am conscious of the hypothetical nature of my assumptions as it comes to the audience's response to the work, which therefore induced me to think of introducing actions that would encourage the public's reaction, alert their responsiveness and invite them to take an active role.

Connecting to my series *Doing & Undoing*, I considered the possibility of introducing the dimension of undoing in the work, within the site of the exhibition: by introducing the perspective of a "negative creation," the passive experience of visiting an art exhibition would then be subverted as the work would be consumed during its showing, while being displayed, by the audience itself, thus resembling an organic material, becoming almost alive, alive in order to die.

On another level, to fictionalise reality and introduce a subversive and 'humorous' stance—humour here understood in my own terms, serving as a disclaimer—as a way of engaging with a subject that resists treatment from anything less than a serious perspective, I contemplated creating memorabilia, reminiscent of the Berlin wall fragments that began circulating—often of questionable authenticity—after its fall. These ideas, which were not eventually realised, directly respond to considerations on proactive, anticipatory and visionary strategies both residing in enactment and in fictional narratives, as discussed more extensively later⁵⁸.

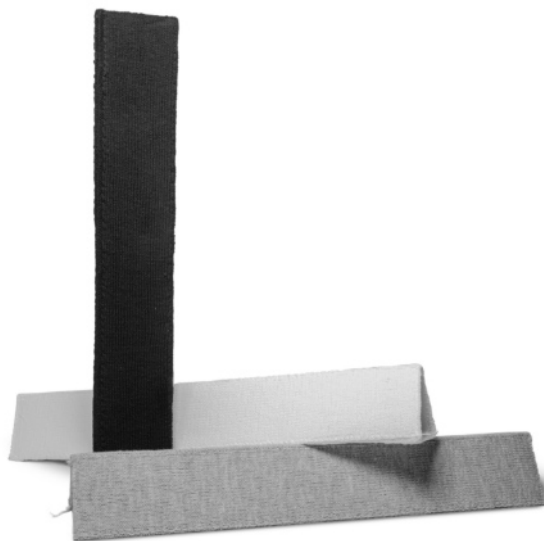
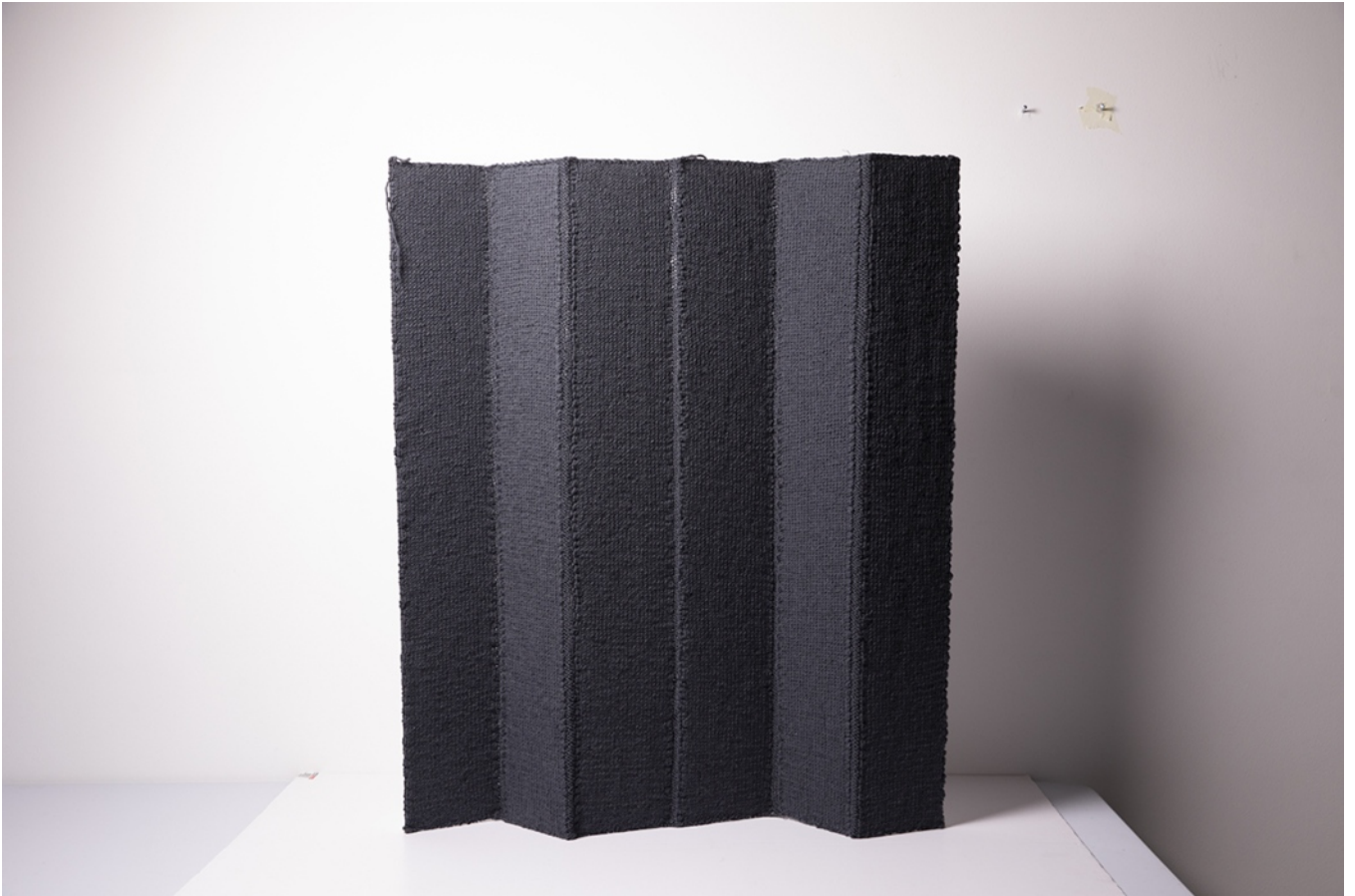
It is only when we are confronted with reality that we think "I don't believe it". When we are confronted with fiction, we don't question the likelihood of what we are exposed to⁵⁹

⁵⁷The question of agency becomes central, and it will be discussed in the chapter dedicated to the work *Monument to the falling Wall* (Part II, 3.1).

⁵⁸Part III, Chapter 5.

⁵⁹The quote is a transcript from an artist talk, attended virtually: Gernot Wieland, "On birds, Pombero and artistic research on the disappeared," Artist talk, April 23, 2021. In the framework of exhibiting and the disappeared with Prof. Zasha Colah. Department of Visual Arts & Curatorial Studies, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti/NABA Milano.





On that map, the Via dei Coccodrilli neighbourhood stood out like a white void, the same one used to indicate polar regions, unexplored countries or countries of uncertain existence.⁶¹

Walls. The Cappadocian Wall (713 BC). The Syrian Wall (ca 2000 BC). The Great Wall of China (ca 600 BC). The Amorites Wall (ca 2000 BC). The Wall of Babylon (ca 600 BC). Limes Germanicus (83-260 AD). Hadrian's Wall (ca 120 AD). Antonin's Wall (ca 140 AD). The Pestmauer⁶² (1721-23). The Dingo Fence⁶³ (ca 1880-85). The Great Wall of Gorgan (ca 5th or 6th c. AD). The West Bank Barrier⁶⁴ (2003). The Berlin Wall (1961). The Lima Wall of Shame⁶⁵ (1985). The Refugee Wall (2012). The Mexico – United States Wall (since 1940s; Security Fence Act, 2006⁶⁶).

Conceived as pages from an atlas, each wall is reproduced as a tranche, a slice from the totality of its extension and potential representation. The landscape is not taken into consideration: abstracted and

⁶⁰CAESURA, 2020-2022. Hand knitted embroidery on canvas, mounted on cardboard, set of 17, 30x30 cm each.

⁶¹Rabih Alameddine, *La traduttrice* (Bompiani, 2013), 39 (my translation).

"In quella carta geografica, il quartiere della Via dei Coccodrilli spiccava come un vuoto bianco, lo stesso con cui si suole indicare le regioni polari, i paesi inesplorati o di incerta esistenza."

How long can images transferred by literature linger? This passage, read ten years ago, immediately felt relevant, as I had already started the series of the white maps. And yet, it is in relation to *Caesura* that it resurfaced, in its more cogent affinity to the impulse driving the work.

⁶²The Plague Wall (French: Mur de la peste) is a wall approximately 25 kilometres long that was built in 1721 in the highlands of the Comtat Venaissin (France) to prevent the spread of the plague, which raged in Provence between June 1720 and 1722/1723 in one of the last major epidemics in Europe," ("Mur de la peste," Wikipedia, accessed January 14, 2025, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mur_de_la_peste).

⁶³The Dingo Fence or Dog Fence is a pest-exclusion fence in Australia to keep dingoes out of the relatively fertile south-east part of the continent (where they have largely been exterminated) and protect the sheep flocks of southern Queensland. [...] One of the longest structures in the world, it stretches 5,614 kilometres [...], ("Dingo Fence," Wikipedia, accessed January 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dingo_Fence).

⁶⁴In English, the BBC's style guide uses the terms "barrier" (sometimes "separation barrier" or "West Bank barrier") as do *The Economist*, PBS and *The New York Times*. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses the phrase "security fence" in English. The International Court of Justice has used the term "wall", explaining that "the other expressions sometimes employed are no more accurate if understood in the physical sense." It is also referred to as the "Apartheid Wall" [...], ("West Bank barrier," Wikipedia, accessed January 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Bank_barrier).

⁶⁵A 4.5-kilometer "wall of shame" separating luxurious estates in Peru's capital Lima from neighboring communities living in poverty... The wall, which has sections up to three meters high and secured with barbed wire, separates people living in precarious housing on dirt roads with no basic services from residents of an asphalt-paved gated neighborhood of well-to-do homes, some luxurious mansions even equipped with swimming pools," ("Peru tears down Lima 'wall of shame' but wealth divide stays strong," Reuters, September 1, 2023, accessed 14.01.25, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-tears-down-lima-wall-shame-wealth-divide-stays-strong-2023-09-01/>).

⁶⁶In the 1940s, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service built chain-link barriers along the border. The U.S. Congress approved a \$4.3 million request by Immigration and Naturalization Service, in 1978, to build a fence along the border to replace an existing 27-mile (43 km) fence near San Ysidro, California, and El Paso, Texas, and then build an additional 6 miles (9.7 km) of new fence. Fencing was ultimately constructed, but had a limited length and did not have razor wire. U.S. president George H. W. Bush approved the initial 14 miles (22.5 km) of fencing along the San Diego-Tijuana border. In 1993, President Bill Clinton oversaw initial border fence construction which was completed by the end of the year. Starting in 1994, further barriers were built under Clinton's presidency as part of three larger operations to taper transportation of illegal drugs manufactured in Latin America and immigration: Operation Gatekeeper in California, Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas, and Operation Safeguard in Arizona. [...] The Real ID Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush on May 11, 2005, attached a rider to a supplemental appropriations bill funding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which went into effect in May 2008. [...] In 2005, there were 75 miles (121 km) of fencing along the border. [...] The Secure Fence Act of 2006, signed into law on October 26, 2006, by President George W. Bush authorized and partially funded the potential construction of 700 miles (1,100 km) of physical fence/barriers along the Mexican border," ("Mexico – United States Border Wall," Wikipedia, accessed January 14, 2025, *passim*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico-United_States_border_wall).

whitened, only two sides of the same immaculate surface are represented. The wall is rendered as a negative space, resulting in a scar, an incision on the superficial appearance, a wound⁶⁷.

Once again approaching the subject matter by means of fragmentation, the walls reproduced in this book of maps, rendered on a horizontal plan, are segmented. While the wall samples seen earlier are reproduced in their intimidating verticality, suggesting a position of disadvantage in the viewer (a position that might instil sentiments of defiance while also asserting the near-impossibility of overcoming their height); these 'plates' replicate sections of historical and historicised walls from a bird-view standpoint. The viewers are elevated, they gain perspective, and they can embrace the landscape with their sight. Nevertheless, while enjoying a privileged view, which escapes the limitations of the very construction they are observing, the viewers are limited to a portion of it, they don't have access to the integrality of the vision. Progressive, and following motion, the visual appropriation of the wall is always partial, contextual. And yet, in regards to an architecture of confinement such as a separation wall, this is almost equivalent to experiencing it as a whole. Barriers are modular: they repeat the same segment endlessly. They occupy different areas and surfaces, which are suddenly reduced to a uniformity of purpose, to a nullification of their individuality, of their peculiarity. The difference resides almost entirely in a dichotomy between an 'inside' and an 'outside,' between limitations in mobility that are either imposed or lifted.

If on one side, this segmentation addresses the de-humanising character of these architectures of confinement, with their insisted imposition of a same power to neighbourhoods, areas and regions otherwise individually characterised; on the other side, it serves the purpose of reclaiming agency. This is the portion the eye can contain, this is the portion the arm can break.

Walls are meant to be solid, permanent, not trespassable. The only ways to circumvent their presence is to either climb over them – an activity that is well planned for being discouraged and mostly fatal – or destroy them, take them down. Fragmenting implies an act of violence that causes the wall to disintegrate and break into pieces.

Can it be undone? This is a question I have returned to time and again, with sustained and insistent reflection. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a considerable segment of my practice has been devoted to the exploration of undoing⁶⁸. *Doing & Undoing* began in 2012 as a series of textile-based video performances, where the repetitive act of writing with thread and then removing the stitches—

⁶⁷The physical imprint of the wall on a territory necessarily translates into a chronology, where the historical point of view – a retrospective reading of past events through the lens of an interpretation that can be based on different, often contrasting parameters – is only one possible reading. The impossibility of bridging the gap that separates the Before and the After, the irreconcilability of the interruption, of the fissure introduces another perspective, which is not that of a strict and reassuring sequence of facts.

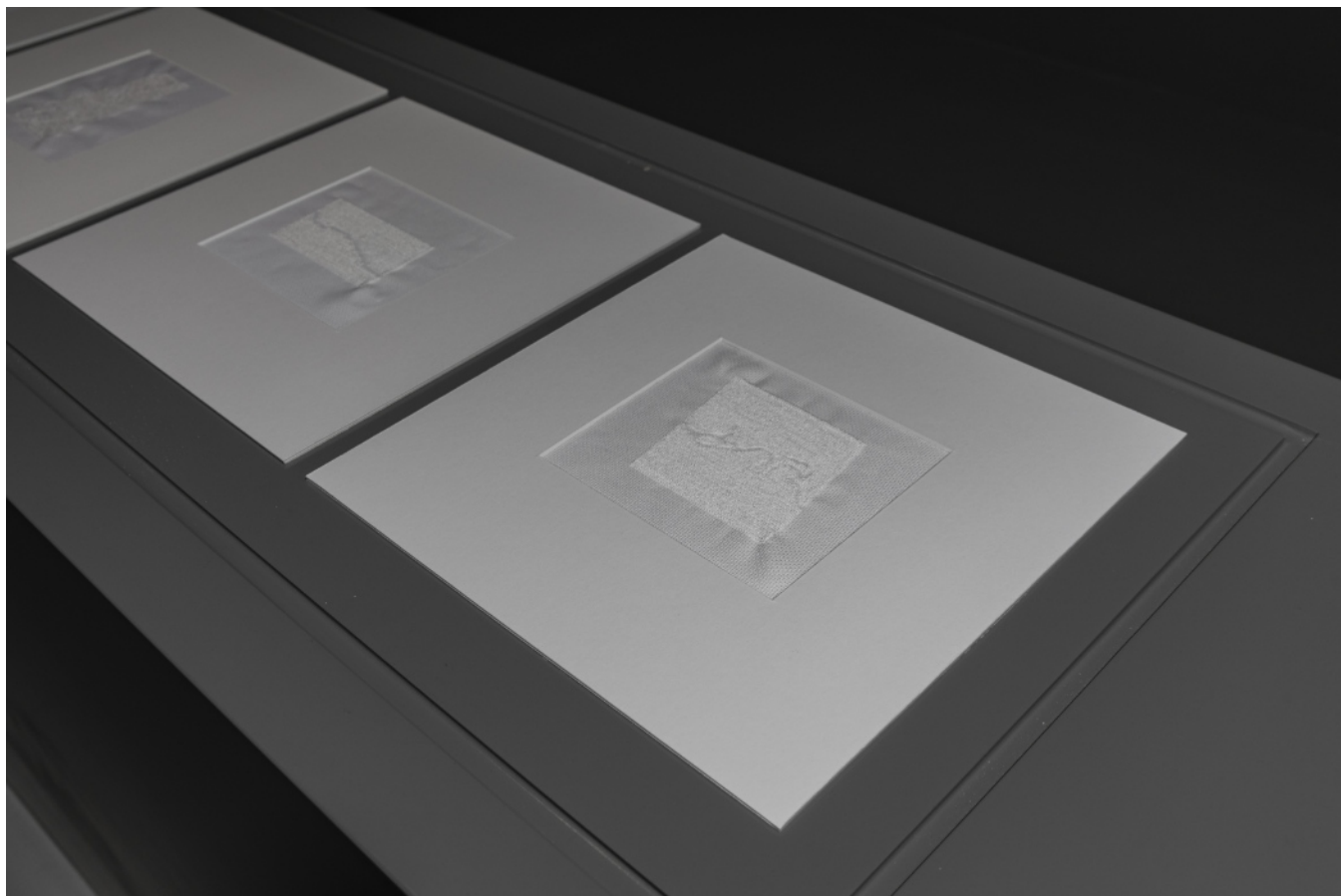
"The chronology of understanding [...] arranges facts as it wishes along the axis of time: a sensational event [...] brings to light others from the past, illuminates them with its own meaning, or even *creates* them, so that, if these facts had taken place *before*, in reality they begin to exist only *afterwards*." (Edoardo Albinati, *La scuola cattolica*, Rizzoli, 2016, 1241, my translation)

⁶⁸See also Part III, Chapter 4.

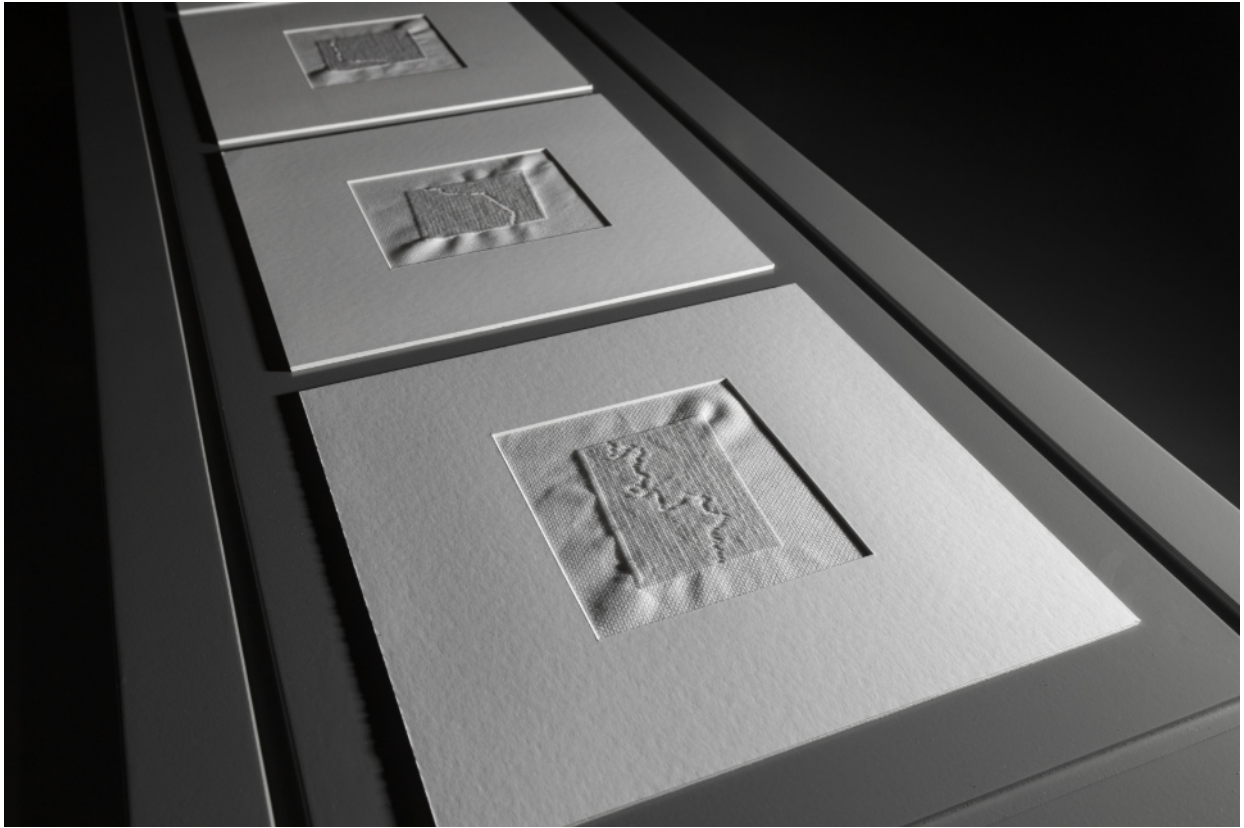
without ever being able to fully erase the marks of past presences—offers an immediate answer to the question. Can it be undone? If the act of undoing is necessarily imperfect, declaredly unsuccessful, and often merely rhetorical, the empowerment associated with the act of—or the attempt to—reverse the many injustices of the past – whether far, recent, or even contemporary – can nevertheless be authentic.

The concept that is strictly connected to historical revision is that of memory—and with memory, its opposite: forgetfulness, oblivion, erasure.

This is not an exposure, precisely; the facts have typically been there all along. It is a means of re-attending to that which is already visible, of reconsidering that which we may already know. It is, in short, a recalibration of the function of knowledge itself.⁶⁹



⁶⁹Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty* (Norton & Company, 2012), 161.



3.1 MONUMENT TO THE FALLING WALL⁷⁰

The United Nations condemns Israel for inflicting “enormous destruction” on the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank as the army continues to lay siege, leaving Palestinians without access to food, water, electricity and the internet⁷¹

Created over the course of 2021-2022, this project had a long gestational period resembling a rehearsal, filled with the excitement of a premiere accompanied by the deflections and moments of discouragement that the achievement of an apparently impossible task can provoke. Ultimately, the reproduction of a segment of a hypothetical separation wall was completed and made ready for the representation of its falling.

Because of its very material nature, the work addresses the question of solidity – which is often associated with that of security – and solidification of a condition that, from an initial state of fluidity, eventually acquires a static shape, which is transferred to the future as if it had invariably been configured in that specific way⁷².

To transfer a textile – especially when created by knitting, with its intrinsic malleability – into a solid surface, and actually into a volume, because of the three-dimensional nature of the consolidated thread, makes the wall stable, while at the same time keeping the quality of permeability originating from its materiality. This brings me to the question of interaction with the audience, their invited exchange with and response to the work: Can interaction happen by touching the artwork? This alone wouldn't suffice, although it is likely that repeated contact with the audience's bodies would gradually alter the surface, without any performed “aggression.”

Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects. [...] we have a contact with an object, and an orientation towards that object. To be more specific, the ‘aboutness’ of fear involves a reading of contact [...].

If the object of feeling both shapes and is shaped by emotions, then the object of feeling is never simply before the subject. How the object impresses (upon) us may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions.⁷³

⁷⁰*Monument to the falling Wall*, 2021-2022. Hand knitted wool, 631×125 cm.

⁷¹Mohamed Edna and Jamal Urooba, “Israel's war on Gaza updates: Protests in Tel Aviv after captive deaths,” Al Jazeera agency news, September 1st, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/9/1/israels-war-on-gaza-live-real-ceasefire-calls-for-polio-vaccine>.

⁷²I found echoing thoughts in this interview with the Hong Kong composer Samson Young, published in Lucy Cotter (ed.), *Reclaiming Artistic Research* (Hatje Kantz, 2024), 256–275: “When they are happening in real time, events never feel inevitable, it feels like things just pop up and events just happen; [...]. But when you look back after twenty years, especially after they have been written into history in a specific way, they look as though they were inevitable. It was always meant to happen that way; one thing was leading to another. Or at least that's how we give them form, or how we give them a position in the way that we write history. I don't know if I'm consciously trying to deal with all of these issues in my narrative, but I'm certainly interested in that as a larger process,” (p. 273).

⁷³Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 8.

The notion of 'contact' and 'impression' is crucial in relation to the audience's response to the artwork. The controversial nature of artworks that deal with complex, unresolved and unresolvable issues precisely lies, as Ahmed has synthetically noted, in the 'histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impression'. This aliveness determines a relational model with the work of art that is not responding to the subject-object dialectic, and rather substantiates the object, it subjectifies it⁷⁴. The artistic intervention can then be referred to as the *substratum* of impressions derived from the historical experiences of the receivers, which can be predicted to a certain extent.

Adhering to Ahmed's observation on how 'objects become sticky, or saturated with affect [=emotion or desire as influencing behaviour], as sites of personal and social tension,'⁷⁵ the symbolic value of the wall acquires full vividness, especially within contexts of current and actual implementation of those very architectures of confinement. As Ahmed argues, it is the density of meaning and mental associations, the layers of affect attached to a specific object, that allow the collective emotion to circulate.

[...] Emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made [...]⁷⁶

This passage reflects the controversial conversations provoked by the making of the wall piece among fellow candidates since its initial presentation, shaped by the substratum of impressions derived from our individual historical and biographic experiences. Based on these premises: my self-questioning was then oriented towards identifying the appropriate strategies for saturating the piece with both meaning (pertaining to the logical sphere) and affect (pertaining to the emotional sphere), in order to transform it into a 'site of social tension'. If the logical level can be met with thorough explanations provided to the audience, indeed to imbue the object with an affective charge proved to be more complex. Engaging the audience physically emerged as the most promising strategy for experimentation, aimed at eliciting emotion and generating an 'impression'. As the physical object retains the imprint of its function, the decision to present it in the paradox of its anticipated annihilation

⁷⁴Although their respective positions might differ quite significantly, I am tempted to recognise a correspondence between Ahmed's observations on the object and Hirschhorn's position towards the 'phenomenology of advanced reification': "... this "phenomenology of advanced reification" might still yield an intimation of utopian possibility, or at least a desire for systematic transformation, however damaged or distorted it might be" (Foster, "Archival Impulse," 11). Whereas Ahmed seems to insist on dignifying the object, Hirschhorn points at a widely circulated reification, and yet they both open to a utopian possibility of transformation impressed on the subject.

⁷⁵"[...] I suggest that it is the objects of emotion that circulate, rather than emotion as such. My argument still explores how emotions can move through the movement of circulation of objects. Such objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11).

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 10

created, quite literally, a tilted image: the monstrosity of the wall then turned into a superable obstacle, as it was installed at an angle, sloping through space, and appearing frozen in a gesture of continuous, potentially endless falling⁷⁷.

Reiteration and reoccurrence could further reinforce the 'impression'. Ahmed seems to imply that repetition might be a tool to provoke the emotion, when she alludes to the circulation of the object: its re-appearance would then be invested with additional affect every time it moves and shows, as stated in the following passage⁷⁸:

Drawing on Marx, I argue that emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value. Objects only seem to have such value, by an erasure of these histories, as histories of production and labour. But whilst Marx suggests that emotions are erased by the value of things [...], I focus on how emotions are produced. [...] 'feelings' become 'fetishes', qualities that seem to reside in objects, only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation.⁷⁹

The notion of fetish, aside from its sexual declination, is described as follows: 1. "an excessive and irrational devotion to or admiration for a particular thing;"⁸⁰ 2. "an object that is worshipped in some societies because it is believed to have a spirit or special magical powers."⁸¹ Therefore, the fetish is both the obsessively devotional feeling and the object invested with such an irrational consideration. This poses even more questions: can this be framed in favourable terms? Can an object be invested in the power of conveying and circulating positive and ethical questioning, and of positing those interrogations to the social body?

It is appropriate to briefly mention Hirschhorn's notion of 'just monument,'⁸² which introduces the prospect of the function of a monument in ethical terms and can be summarised as follows: a. the spontaneous appropriation of an existing monument or public space by the collective body ("*détournement*"), and b. its repurposing with an associated new meaning ("*re-inscription*").

⁷⁷See Part III, chapter 5, on the role of rehearsing as an anticipation of a desired future, an actualisation of its potential, and ultimately a tool for empowerment.

⁷⁸See also this section: "[...] the work of feminist and queer scholars... have attended to how emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination (Butler 1997b; Berlant 1997; Brown 1995). Such scholars have shown us how social forms (such as the family, heterosexuality, the nation, even civilisation itself) are effects of repetition. As Judith Butler suggests, it is through the repetition of norms that worlds materialise, and that 'boundary, fixity and surface' are produced (Butler 1993: 9)" (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12).

⁷⁹Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11.

⁸⁰"Fetishize," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed August 17, 2024, <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fetishize>.

⁸¹"Fetish," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed August 17, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fetish>.

⁸²"Hirschhorn produces interventions in "public space" that question how this category might still function today. [...] His direct sculptures aim for a related effect: designed for "messages that have nothing to do with the original purpose of the actual support," they are offered as provisional mediums of *détournement*, for acts of reinscription "signed by the community," (Foster, "Archival Impulse," 7).

[...] the encounter suggests a temporary refunctioning of the monument from a univocal structure that obscures antagonisms (philosophical and political, social and economic) to a counter-hegemonic archive that might be used to articulate such differences.⁸³

The role of the erasure of the object's past history in creating meaning seems to be just the opposite of the creation of meaning in the case of an object that emulates reality. This leads me to the ultimate question, regarding the conceptual and material approach of my research, which also examines the notion of negative creation as a counter-strategy to claim agency in conditions of reduced institutional or legal power. Could I portray my own action of reproducing, and re-creating a segment of a wall in a soft material (which represents 'an erasure of the history of their production') as a strategy for scratching out the history of the production of that very category of objects, thus investing it with a new meaning? Could it act as a 'just monument'? Whereas a monument typically celebrates national, regional or communal pride, an anti-monument confronts a shameful episode in history. A "just monument" in this context, may be understood as an attempt to redress such historical interventions – to "correct" history, so to speak.

If monuments are public expressions of what societies care to remember, they also have to be understood as evidence to what societies choose to forget. [...]

Can public space be freed from the violence of monuments? Can a democratic public space become the site for representing monumental worries? We argue for an activist ethics of im/permanent material articulations [...]⁸⁴

The wall, in its primary function of marking a separation, establishing or fixing a boundary, therefore asserting and [re-]enforcing absence from a political perspective, is from my standpoint inseparable from the historical trauma of the 'Naqba', therefore it is inserted in a timeline of grievance, as reclaimed from the position of the "victim."

Why do I refer with indeterminacy to the wall, instead of referring to the specific wall upon which the work is in fact based, that is on the situated reality of the Israeli West Bank barrier? Is the universality of separation anyway representable? Can we escape the specificity of historical circumstances to rise to an abstract terrain, ideally a common one? Is it even recommendable, while addressing issues of

⁸³Ibid., 9.

⁸⁴"Monumental Cares: Activist Ethics and Representation in Public Space" (Round Table, University of applied Arts Vienna, May 13, 2022), e-flux, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/455557/monumental-cares-activist-ethics-and-representation-in-public-space>.

imposed violence? Isn't violence always specific and individual, as it can't be experienced through abstraction?

Alongside the figure of the victim, the 'returnee' is likewise—though regrettably—assigned a significant role in contexts of oppression enacted by the state, or centralised military power. Regardless of the shared etymological root, the returnee does not refer to 'the right to return' central to the Palestinian cause, but is here explicitly referring to another claim for justice, and precisely to 'the disappeared' under many regimes. As the geographic horizon of my research is the MENA region, I am considering the unresolved issue of the nearly 17000 Lebanese civilians who disappeared, or rather were made disappear, during the civil war of 1975-1990.

This is especially pertinent to my ongoing research on 'Absence', which has led me to revisit two texts, of distinct literary forms that explore the notion of loss within the political context of the Lebanese post-war "missed reconciliation" – an open wound that remains unresolved.⁸⁵

⁸⁵Walid Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny and the Labor of Missing", in S. Mejcher-Atassi and J.P. Schwartz (Eds.), *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Routledge, 2012), 111-130; and Mouawad, *sang des promesses*. The main argument in the following pages is conducted on Sadek's text, with a few "poetic" references and quotes from Mouawad.





The labour of missing, as it has been theorised by Lebanese artist and writer Walid Sadek introduces the question of how to give substance to absence. Absence is referred to as “substantial” when we congregate around it, to prepare for the possible return of those who forcibly disappeared.

Sadek suggests a sequence of actions to try and re-appropriate an active position within a wounded society:

Recognising □ *naming* □ *congregating around absence*

Absences can be represented as scars, wounds, or lacerations, and yet they cannot be omitted from the process—or attempt—of reconstitution, which is grounded in making sense of painful, and often controversial, episodes from a “recent”—or no longer so recent⁸⁶—collective past.

Sadek’s first assumption is that absence cannot be undone. The second assumption revolves around the notion of responsibility, which is interwoven with that of memory from a historical perspective.

Sadek introduces the question by asking: “What are we afraid of?”, to which the only possible answer would be: “finding ourselves relieved of historical responsibilities.”

He later establishes a relation between the relief of responsibility and accepting the position of the victim⁸⁷, which is by itself an admission of fragility: being incapable of dealing with history as an active actor, being a victim becomes the way to be looked after.

Sadek strongly objects to the tropes of trauma theory as they are used to frame the subject as a victim and alternatively introduces the labour of missing as a strategy against the very notion of equating the subject and the victim.

The *revenant*.

The labour of missing is based on the following premises:

⁸⁶“The Lebanese civil war was a multifaceted armed conflict that took place from 1975 to 1990. It resulted in an estimated 120,000 fatalities and an exodus of almost one million people from Lebanon.” Confessional divisions “played a notable role in the lead-up to and during the conflict,” (“Lebanese Civil War,” Wikipedia, accessed March 12, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanese_Civil_War).

“[...] An estimated 17,000 Lebanese were kidnapped or “disappeared” during the civil war.... In addition, scores of citizens and Palestinians disappeared in Lebanon after 1990 during Syria’s military presence in the country, and are known or believed to have been transferred to detention in Syria. But until now, there has been no significant effort to investigate and uncover their fate or whereabouts” (Bassam Khawaja, “Still No Justice for Thousands ‘Disappeared’ in Lebanon’s Civil War,” Human Rights Watch, August 30, 2017, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/30/still-no-justice-thousands-disappeared-lebanons-civil-war>), regardless of the fact that “On November 12, 2018, parliament passed a landmark law creating an independent national commission to investigate the fate of the disappeared,” (“World Report 2019,” Human Rights Watch, s.d., accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/lebanon>).

⁸⁷From the early 1990s in Lebanon, and later with the proliferation of NGOs focused on archives and collective healing, the Lebanese people were almost encouraged to accept the role of victims.

- Absence cannot be undone by Presence;
- Absence is necessary in the process of reconstructing;
- Absence is a substance.

The dimension of time is crucial as it comes to defining “the protracted now”, a time that doesn’t move on, that lingers in the past. This is the time occupied by absence, by the impossibility of the return – to a person, to a community, or a land, and often to all of them at once – but also by the impossibility for the returnee, the *revenant*, to be reintegrated in their original context, to reoccupy their position, as they will always remain the disappeared, the absentee.

Although reappearance could seem to be the ideal fulfilment of absence, the return does not erase the absence. “The Revenant must join those already active in the labour of missing and congregate around an absence that will never be erased, that will never become a presence.” Re-appearance is not the equivalent of Presence. The *revenant* becomes a troubling figure: they reappear, yet are not present: they embody the violence perpetrated against them, and it is for this violence that the labour of missing is done.

The *survivant*

Sadek looks at the etymology of survivor [fr. *survivant*], which literally means “someone who lives beyond”, and pushes it to represent someone who is not just “vivant”, but who is in a surplus of existence. If the *survivant* is the over-living, someone who outlives, who continues to exist after the death of another, Sadek introduces the possibility of reading the *survivant* as someone who continues to live after their own death.

This is the only way one can enter a post-traumatic phase and move beyond the role of the victim: by taking an active stance and acknowledging the imprint of the violence endured, without allowing others to speak on their behalf, without allowing the now-powerful to become the sole voice entitled to represent that violence or to propose ways of repairing it⁸⁸. As victims, we give up the right to represent violence, the death we have over-lived.

Nevertheless, to live through violence doesn’t make you a survivor: a survivor must be a “non-posthumous survivor” to be able to represent their own death.

“non-posthumous survivor”: a survivor who refuses the role of the victim, because they want to remain historical [subjects], to make society

⁸⁸“How to stay alive and restore history in its presence? ... How to stay alive with what is dead within us?” (Mouawad, *Sang des promesses*, 27). “Comment rester vivant et redonner à l’histoire sa présence? ... Comment rester vivant avec ce qui est mort en nous?” My translation.

accountable and co-carry the weight of the past⁸⁹.

The neo-victim

There is a further development of the position of the victim towards the position of a “neo-victim.”⁹⁰ How is the neo-victim different from the victim? The neo-victim is everywhere; the position that levels the victim, the anger of the unreconciled, the non-posthumous victim, and the perpetrator: all roles are equalled⁹¹. The figure of the neo-victim erases agency over history, allowing only for a passive stance in which the horrors of the past are veiled rather than confronted.

In contrast, the notion of “post-memory” introduces the possibility of an active re-appropriation of the past. This raises a critical question: how can successive generations continue to gather around past traumatic events they did not directly experience?

Post-memory is based on the assumption that future generations will invest their efforts in pursuing and caring about past traumatic events, and that against a selective, revanchist memory, as it is perpetrated by sectarian-based societies⁹².

If hope is an attempt to replace a broken presence with a better forthcoming one, then the labour of missing resists that narrative of a “future without death, without absence”.

The critic of hope is, therefore, a claim of the inevitability of including absence in the present and in the construction of the future.

What we witness here is a shift from the possibility to the reality of the present horror of history, and the refusal to veil the horror.

⁸⁹“This determination not to will is very important!” (Mouawad, *Sang des promesses*, 27). “Cette volonté à ne pas vouloir est très importante!” My translation.

⁹⁰With specific reference to the Lebanese context, this shift indicates that post-war Lebanon has ended. So what are we entering? If we refuse the idea of a protracted post-war, then what is the time after the time of post-war?

⁹¹See Ziad Doueri’s drama *The Insult*, 2017, where victim and perpetrator are inter-changeable, therefore the neo-victim becomes the only possible role for all.

⁹²The issue in Lebanon lies not in “not-remembering” but in selective memory and the inability to forget, understood as a dynamic, progressive stance. However, this may be a common issue in any context where unresolved historical trauma persists.

3.2 BUILDING A FALLEN WALL⁹³

The body as a site of discourse turns the archive into a performative practice, an activation of embodied knowledge through the senses. Cinema too finds its roots in oral storytelling practices. It's a somatic experience that lives through the reverberations of the sonic and the visual in a collective setting. Like archives, films are performative practices. They can be fragments in a collection, and a collection/remix of fragments. When we think about strategies of non-perpetuation of violences in sonic archives, what does it offer us to think of the material practice of filmmaking as a form of critical archiving?⁹⁴

The idea of filming the making of the wall was prompted by a range of considerations of different kinds. On one side, I felt the need to document time—not only the time spent in creating the work, but time itself: its passage, its impermanence, the least visible and, therefore, the least communicable dimension. Space was equally important, regarded as plural, to evoke the multitude of geographic contexts in which separating walls have been erected, or are under construction. The filming was then displaced in various locations in the United Arab Emirates, and more specifically in the Emirates of Dubai and Sharjah⁹⁵.

The creation of this large textile was also perceived as a performative act: in fact all my textile practice, with its physical involvement, can be read through the lens of performance. For this specific work, as well as for the *The Echo of the Void*⁹⁶, the dimension of the textile, imposed a redefinition of my body in relation to the piece. While painting, particularly since Abstract Expressionism, embraced the 'gestural' as early as the mid-20th century, the concept has yet to be fully acknowledged or critically explored within the field of fibre art. Far from being neglected, which would imply recognition and then its oblivion, 'gestural' has not entered the discipline. Nothing grandiose seems to be associated with textile art, regardless of the majestic scale attained by textile works. Born and raised within closed walls, by women of modest ambition, only in recent times –and literally not before the 1940s, starting with the Bauhaus– has the domain begun acquiring consciousness and evaded the rigidity of its beginnings.

With that acknowledgment lingering in the back of my mind, and becoming fully understood only as the process unfolded, the filming was planned to document various stages in the making of the work⁹⁷

⁹³*Building a Fallen Wall*, 2021-2022. Single channel video with sound, 3 hours.

⁹⁴Lynhan Balatbat Helbock and Laura Kloeckner, "Fragments of Our Memories: On the Incompleteness of Broken Nostalgia," in Vinzenz Hediger, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (eds.), *Accidental Archivism* (Meson Press Eg, 2023), 448.

⁹⁵The legislation of the UAE requires filming permits whenever filming occurs in a public space, and these permits must be approved and comply with the current laws in force.

⁹⁶See here chapter 4.1.

⁹⁷The video was filmed and edited by Altamash Urooj between November 2021 and February 2022, and presented within the show "Finer: a thread... In the swell of wandering words," at the Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah (March 7-August 4, 2022). Most pictures reproduced here were also photographed by Altamash, in preparation for the 2022 exhibition at the Maraya Art Centre. The other photographs were friendly taken by Mohammed Kazem, whom I equally like to thank for the

, and to also engage with a series of architectural evidence located in the territory of Dubai and Sharjah. Filmed both in open spaces – ranging from desert landscapes to urban environments – and within specific buildings (including institutional settings), the video records the progression of the work while also focussing on the gestural repetition of knitting. A miniaturised gesture, if the expression may be allowed, yet one not inclined to disappear, asserting its presence through sheer determination, almost as an act of protest ('in-protest').

To express disapproval is clearly a manifestation of dissent, but it acquires its full status only if and whenever this very objection is displayed in the public sphere⁹⁸.

Architectures of confinement are imposing and suffocating; they prevent those subjected to their immanence from living with ease and often even in a dignified way. Nevertheless, against the crushing feeling of hopelessness, those same architectures can also be viewed through a lens of resistance and evasion, as structures to be confronted in the pursuit of freedom.

Building a fallen wall engages with the unresolved interaction and tension between the human body and the abuses and inequalities deriving from oppressive judicial and legal/ised systems.

As an act of empowerment, the attempt to overgrow the architecture of confinement becomes a radical acknowledgement of the potential of the bare body to oppose the dominant political powers, bringing the human body to the centre of the investigation.

The objects that become progressively instrumental in manifesting the desire to transcend the architecture of confinement—here symbolised by a module of 631x125 cm, knitted out of a black yarn—range from the domestic domain (a bench, a low table), to the construction industry (a ladder, a lift, a tower). This shift suggests a trajectory often observed in resistance practices: from improvised response to more organised and strategic forms of action.

The verticality of the structure growing over the course of the durational also engages with the notion of monumentality, which is indeed a core dimension of separation walls erected across various parts of the world, particularly in their imposing and intimidating stance towards the peoples subjected to their architectural presence.

Conceived as an anti-monument, or potentially as a 'just monument,' the growing structure is depleted of meaning as soon as it is accomplished, thus negating its very purpose, which is the imposing nature of the wall. The title of the work encapsulates the absurdity of its purpose: building an architecture that is already fallen, building destruction. Indeed, this is an implicit aspect of construction, the potential, eventual fate of which is destruction, a principle that could almost be a *memento mori* for the architectural world. As inevitable as it is, though, the presumption of architectural existence and

umpteenth time.

⁹⁸The UAE law prohibits any attempt to publicly express dissent, in both physical and virtual spaces. Therefore, each action must be carefully calibrated and 'performed' in ways perceived as inoffensive. In this context, the arts can occasionally serve the purpose of conveying a disapproval that would otherwise remain unexpressed.

functionality embraces a relatively long period of time. The work here intentionally contradicts that truism: the creative process here results not in an object meant to have its own life, but rather in one that is already exhausted, born dead, to use an organic similitude.

The video incorporates another element, that is sound. While the sounds recorded during the filming sessions have been silenced, the soundtrack re-elaborates an older work of mine. *Cacophony* (2010) is a sound piece that overlaps the musical composition of the national anthems of dozens of countries, while reflecting on ideas of repetition, similitudes, opposite political agendas, propaganda, and ultimately borders. The work was created in relation to a series of textile and video works that all reflected on notions of political, national, and nationalistic self-identification, through the various paraphernalia adopted by state agencies: maps, currencies, flags, anthems, etc.

For the purpose of the current video performance, the original sound piece has been slowed down to its maximum potential, turning it into white noise, with the different frequencies equalised in intensities. This is clearly an attempt to exercise power, to annihilate the predominance of specific tunes, of specific power-narratives. A futile exercise, that can only survive within the protected space of a gallery hall, and yet a standpoint, in a state-defining impossibility to express dissent.

The initial concept for the video, which couldn't be realised, relied on the possibility of filming on a scaffolding at various heights, following the development of the work. This perspective sought to combine two distinct aspects: the public presentation and documentation of a durational performance with an architectural setting, the scaffolding symbolising the proceedings of a construction process.

During the summer of 2024, hence after the completion of the work, I came to know about the practice of Dancing Architects, founded by Takako Hasegawa⁹⁹. The very concept of pairing architecture and movement echoed my interest in interacting with the built environment from a performative perspective. If an immediate character of architecture is their static, it is equally evident that architecture is meant to be spatially occupied, engaged with and progressively "consumed," that is transformed. This transformation happens through movement, the movement of bodies interacting with the fixity of the container.

Over the past two decades, I have actively related to architectural entities in performative ways¹⁰⁰. Entering into a conversation with a public building also implies the involvement of its users, who are often unaware of what's taking place in front of or around them and, more often, are uncomfortable with the vocabulary of contemporary art. This intervening in the public space elicits a reaction from the passers-by, and mostly it does it, regardless of the generalised indifference that characterises a

⁹⁹"Approaching architecture through choreography, and as choreography, Dancing Architects cross-pollinate architecture with contemporary dance. Engaging with movement as an agency, Dancing Architects activate architectural ideas through the physicality of our bodies by inviting radical experimentations and explorations through dialogues, workshops, forums and conversations," <https://www.dancingarchitects.org>.

¹⁰⁰*The Happy House*, 2010; *Fish Market*, 2011; *Doing & Undoing. Motherhood*, 2014.

number of our daily interactions. The presence of an unusual element in an otherwise familiar context is generally recorded, and the response – whatever form it takes, from what might be described as refusal, attention, to outright dismissal or active engagement (with approval being rarer) – is inevitable.

In the early 1980s, a young Hassan Sharif with a few fellow artists and friends organised the first public art event in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates. He was fresh of his studies in London and adventurous enough to think optimistically of the responsiveness of the Emirati society to innovative and provocative concepts. “In November [1985], he participates in the “Central Market” exhibition in Sharjah with More Than Ten Squares. For the very first time in the UAE, a painting is displayed on the floor, eliciting a wave of curiosity and reactions. Indeed, this is the second exhibition held at the Central Market, as a first one was organised without permission in 1984 and lasted only a few hours.”¹⁰¹ Photographs documenting the event record curiosity and attention among the people dealing with their shopping in the souq. The ‘exhibition’ was quickly removed by the local authorities and lasted only a few hours: enough to be remembered and later memorialised in the publications that retrace the making of an art scene in the Emirates.

This is not to state the ambition to posterity that art still presumes, but rather to introduce alternative models of ‘monumentality:’ fleeting experiences carry the potential to sediment in memory and, considered retrospectively, to translate as ‘monumental’, if pictured at the threshold of a before and an after¹⁰².

¹⁰¹Cristiana De Marchi, “Chronology,” in Catherine David (ed.), *Hassan Sharif. Works 1973-2011* (Hatje Cantz, 2011), 306.

¹⁰²“The geographical distribution of artistic research practices also dramatically changes in this perspective. Since some locations were particularly affected by the conjunction of power and knowledge, which arose with the formation of capitalism and colonialism, strategies of epistemic disobedience had to be invented.”

“A power/knowledge/art, which reduced whole populations to objects of knowledge, domination and representation, had to be countered not only by social struggle and revolt, but also by epistemological and aesthetic innovation. Thus reversing the perspective and focusing on discipline as an index of conflict also reverses the direction in which art history has been written as an account of peripheral artists copying and catching up with Western art trends.”

“One aspect of the work claims to participate in a general paradigm, within a discourse that can be shared and which is manufactured according to certain criteria. [...] On the other hand, artistic research projects in many cases also lay claim to singularity. They create a certain artistic set up, which claims to be relatively unique and produces its own field of reference and logic. [...] Practices of artistic research usually partake in both registers, the singular as well as the specific; they speak several languages at once,” (Hito Steyerl, “Aesthetics of Resistance,” 4).







4.1 THE ECHO OF THE VOID¹⁰³

[...] dovrò per forza giungere a una conclusione, se non voglio diventare pazzo o entrare in una fase che io stesso non so immaginare tanto sono stremato. Credi che non ne posso proprio più e mi spaventa il fatto che sto perdendo il controllo dei miei impulsi e degli istinti elementari del temperamento.¹⁰⁴

In the process of elaborating on the relation with the very presence of Walls, notions of justice and law application, of enactment versus the “virtuality” of legal statutes as defined by jurisprudence, which have been at the core of my artistic practice, resurfaced and intersected with a research-based project on architectures of containment, ranging from the domestic to carceral structures. The exploration of this human–architecture interaction eventually translated into the creation of a large textile piece, a series of performative photographs and a video documentation of the process, all titled *The Echo of the Void*.

Developed throughout the course of 2021 and coinciding with a time of limited mobility, *The Echo of the Void* is the first large-scale piece I completed—or even envisioned—within a practice that until then had been confined to smaller pieces of manageable and movable dimensions, whose assemblage would eventually result in larger compositions.

The idea of confinement is at the core of this work, which is based on research on the dimension of prison cells, without geographic restriction or specific target or reference. Accepting as valid the official records released by governments and state agencies competent in the field, the work reproduces the surface of the smallest declared prison cell in use, that is 200x200 cm.¹⁰⁵

Besides the immediately relatable dimension of space, time is another essential category in association with the experience of imprisonment and the purpose of its infliction from a judicial perspective. A court verdict measures the heaviness of the punishment in relation to time, with the most serious crimes being punished with the longest periods of incarceration. As a colleague rightfully noticed¹⁰⁶, the dimension of time here opens up a framework for examining the act of disappearing.¹⁰⁷

Following Sadek¹⁰⁸, we could argue that time, under static conditions –such as those of imprisonment– coincides with “the protracted now”, a time characterised by a perceived circularity, by an apparent

¹⁰³*The Echo of the Void*, 2021. Hand knitted wool, 200x200 cm.

¹⁰⁴Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere* (Einaudi, 2014), 231. “I will have to come to a conclusion, if I don't want to go crazy or enter a phase that I myself can't imagine, I'm so exhausted. You think I just can't take it anymore and I'm scared that I'm losing control of my impulses and the elementary instincts of my temperament,” My translation.

¹⁰⁵Theo Deutinger, *Handbook of Tyranny* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2018), 104–107, 154.

¹⁰⁶Fabian Weiss, direct message to the author, March 15, 2021.

¹⁰⁷See here ‘Introduction,’ where the notion of countability, as a measurable parameter for absence is evoked. The strict linguistic connection of countability and accountability is obviously striking, especially within the field of justice that is here explored.

¹⁰⁸See Part II, chapter 3.1.

repetition of the past. This is the time occupied by absence, both as the impossibility of return –a movement towards, yet projected over the past– and as the impossibility for the *revenant* to state their reintegration within the context from where they disappeared. The dimension of the return and of the *revenant* ultimately converge in shared impossibility, as seen from the two perspectives: that of a supposedly filled-absence (*de facto* neither absence nor its true replacement), and that of the one who returns alongside those who had longed for the ‘missing’ and now witness their return with a sense of impotency¹⁰⁹.

In the first version, Persephone
Is taken from her mother
And the goddess of the earth
Punishes the earth – this is
Consistent with what we know of human behavior,

That human beings take profound satisfaction
In doing harm, particularly
Unconscious harm:

We may call this
Negative creation.

Persephone’s initial
Sojourn in hell continues to be
Pawed over by scholars who dispute
The sensations of the virgin:

Did she cooperate in her rape,
or was she dragged, violated against her will,
as happens so often now to modern girls.

As is well known, the return of the beloved
Does not correct
The loss of the beloved [...]¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Sadek and Glück seem to agree on the impossibility of reparation: the reappearance of the missing one, although coveted, doesn’t erase their absence; it doesn’t equate to a presence. Presence and the fulfilment of absence are and remain two irreconcilable conditions, because of the stain of inflicted violence indelibly attached to the *revenant*.

¹¹⁰Louise Glück, “Persephone the Wanderer,” in *Averno* (Carcanet Press Limited, 2006), 16.

The awarded American poet Louise Glück has extensively depicted violence, especially violence perpetrated against women. The way Glück introduces the question of ‘acceptance’ might not be the most popular perspective, and the question itself is indeed hard to relate to. How can the victim be perceived as complicit in a crime perpetrated against them? And yet this is quite often the case in predominantly male-oriented societies, as many Middle-Eastern societies continue to be. The victim’s position, and I would argue the victim’s experience of a trauma, is aggravated by negating, or significantly reducing, their right and chances to claim justice, or to even access it¹¹¹.

The Echo of the Void, along with *Monument to the Falling Wall*, also introduces a new dimension in my practice. Over the past decades, I have opted for creating figurative works, often adopting maps as tools and vehicles for addressing relevant social and political questions. With the larger pieces initiated in 2021, abstraction is explored as an instrument for further investigating those recurring questions. The issue of abstracted violence, the way we receive and perceive violence transmitted through mass communication –that is, violence we do not experience personally– becomes central to its rendering. Far from being literal and replicating visual representations widely circulated by the media, abstraction introduces the possibility of contemplation and, with it, empathy. The indicator and trigger for the audience to connect with the context is therefore purely verbal, descriptive, and conceptual.

The embodiment of violence is nevertheless a constituent component in creating these large pieces. Hand-made and realised over several months, their production technically required the use of roped needles –a technique that gradually imposed physical strain and a sense of bodily exhaustion. As the pieces quite literally grew around my body, they engendered a feeling of constriction, of physical limitation, of imprisonment that mimicked – with all the non-secondary comforts of still being free to stop the experience at any given time, – the experience of those individuals subjected to the conditions evoked by the artwork.

Let me be adamantly transparent here and clear the field from an easy assumption about my loose sense of legality: the works do not claim that a citizen who committed a crime should not be punished by imprisonment. These works address the question of unfair imprisonment, state-inflicted violence,

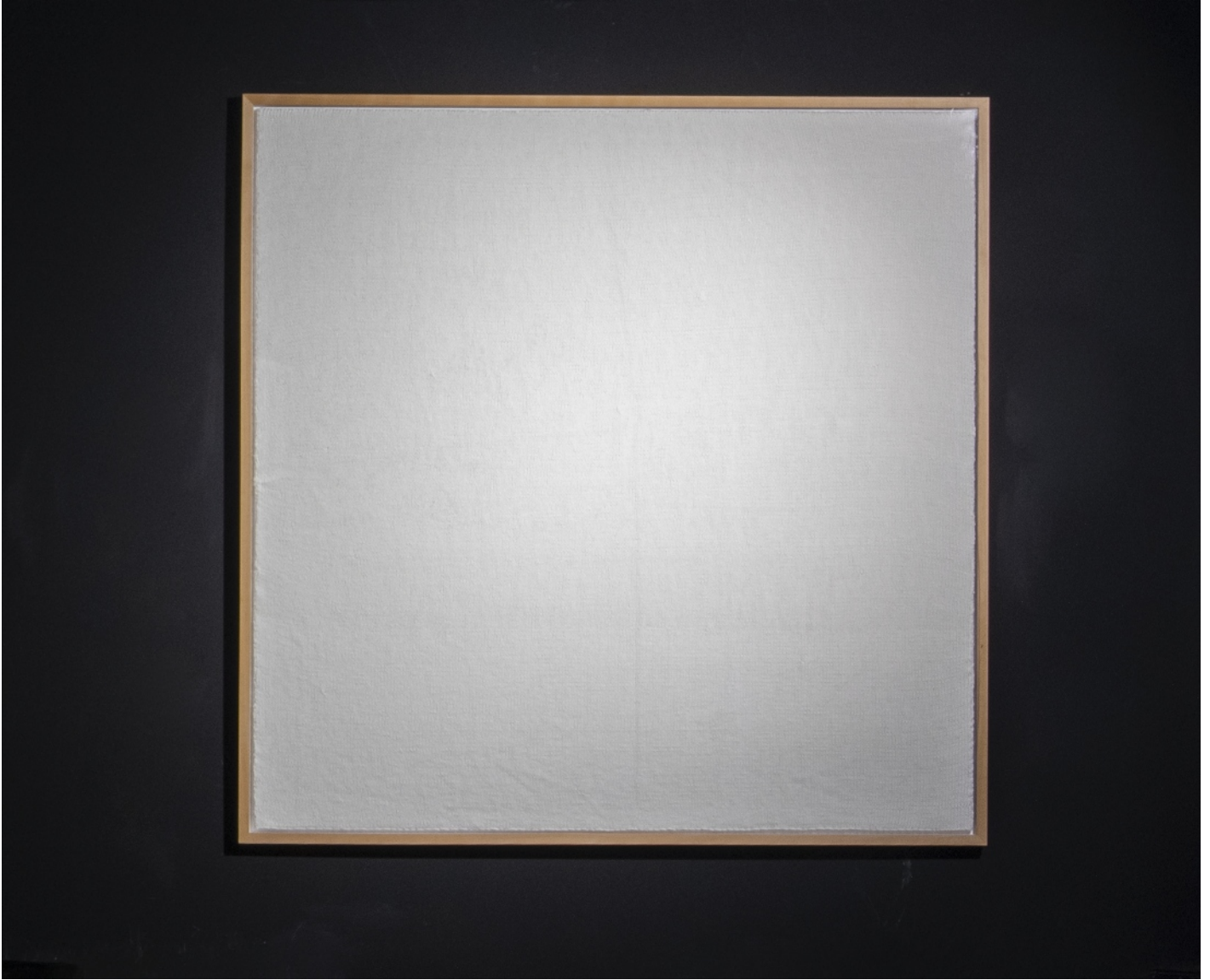
¹¹¹“A marry-your-rapist law, marry-the-rapist law, or rape-marriage law is a rule of rape law in a jurisdiction under which a man who commits rape, sexual assault, statutory rape, abduction or other similar act is exonerated if he marries his female victim, or in some jurisdictions at least offers to marry her. The "marry-your-rapist" law is a legal way for the accused to avoid prosecution or punishment,” (“Marry-your-rapist-law,” Wikipedia, accessed January 17, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marry-your-rapist_law).

Dr Natalia Kanem, executive director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), which published a 2021 report on this issue, declared, “The denial of rights cannot be shielded in law. ‘Marry your rapist’ laws shift the burden of guilt on to the victim and try to sanitise a situation which is criminal,” (Sarah Johnson, “‘Marry your rapist’ laws in 20 countries still allow perpetrators to escape justice,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2021, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/14/marry-your-rapist-laws-in-20-countries-still-allow-perpetrators-to-escape-justice>).

preventive detention, and the use of incarceration for silencing political dissent, for limiting rights of speech and expression, which are virtually granted by almost all constitutional texts.

Through the process of making, which is intentionally hand-made, lengthy and physically strenuous, I submit myself to a confinement of sorts: the long hours spent sitting in a fixed placement, with the surface of the textile growing around my body, determine contiguity with the body of the work, which imposes its conditions. The protracted relation between these two elements has resulted – through a reflexion on the actual status of reduced mobility and physical constriction – in a video documentation and performance, that aims to capture the conditioning exerted through the use of time and space as physical punishments.





4.2 THE ECHO OF THE VOID | LETTERE DAL CARCERE^{112 113} THE ECHO OF THE VOID | AN INDIRECT AUTOBIOGRAPHY¹¹⁴

Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others.¹¹⁵

The Echo of the Void gradually transitioned from a static dimension – a 200x200 cm hand-made textile piece – into a textile-based performance, created during the spring and summer of 2021 and documented photographically and through video.

Slowly conceptualised, along with the progress of the knitting, and retrospectively conceived as sculptures for the camera, the performance documented by the photographs illustrates the interaction between the body and the material, how it is prone to and tends to generate the space for a third body, for “a sculptural happening.”

The performative segment of the project obsessively focusses on the growth of an apparently innocuous, soft whiteness, a flat surface turned three-dimensional, which eventually becomes physically oppressive in relation to the human body.

The ambiguous interaction and the tension between the two components – the human body disappearing beneath the textile, which results from the individual’s own action – can be interpreted from multiple perspectives, including through the lens of environmental concerns, as the disproportionate damage inflicted upon the planet has begun to reclaim attention. The soft surface of the textile may function as both a protective shield and a concealing filter, offering comfort while coextensively acting as a silencing device. This work specifically confronts the unjust and unjustifiable conditions embedded in oppressive judicial systems, employing non-representational artistic strategies to do so.

Knitting proved particularly demanding due to the dimensions and weight of the textile, which necessitated the use of knitting needles connected by a rope, as described earlier. In this specific instance, the technical aspects of my creative process became relevant and almost structural to the project’s development. Throughout the process, I was compelled to further explore the relationship I established with my own body: as the knitting grew heavier, I had to manage the textile wrapped around my shoulders, thus contained. Being literally enveloped by it, surrounded by the expanding soft surface, it transformed into my space of confinement in a quite factual sense. During this process, I

¹¹²*The Echo of the Void | Lettere dal carcere*, 2021. Chromogenic prints on Hahnemuhle paper, set of 7, 56x67.5 cm each.

¹¹³*The Echo of the Void | Lettere dal carcere*, 2021. Single channel video, 2 hrs 34 mins 12 sec.

¹¹⁴*The Echo of the Void | An indirect autobiography*, 2024. Audio recording, 34 min 37 sec.

¹¹⁵Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 1.

consequently had time to reflect on my creative journey, as I engaged with my subject through a ritualisation of the making.

The process of making was video recorded throughout its duration: a set corner in the studio, a fixed camera progressively moved to capture various angles –a reference to the omnipresent surveillance and lack of privacy; the exclusive focus on the action of the hands and arms, to strengthen the perception of the immobility forced upon the prisoners; and the obsessive repetition of the needles moving around the wool, creating a surface from a line.

In hindsight, and thinking retrospectively, it would have been possible, and certainly easier, to knit the piece using a machine. However, I chose to include the manual process as a constituent part of the finished work, and pushing the medium to express something beyond materiality: not necessarily a quest for perfection, but rather the internalisation of labour (at once a burden and a generative, akin to giving birth).

The 2mx2m monochrome square dimensionally corresponds to the smallest prison cell actually in use in several countries (including Albania, Hungary, and Ukraine), as per officially dispatched records. Personally, I related to the idea of an oppressive space from two different perspectives– during the making and after its conclusion.

During the creative process, my primary focus was on the physical burden of being surrounded by this other body, of being contained – within a rigidly small space – while also being secluded from the world. Internalised, the relation with the space of confinement became an exclusive relation. Nevertheless, once the piece was completed and the canvas was exhibited on a gallery wall, the visual perception took over, making explicit the offensively small dimensions of the detention cell¹¹⁶. The interrelation with the space of confinement I had created and developed still felt unresolved, demanding further exploration. The relation established during many months, grounded in a fixed horizontality (low sitting on the floor, cross-legged), ultimately claimed for movement. A movement that could not be exuberant, due to the very conditions of the space under investigation but rather manifest as a sequence of frozen poses, of fixed progressive pictures that only an externally impressed energy could translate into a fluid motion.

Considering the disappearance of the body as a central, urging premise of the work, and closely aligned with my research on absence, I gave myself the freedom to experiment with the idea of creating sculptural pieces for the camera, of actually “casting a shadow.”¹¹⁷ The shape resulting from

¹¹⁶The commercial showcase also influences how we perceive the intersection of aesthetics and politics. Receiving or pursuing the meaning beyond the flat, neutralised surface of the canvas- whose inevitable commercialisation is now associated with that- creates a deeper understanding junction.

¹¹⁷I am thankful to Ruth Anderwald and Leonhard Grond for bringing to my attention Erwin Wurm’s *One Minute Sculptures*, “[..] an ongoing iconic and now historical series of photographed performances in which he subjects his models or himself to paradoxical, cynical or absurd contortions and situations,” (“Erwin Wurm: ONE MINUTE FOREVER,” *e-flux*, March 21, 2022, accessed October 21, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/453530/erwin-wurmone-minute-forever>).

the inaccessible body, which technically is a void underneath the surface, pretty much replicates the process of casting bronze sculptures, where the mould gives shape but remains hidden and is eventually discarded or deteriorates through the casting process. Therefore, the interaction between the body and the material generates the space for a third body, 'a sculptural happening' and, in the case of these soft sculptures, absence would converge with presence.

We need to remember the 'press' is an impression. It allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace¹¹⁸.

Although diligently rehearsed, performance always implies a margin of the unwanted, and often actively invites it. After documenting the performance through a copious number of photographs, I reviewed them and selected 12 photos, which composed two sets, consisting of seven and five images. It was only during the revision process that I came to realise the striking connection between the postures I had taken and many Graeco-Roman sculpture, that I knew from my archaeological training. This was not a conscious connection, one that I meant to drive, rather an intuitive overlapping of visual references. In particular, Hellenistic sculpture, the last phase of Greek classic tradition, resulted in close mnemonic conversation with my improvised performative gestures. Indeed, one of my favourite segments of Greek history, Hellenistic art presents a stronger level of humanisation, and attempts to represent emotions, in contrast with the Archaic and Classical periods, characterised by an impersonal, expressionless human figuration.

The intuitive and improvised nature of my approach is now under scrutiny, and yet I retain the position of an unintentional embodiment of a stratified memory. The accumulation of visual references from my university studies, the long frequentation with archaeological museums, and my predilection for sculpture above all media, seem to have imprinted a vocabulary of gestures that I repeatedly draw upon in relation to specific emotional registers I aim to express. Or was it the peculiar context I was navigating, the embodiment of a sense of defeat, the attempt to surmount it, the impulse toward freedom, the annihilation imposed by oppressive structures, that summoned those dormant images from my memory, and briefly reanimated them for the duration of a photo shoot?

¹¹⁸Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 6.



In February 2024, I returned to the work and its potential for disseminating knowledge about unfair, political imprisonment. *The Echo of the Void* was showing, along with *Black Square*¹¹⁹ at the Art Gallery of the New York University Abu Dhabi¹²⁰. On this occasion, as a constituent aspect of the exhibition was its evolution over time, I realised an audio recording, titled *The echo of the void | An indirect autobiography*.

The reading presents a selection of 15 letters written by Antonio Gramsci during his imprisonment (November 1926 – April 1937), starting with some early ones, addressed to his wife and his mother respectively, until one of the most intense missives, dated 1933, a time when due to his deteriorating health, he admitted: “I have reached a point where my resistance is about to collapse completely, and I don't know with what consequences.”

Gramsci, who was incarcerated with the full advent of fascism in Italy, died in captivity as a result of the prison condition he had been subjected to for over a decade. The selected letters trace a trajectory from the early days of Gramsci's incarceration, when he displays an unbreakable strength, through a

¹¹⁹See the following chapter 6.

¹²⁰'In Real Time,' curated by Maya Allison with a curatorial intervention by Duygu Demir (Art Gallery, New York University Abu Dhabi, February 22-June 9, 2024).

phase marked by the first doubts about his future, and culminating in the final letters, which revealed a weakened man, lucidly conscious, yet increasingly undermined in his resistance.









5. BLACK SQUARE¹²¹

The claim to distance from history, which we sometimes invoke, is not always convincing. Sometimes it's necessary to claim distance from social struggles, for example in cultural situations where art can exist only when it claims the distance from politics. But this distance can also be an excuse not to engage with the demands of our moment.¹²²

In the summer of 2022, I continued the research on spaces of confinement that I had begun in 2020. While the first work created, *The Echo of the Void*, was based on the official information released by governmental agencies; the second one, *Black Square* is the result of investigations conducted by human rights associations on prison systems and facilities across the world.

The smallest recorded prison cell would be described as slightly less than 1x1 meter and was located in South Lebanon after the infamous Khiam prison was dismissed in 2000¹²³.

The choice of colour in which to realise the work (the first one being white) was dictated by a few considerations, both relating to the physical and emotional reaction to the imagination of such a punishing space and to the reference to Malevich's influential homonymous painting, which is only slightly smaller than the work here presented.¹²⁴

The work was created during a summer residency at the Serlachius Foundation in Finland and first presented during a post-residency exhibition without the possibility of stretching it properly. The impossibility of displaying the work in the way in which it was initially conceived – that is, stretched and “solidified” – turned it into a more complacent surface, resembling that of a dead animal, and presented on the wall as a trophy, as the remnant of a heroic past, now domesticated.

On that occasion—and on that only one—, the work was titled *The Dying Animal*,¹²⁵ and in that iteration, it only exists in the photo documentation of the exhibition.

¹²¹*Black Square*, 2022. Hand knitted wool, 98x98 cm.

¹²²“Making as Translation. A Dialogue with Christian Nyampeta,” in Cotter, *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, 183.

¹²³“The Khiam detention center was an army barracks complex originally used by the French military in the 1930s in Khiam, French Lebanon. Following the establishment of Independent Lebanon in 1946, it was used by the Lebanese military until the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, during which time it came under the control of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a Christian-majority militia allied with Israel. With the beginning of the South Lebanon conflict in 1985, the base was converted into a prisoner-of-war camp and used to hold captured fighters, mostly those associated with Hezbollah. The facility remained in use in this capacity until Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 and the subsequent collapse of the SLA. After the Israeli withdrawal, the camp was preserved in the condition it was abandoned in, and converted into a museum by the Lebanese government. During the 2006 Lebanon War, the Israeli Air Force bombed and destroyed the museum, alleged by locals to have been carried out in an attempt to hide the evidence of torture and mistreatment used there. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reported the use of torture and other serious human rights abuses at the facility,” (“Khiam detention center,” Wikipedia, accessed February 13, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khiam_detention_center).

¹²⁴Malevich *Black Square* measures 79.5x79.5 cm.

¹²⁵The work namely references Philip Roth's 2001 short novel *The Dying Animal*.



The question of the ambivalence of the work, of its duality and changing narrative, depending on the conditions and occasions of its presentation, brings forward a range of considerations about the very nature of violence. As Susan Sontag mentioned in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, with specific reference to photography as a medium for documenting and transmitting information, the relation between text and image can illustrate as well as mislead when it comes to defending a specific political position or agenda.

La didascalia di una fotografia è tradizionalmente neutra, informativa: una data, un luogo, dei nomi. [...] Ma l'immagine fotografica [...] non è mai solo il trasparente resoconto di un evento. È sempre un'immagine che qualcuno ha scelto; fotografare significa inquadrare, e inquadrare vuol dire escludere.¹²⁶

In its initial conception, aimed at faithfully reproducing the surface of the less-than-one-metre prison cell, the textile, once completed, would need to be stretched to perfectly match the visual effect of a

¹²⁶Susan Sontag, *Davanti al dolore degli altri*, trans. Paolo Dilonardo (nottetempo, 2021), 58-59.

“The caption of a photograph is traditionally neutral, informative: a date, a place, some names. [...] But the photographic image [...] is never just the transparent account of an event. It is always an image that someone has chosen; photographing means framing, and framing means excluding,” My translation.

rigidly defined architectural space. Following the same approach as that employed in *The Echo of the Void*, the immediacy of the relationship between the viewer and the work lies in the viewer's ability to distinguish themselves from the object they have in front of them, and to recognise the two distinct poles of the interaction. Clearly defined as separate bodies, the two can relate, and relate at a cerebral as well as at an emotional level.

By contrast, the display of *The Dying Animal* activates a different mechanism, one based on identification, between the audience and the artwork. Offered in its fragility, in a 'post-mortem' state, the work invites closer inspection, and reflection on the vulnerability of other animal species, and, by extension, also of our human species, along with all forms of life subject to various modes of aggression. Accustomed as we are to seeing skinned animals displayed as trophies on the walls of proud hunters, the work provokes a visceral identification with human skin, intensified by the context in which it is set: the prison cell intended to contain a human being. Thus, what we see on the wall directly evokes the human body. The cruelty of imagining the soft textile as a human trophy tragically resonates with the grim realities we are likely aware of through the news, yet may prefer to suppress at a conscious level.



REFINING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Art does not transmit information. [...] (it) asks for attentiveness from the viewer. [...] art embodies the viewing subject. It does not attempt to tell us who we are, but rather asks, Who are you? and, Where do you stand?¹²⁷

The question underpinning *Monument to the Falling Wall*, *Building a Fallen Wall*, *The Echo of the Void*, and *Black Square* can be formulated in theoretical terms as follows: Is it possible to “materialise” absence? To give it substance? And if so, how? To what extent? Furthermore: how might we move beyond the binary logic of presence and absence through strategies of re-appropriation, re-enactment, and re-staging, which necessarily embrace a degree of speculation in response to historical gaps, both on a micro- and macro-historical scale?

As the state of my artistic research evolved over time, a shift became evident beyond the premises of the initial research question. Initially conceived as an investigation into the possibility of giving form to a longed-for absence—situated within the paradigm of nostalgia, and more specifically of diasporic nostalgia—the project emerged from two complimentary perspectives: that of the traveller, yearning for a lost homeland (the odysseic perspective), and that of those who remain, longing for a son, a husband, a brother (mostly the figure of the traveller being a male figure) perceived as lost to a new world (the penelopian perspective). Gradually, however, the focus shifted towards reconciling the artistic and the political; engaging with the space-time dialectic that asserts the right to de-territorialisation while remaining rooted in the temporal occurrence of making; interrogating the risks of over-aestheticising in the face of socially and politically charged content; and exploring the notion of anti-monumentality and the “just monument”, as strategies to reflect on the impact of the typically masculine celebration of history. In doing so, the work ultimately proposes alternative models to this patriarchal norm, foregrounding the role of poetry in the process.

History... and then comes the question: how do we write history? Re-write it? Or re-frame it? Traditional historiography often speaks from a perspective of assertiveness, from a confident and forceful stance that organises and structures “facts” into undisputed sequences of actions and reactions—the precise mode in which we were taught to understand history. By contrast, introducing a critical questioning, embracing a multiplicity of perspectives, and refracting dominant narratives through alternative, counter-histories, challenges this structure. It opens up the question of how to say the unspeakable, how to give voice to the unfathomable.

¹²⁷Jean Fisher, “The Work Between Us,” in *Trade Routes: History + Geography*, catalogue to the Second Johannesburg Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor, 1997, 23.

The Indian artist and activist Amar Kanwar, reflecting on his decades long involvement with rural communities in India, and his documentation of their struggle against the corporations exploiting the natural resources that these communities strive to preserve for future generations, reminds us of the grey zones that will always remain unexplored, unoffered:

Whatever the conflict you are faced to, "...There is an intimate terrain of violence and what it does to you... [...] it was very clear to me that what was actually of importance, apart from what happened, was this terrain. It was also very clear that there was no way that I had the ability or the capability to enter that terrain or talk about that terrain. I had what I later had to describe as a mixture of doubt and inadequacy, and a lack of comprehension."¹²⁸

The completion of the works presented in the previous chapters has, unsurprisingly brought to light more questions than they could hope to answer. These so-called "finished" works merely touched upon the subject, and in doing so, gave rise to further lines of inquiry—questions around the nature and terrain of conflict; the obscuration of 'the other' as shaped by political agendas, and then by the consequences of their implementation; the physical wound inflicted both on the land and on the conscience of those enclosed within these architectures of confinement; and the loss of lives, along with the futures those lives had yet to realise.

Both the notion of trauma and, by extension, that of collective trauma requires brief introduction here. Trauma, which first appeared in its modern acceptance in the late 17th century and comes from the Greek, literally meaning 'wound' is defined in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* as:

- 1a** an injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent
- b** a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury
- c** an emotional upset
- 2** an agent, force, or mechanism that causes trauma¹²⁹

What is compelling in the definition of trauma is not only that it is described as affecting both the physical and the psychological sphere, as we are used to know and is widely accepted, but also that it is defined as both the agent and the effect of the action. That could reflect either a poverty of language,

¹²⁸Amar Kanwar, quoted in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, *Beautiful, Gruesome, and true. Artists at work in the face of war* (Columbia Global Reports, 2022), 55.

¹²⁹"Trauma," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma>.

or an undeveloped understanding of traumatic experiences, or conversely a profound understanding of it.

The reciprocity of the positions – the cause and the effect – presents analogies with a few other, far more inviting situations to which we are exposed to during our lifetime, that is love and hospitality. Love can be the cause and the effect, although the process activating the transition is expressed as a “fall.” Falling in love manifests the incontrollable condition of being captured into a sentiment that leaves no escape. Hospitality, on the contrary, is a mutual relationship perfected by civilisation, where the host and the guest seem to move according to choreographed sequences. Even the duration is somehow fixed, and it shouldn’t exceed a prescribed extension, ultimately extinguishing the duties of hospitality within a set timeframe. In Italian, the same word, ‘ospite,’ indicates the two roles, as the main focus in the original Latin etymology would sit on the duties of reciprocity: any guest is obliged to reciprocate the sacred link of hospitality, any guest becomes a host-in-potency, and so does the host.

If we go back to trauma, the transition from trauma as a cause, an activator of future effects, and trauma as the actual effect of that action, or sequence of actions, often protracted in time, lies in the verbal suffix -ise, that indicates a transformation or a becoming.

The term *collective trauma* refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it.¹³⁰

The expression “collective trauma” starts with the psychological description of the wound to then focus on the temporal dimension, specifically how the trauma sediments into the “collective memory of the group,” a phenomenon which is often referred to as “inherited trauma.”

Whether individual or collective, trauma fragments and fractures. It disavows and silences. It creates denial and forgetting. To assist in its repair, we must choose to acknowledge, to witness, and to thereby *feel* together, what has actually occurred, even the most horrific details we would rather close our eyes to. Because to look away — to dismiss, deny, minimize, or wilfully forget — is to uphold the institutions of inequality, of inhumanity, that created them.¹³¹

¹³⁰Gilad Hirschberger, “Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1441. The text is available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

¹³¹Thomas Hübl and Julie Jordan Avritt, *Healing Collective Trauma: A Process for Integrating Our Intergenerational and Cultural Wounds* (Sounds True, 2020). Quoted in “Historical Trauma,” Wikipedia, accessed November 4, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_trauma.

Different approaches to trauma highlight the external imposition of interpretative categories over the groups of people that have been subject to violence, oppression, or other traumatic experiences, an attitude eloquently defined as “politics of redemption:”

Archival initiatives have unconsciously continued this theological impulse. Their desire to document that which is absent, missing or forgotten stages a domain of politics which often privileges the experience of violence and trauma in a manner in which the experience of violence is that which destroys the realm of the ordinary and the everyday.

Thus if you examine the way that histories of the oppressed are written about, it were as if life is always subsumed under the threat of death, and living is forever condemned to a shadowy existence under the idea of a ‘bare life’. The subsumption of life into a condition of bareness is as illusory as aesthetic practices which attempt to redeem experience from the clutches of time and history.

If the archival imagination is to rescue itself from this politics of redemption, it will have to allow for a radical contingency of the ordinary. It will have to engage with ‘forms of life’ which exceed the totalizing gaze of the state as well its redemptive other. Radical contingency recognizes the possibilities of surprise in the archive and in the possibility that a descent into the ordinary suspends the urgent claims of emergencies.¹³²

Echoing this position, perhaps in less confrontational terms, Anthony Downey muses:

The relationship between artist and the act of spectating or viewing is key to addressing an important question [...] how can art as a practice reflect on – and therefore re-imagine – the historical trauma associated with conflict without merely repeating the spectacle associated with war and civil insurrection? To this we must add a second question: how can art avoid fetishising the objects and locations of conflict?¹³³

and continues:

[...] terror and images of terrorism have both a commodity value within news media and symbolic value within political discourse.

¹³²Pad.ma, *10 Theses on the Archive*, (Beirut, April 2010), accessed November 22, 2022, <https://pad.ma/documents/OH/100>.

¹³³Anthony Downey, *Art and Politics now* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 109-112, *passim*.

Among the works exploring this delicate relation, I would like to mention: Ariella Azoulay, *Unshowable photographs/different ways not to say deportation (1948)*, 2010; Reza Aramesh’ actions: i.e., *Action 51. Kerem Shalom, Israel – February 17, 2008: Palestinian prisoners of sit blindfolded on the ground after they were captured* (2008).

[...] The demand placed on art to explore ways of avoiding the voyeurism often implied in such images.

History, and the trauma associated with these events, seems to be defying both representation and simplistic interpretation.¹³⁴

leading to a conclusion that, although self-critical, opens a potential space for artistic action:

[the]... legacy of trauma.... continues to have widespread political implications for the countries affected. In this context, art, and culture in general, has contributed to a process of negotiating the past and coming to terms with it in a way that politics... is often less inclined to do. This is not, however, about proposing a cathartic function for art... Rather, the artists contest the elisions and erasures of a politically determined version of history and, in doing so, reveal how current political concerns not only prescribe how we understand the past but also attempt to dictate future responses to historical events.¹³⁵

While recognising the validity of these positions, new questions and approaches surface within the researched field, introducing the possibility of transforming absence into an act of resistance¹³⁶, and transitioning towards a dimension of resilience and empowerment. This shift also involves reimagining the “Feminine” as a position capable of reversing the sign and direction of a historically unceasing chain of events that determine absence as the outcome of violence, aggression, and patriarchal power.

¹³⁴Downey, *Art and Politics*, 122.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*, p 138.

¹³⁶See Sadek, “Collecting the Uncanny,” and Mouawad, *sang des promesses*, which examine the notion of loss and collective trauma within the political context of the Lebanese post-war “missed reconciliation,” that is still an open wound, and unresolved.

Comment lui faire comprendre que la douleur passe? Et est-ce que l'on a raison de lui dire une chose aussi horrible? ... Comment fait-on pour se consoler de l'inconsolable? Comment fait-on pour se reconstruire?¹⁴¹

During the summer of 2022, I started a new work that eventually resulted in a series: *The Eclipse of Words* and *Nation / Narration* revisit a theme that I have researched on multiple occasions over the past decade, which is the disputable notion of administering justice through the enforcement of capital punishment, both under the rules of legal and internationally recognised governments, and under the terms of a rough justice exercised outside that institutional frame.

Conceived as a reflection on the role of capital punishment within the frame of state-inflicted violence, the works, through their multiple iterations, reproduce scenes of executions, rendered in stark monochrome, either white or black.

The embroidered pieces, realised in an immaculate white monochrome, reflect on issues of disappearance through the technical, minimalistic approach adopted by the medium. By playing with depth and articulation, the work establishes the conditions for the representation to emerge from the contrast between the stitched surface and what is left undone: the "image" actually coincides with the empty surface, with the debossed segment of the canvas, with the void left unstitched.

In another iteration of the project, realised with hand knitting¹⁴², the opaque black surface creates a similar effect by bringing the negative, supposedly the back of the canvas, to the front view, by integrating it as its central motif. These works, realised in a knitted black monochrome, offer the simultaneous creation of a figurative composition and, quite literally, of the canvas supporting it and serving as its background. In doing so, critical questions about historical and narrative framing and the broader contextualisation of events are raised.

¹³⁷*The Eclipse of Words*, 2022. Hand embroidery on canvas, ca 17x25x2.5 cm.

¹³⁸*The Eclipse of Words*, 2022-2023. Hand knitting, wooden frame, ca 94x110x2.5 cm.

¹³⁹*Nation | Narration*, 2023. Hand embroidery on canvas, ca 42x43.5x2.5 cm.

¹⁴⁰*Nation | Narration*, 2023. Hand knitting, 206x114 cm.

¹⁴¹"How to make him understand that the pain passes? And is it right to say such a horrible thing to him? ... How can we console ourselves for what is inconsolable? How do we rebuild ourselves?" (Mouawad, *sang des promesses*, 22, my translation).

¹⁴²*The Eclipse of Words* consists of a triptych, then framed within a wooden structure, while *Nation / Narration* is simply stretched on a wooden structure.

The overlapping of text and texture cannot be missed nor escaped, as verbally addressed in the triptych *Nation / Narration*, which inscribes the homonym words on its lateral panels.

The visual references originate from research on capital punishment, as it is currently administered in internationally legally recognised countries. The first iteration of the research goes back to 2018 and consisted of two sets of fabricated stamps, either graphically reproducing scenes of the death penalty, or their naming, rendered in a calligraphic font¹⁴³.

As a means of exploration the threshold between bi-and three-dimensional forms, the white embroidered pieces actually aim to bridge these realms, and evoke the visual language of white marble bas-reliefs, drawing on imagery rooted in the classic archaeological tradition.

Another key reference for the works titled *The Eclipse of Words*, is the medieval triptych, painted wooden *dispositif* most often associated with Christianity and traditionally used to depict biblical scenes for the adornment of religious buildings. Indeed, as I was researching and reflecting on the nature of these objects, I was struck by the realisation that many triptychs often represent scenes of the Passion, and specifically, the crucifixion of Jesus, which technically is a portrayal of capital punishment, as the crucifixion arguably was intended as an act of justice, carried out by the Roman governor of the province of Judea.

These works, like those seen in the previous chapters, also engage with the context of trauma and collective trauma. They address some of the most common practices used to silence political opponents, thereby making them disappear, often under the guise of legal justice, through preventive, frequently unjustified, incarceration and summary executions.

The white *Nation / Narration* illustrates with crudity the appropriation of the narrative tool by national agencies in service of nationalistic propaganda, as well as the contradiction established between history as it is experienced and history as it is narrated, sequenced, organised and ultimately transmitted through official channels. The depiction of a man sadistically hung by his ribs¹⁴⁴, in the central panel of the triptych, based on “actual fact” and presented as emblematic of an unfair judicial system¹⁴⁵, becomes instrumental in the construction of a historical narrative that is unverified, shielded from contestation, and forcefully disseminated by oppressive or totalitarian regimes.

This ideological, “‘organised lying’, where meaning is imposed upon the public world without being open to contestation, undermine the reality of the world we share, destroy this ‘sense by

¹⁴³*Commemorative Stamps. Capital Punishment*, 2018. Manipulated inkjet prints on William Turner paper, dimensions variable.

¹⁴⁴This work is based on William Blake’s famous engraving, in turn based on a sketch by John Gabriel Stedman, “A Negro Hung Alive by the Ribs to a Gallows” (1796).

¹⁴⁵I use “judicial” here in the etymologic sense of “depending on judgment,” as a sort of ‘judgment’, although brutal, intimidatory, vindictive and potentially inviting to revanchism, is inevitably asserted before activating the mechanisms of punishment.

which we take our bearings in the world' (BPF: 257) and condemn people to 'isolation' and 'loneliness' (OT: 474-5).¹⁴⁶

As highlighted earlier collective trauma settles into the "collective memory of the group," potentially resulting in an "inherited trauma." And yet, if we return to the opening citation, we must acknowledge a recurrent post-war approach, one that advocates forgetting as a means to restore a certain social "normalcy."¹⁴⁷

This is a strategy that has been activated in several contexts, among which in Lebanon, where, to seal the conclusion of the 1975-1990 civil war, there was an unpronounced agreement that erased and relegated to the past without further re-elaboration, 15 years of war crimes perpetrated against citizens of different religious belonging.

Amnesties imply the willingness to forget, intentional amnesia, a forceful anaesthesia, throwing an entire population into a public sleep. And yet they don't guarantee forgiveness, they bet on it, they gamble on it. Gambling certainly does not seem to be a solid terrain to rebuild social confidence and trust, rather being a quicksand for future revanchism.

Amnesties also question the ability of legal courts to settle, rebalance and compensate for the loss suffered during traumatic times. If compensation is obviously impossible due to the incommensurability of the crimes, nevertheless exposing the perpetrators' accountability within the court setting, making them liable for their crimes, and ultimately judging their role and responsibility, can partially redeem our human sense of justice, although through a theatrical mechanism, as the court of justice turns out to be.

¹⁴⁶Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Plowoska Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics. Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 48-49.

The books by Hannah Arendt mentioned in the quote are the following:

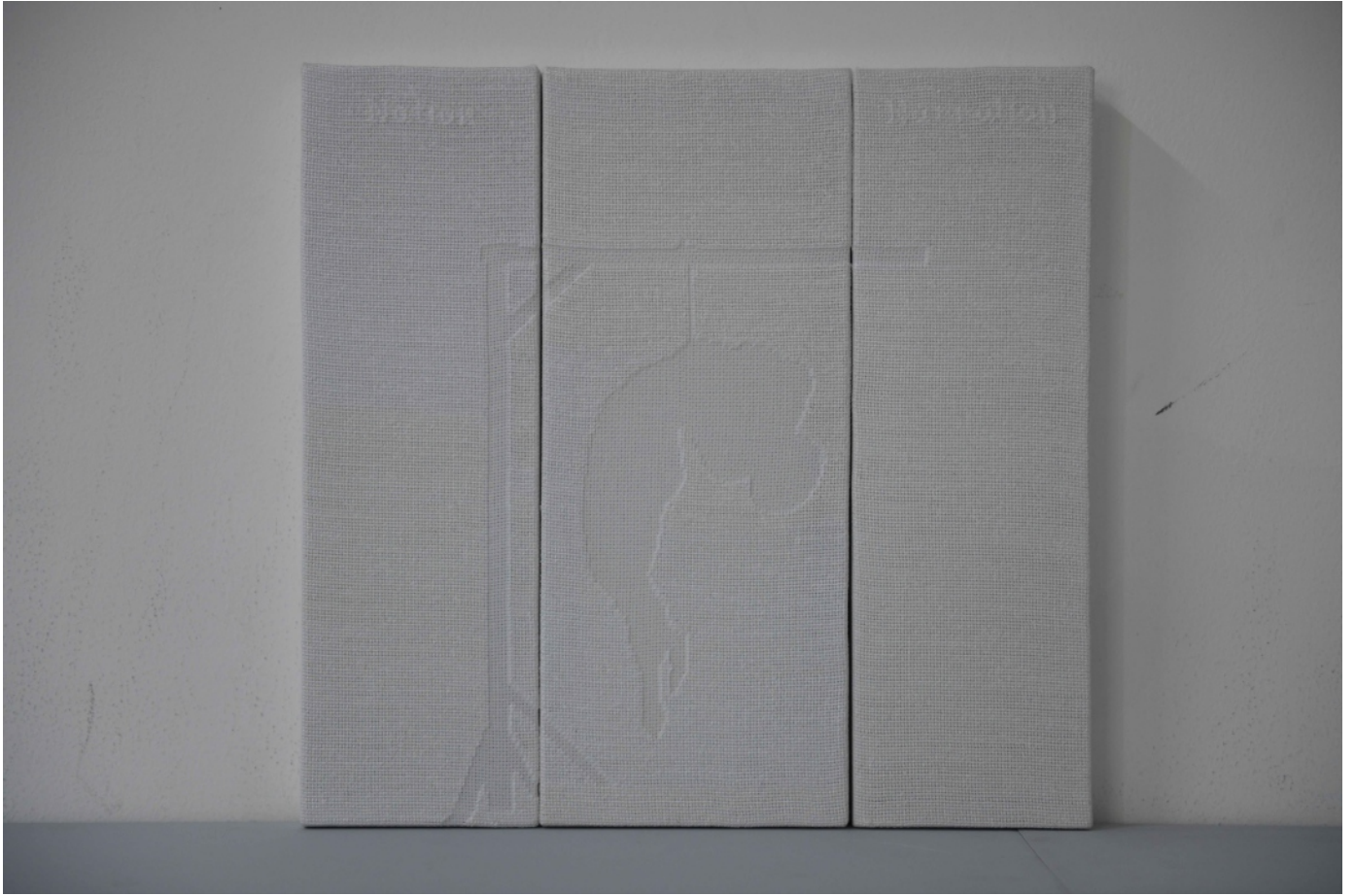
BPF: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

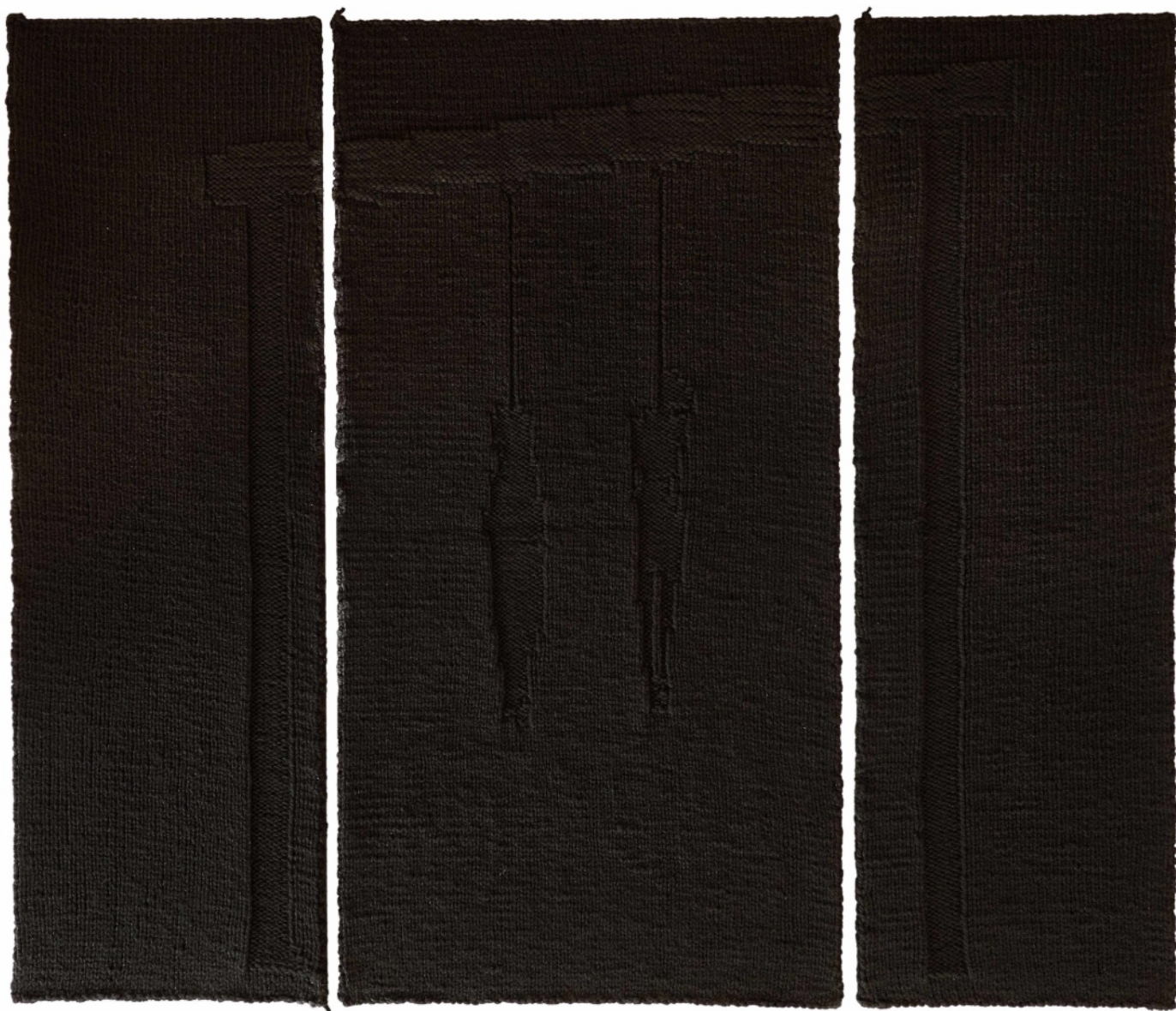
OT: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces (San Diego: Harcourt, 1968).

¹⁴⁷See David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (Yale University Press, 2016).

"Rieff argues the contrarian position that sometimes history, including past mass atrocities, is better forgotten than commemorated," ("In Praise of Forgetting," Wikipedia, accessed January 22, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_Praise_of_Forgetting).









December 12th, 2024

My uncle passed away yesterday.

He was old, of course, his life lived, if that can apply to the deployment of an ordinary biography.

My cousin, who regarded me as a sister for so many years, announced it as it happened. I am always surprised by people's timing, when it comes to these key moments in life, how they privilege the remote communication, how can they digit a message in the minute of bewilderment.

Unless they had it prepared, ready to be circulated. And yet, it would still require some presence of spirit to send it, in that very moment, still sitting around the hospital bed, with her mother to hold and be held by. Pressing a button seems unnatural to me...

Later at night, I write to her "sono giornate pesantissime, non così nitide nel ricordo" [these are days marked with heaviness, not so limpidly preserved through memory].

I don't remember much of the days when my father passed away: the night when he gave his last breath, the confusion of the next day – sleep-deprived as I were, I traversed it dreamingly, – the funeral, only the cemetery is a clear image, not the function in the village church, although I can recall it. The house full and suddenly empty, alone with my mother and sister, learning how to re-occupy a space that was filled by my father's needs until few days earlier. It felt easy, and I know I will sound mean, but it felt easy, to remove the weight of his demands. It felt sad too, of course, as trivially death acts as a strainer, letting go the painful memories and keeping the radiant regret of missing opportunities, the consolation of a tenderness that was dispensed carefully, now become a sequence of acts forming a ring of looped graciousness.

My cousin answers: "ore confuse" [confusion of the hours], and I am driven to think that this was not the case for my mother, always ready, always a step forward in planning anything contingent, including death, including her husband's death. She had enough time to do it, being his main caregiver for 10 months, a calvary, the slow degrading of his physical capacity, of his will to live. She must have planned the immediate after-death for weeks, if not months, the clothes he would wear in the afterlife, the image she chose for the tomb (why not one portraying him as he looked like in his young age, full of beauty and promises? Why choosing an image where he is visibly sick, feeble, tired? She probably chose the image that spoke to her the most, but why delivering him to the eternity as a defeated man, and not in the splendor of their future-to-be?).

I turn to writing – these thoughts cannot be expressed, or if otherwise, they could not be followed by more words. Mitigating circumstances of transience always turns to be a lonely activity.

7. A PALIMPSEST OF HORROR¹⁴⁸

Ce sont des lois anciennes qui nous ont fait bien du tort.¹⁴⁹

My artistic research and investigation in the field of justice and, more specifically, of state-sanctioned violence, has been developed over the course of nearly a decade while employing different techniques and materials: embroidery, photography, collage, and knitting. In 2014, during an artist residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute (USA), I started investigating capital punishment as it is regulated in the United States, which led to the creation of a hand-embroidered black monochrome piece. In 2018, I revisited the subject with a series of fabricated “commemorative” stamps, addressing official, legalised, and internationally accepted execution methods. More recently (2022-23), during a residency at the Cultural Foundation (Abu Dhabi), I returned to the topic through an exploration of the iconography of public executions, while simultaneously confronting the limitations imposed by the local censorship on the public dissemination of my research.

The project proposal for a theatre curtain explores capital punishment as a form of “ritualisation” and public spectacle, a social ritual that, in its open and performative manifestation, parallels theatrical representations. By demanding an audience, the ritualised enactment of state-sanctioned death reveals an understanding of punishment as inherently preventive, didactic, and, disturbingly, ‘entertaining.’ The Roman tradition of the public games, where a ferocious, strenuous fight for survival was witnessed by thousands of citizens gathering in the amphitheatre of the time, appealed to the basic instincts that were solicited and stimulated on those occasions: the formula *panem and circenses* aptly summarises a forerunning populist approach, aimed at satisfying base needs and unsophisticated desires in order to maintain civic order.

This same approach continues to be replicated today in countries where capital punishment remains in effect, and executions are carried out in public squares as a warning to the citizens witnessing the event.

Indeed, there is a striking contrast between this theatrical, representational approach and the intimacy that grief demands. The convict, sentenced to death, is de-humanised, a scapegoat and exemplary

¹⁴⁸A *Palimpsest of Horror*, 2023. Proposal for a safety curtain.

The reference and inspiration for the proposal is the exhibition series “Safety Curtain:” conceived by museum in progress in cooperation with the Vienna State Opera, it transforms the safety curtain into a temporary exhibition space for contemporary art (<https://www.mip.at/en/projects/safety-curtain/>).

The proposal and initial maquette were developed during a six-month residency at the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi, UAE. I am grateful to the institution for providing me with the opportunity to work uninterrupted in a quiet environment, where I could further develop this project and explore its potential. I especially thank the coordinator of the residency programme at that time, Rabi Georges, for his continuous encouragement regardless of mounting hostility towards the outcome of the research. It is important to note that the United Arab Emirates is a country that recognises and applies the death penalty as a means to “make justice” and is not tolerant of dissenting views.

¹⁴⁹Mouawad, *sang des promesses*, 71, my translation.

case, a reminder for fellow citizens of the implications of certain behaviours. Similarly, and moving away for a moment from the central figure – that of the actual victim – the family of the ‘offender’ is unable to manifest their suffering, silenced by the shame of association with guilt, which forces the mourner to the shadows of a private, remissive grief.

Developing from the previous series (*The Eclipse of Words, Nation / Narration*), *A Palimpsest of Horror* reproduces formal aspects of those representations and further investigates them through a dramatic amplification in scale. Visually informed by my research on the iconography of capital punishment, both in relation with classical representation of inflicted violence in the European figurative tradition, and with widely accessible, contemporary propagandistic representations of lethal punishments, the proposed safety curtain addresses the performative component and the social implications intrinsic to both gatherings: those inviting to a theatrical spectacle and those calling to a public execution.

The association with the function of this specific fabric is also revelatory of an ambition for safety that moves between the spectrum of physical security and maintaining social order, through the mise en scène of preventive measures¹⁵⁰.

The gap between notions of justice and legality lies at the core of this research, whose outcome ultimately translates as an exploration through materiality (‘thinking through making’). Conceived as a proposal for future work, the project envisions the creation of a large hand-made fabric at the scale of a theatre curtain, with epic proportions within the context of hand-crafted textile practice¹⁵¹. In parallel, as the specific context calls for more dynamic engagement with the subject matter, a theatrical performance grounded in my current reading and analysis of proceedings’ records related to cases under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, would serve to further investigate the theme and complement the curtain.

¹⁵⁰As previously noted, public executions conclude the parable of a judicial trial and act as a strong reminder for citizens, thereby fulfilling a preventive role in deterring future violations of national laws.

¹⁵¹As my practice is based on a hand-made process, I envisage the possibility of a collective, community-based creation.



29.03.2023

Dear R.,

[...] thank you for sharing your essay on plasticity ("Ontology of the Accident" is on my desktop as a reminder and continued source of ruminations...).

I can't wait to receive your publication on Duchamp read through the lens of Lacan: thank you!

4.04.2023

Dear Cristiana,

Thanks for your kind words. And yes, 'Ontology of the Accident' is also on my reading list – all in a matter of time! [...]

30.05.2023

Dear R.,

[...] It is interesting how the initial rigid structure I had envisioned is now morphing into something less solid, and more plastic. And yet the elements and components are the same, but a certain fluidity has taken place and is directing towards more open possibilities of encounter. [...]

9.06.2023

Dear Cristiana,

The structure you describe is fascinating. I sometimes wonder if life itself tends to operate this way? The possibility of encounter through a moment of opening and expansion that still contains a contraction, a raw experience of a necessary negativity. [...]

9.09.2023

Dear R.,

I am writing after a long time, back in Dubai following a long, nomadic European summer.

¹⁵²The present correspondence has been edited for privacy purposes. Hopefully, regardless of the omissions that were introduced, the flow of the conversation remains unaffected. Footnotes have been added to reference the citations.

I keep piling up fragments, instead of building solid constructions: mine resembles the technique of a bird, every season renewing their nest, creating a temporary solidity, a provisional stability. Recurrences of models, repetition of processes, rather than the reliability of a fixed establishment: all this is said thinking of my research methodology, if ever "methodology" could apply to this incoherent discontinuity, periodically restaged by sudden illuminations.

*"Although at the base level of intuition the artist may think he is acting in a mediumistic way, he remains unaware of what he is doing on the aesthetic plane: reflexively referring to the word "art" in order to performatively mark his position as "artist"."*¹⁵³

This deeply resonates, thank you for your book, which was patiently waiting for me to return.

I now understand better your note on your Duchampian conversations (or conversations around Duchamp) with M.: Hassan has indeed played a major role in making information about Western modern and contemporary art accessible for his fellow artists, and yet each one of them developed his teaching (or offering?) through the lens of their own, individual understanding and sensibility.

*"Even though many artists "refuse the mediumistic role and insist on the validity of their awareness in the creative act," any attempt to translate this awareness into "rationalized explanations" would be incomplete if it did not include the act of translation as part of the explanation."*¹⁵⁴

I can't resist the temptation to connect this observation to Carolyn Shread's introductory note to Catherine Malabou's "The Ontology of the Accident":

*"I would like instead to think of translation itself as accident. What if translation were to accept the accident as its condition, its condition of possibility, its possibility?"*¹⁵⁵

which offers me the opportunity to ask you about your reading and project on plasticity [...]

20.12.2023

Dear Cristiana,

my sincere apologies for the long delay.

I was delighted to read your positive response to the little Duchamp book. I am so happy it found a reader like you – the ideal viewer, as Duchamp might say. Maybe we could plan a zoom in the new year? I hope to start pulling all the threads together for my next book – with plasticity being a central idea – and I would love to discuss this with you. [...]

20.03.2024

¹⁵³Robert Kilroy, *Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: One hundred Years Later*, Palgrave Pivot 2018, 82.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁵⁵Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident. An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Polity Press, 2012), vii.

Hi Cristiana,

It was really nice to speak this morning with you and I am happy we have at least reignited what will hopefully become a sustained conversation.

I realized afterwards that what I was touching on with Beckett was essentially the quote from Carolyn Shread's introductory note you referred to in an earlier email: translation itself as accident...

Attached is the paper I wrote a long time ago on Beckett – it's rather rudimentary and I actually had to remove the reference to the Godot translation. The article focuses more on the field of study around Beckett and art.

Looking forward to catching up again as our respective work develops. Please do send me what you can.

22.03.2024

Hi R.,

thank you for sharing your essay on Beckett.

Here are some of the most recent projects I have worked on (since last summer): the first one is titled Not set in Stone, and I realised it during the months of August and September 2023, with a grim timing considering what has been happening since early October.

The work reproduces the articles of the 'Absentees' Property Law', in a monochrome grey embroidery on 4 felt panels, and it clearly and directly addresses injustice, and how legality frames it and justifies unfair (but not unlawful, under those specific circumstances) actions. The rebellion is all in the title, and opens up to the claim for a rewriting of law, and history.

The second work is a continuation of the series you saw at the Cultural Foundation: I have realised once again a knitted (black) piece, and an embroidered (white) triptych. The two works are titled Nation / Narration, the title being inscribed in the white monochrome with a double layer that reveals while hiding, my old fascination for and incorporation of the veil in the work.

The last work is my most recent series: I have just started it in December and I foresee a long frequentation there... The series of knitted audiotapes (tentatively titled, Archive of Silence) conjugates different levels of documentation: the audiotapes are first of all recorded, but the voice remains inaudible as they are then functionally transposed and become the very material for a textile piece, thus being deprived of their original function. The voice that was recorded, hence supposed to be documented, is here re-coded, silenced and instrumentalised to support the creation of a soundless, sonic fabric. The transition from text to textile, from sound to silence, addresses issues of effective communication, of the audibility of the civic community, which is more often regrettably negated. [...]

16.04.2024

Hi Cristiana,

Thank you for these details on your most recent projects. Not set in stone does seem to have become unfortunately significant in relation to ongoing events. I must say I am intrigued by your most recent project – the re-coding of the voice, and the effective processes of instrumentalisation which this entails, seems particularly relevant to our current predicament on many levels. The act of fabricating this disavowed silence is interesting, in that it draws out/recomposes the radical (emancipatory?) core of a raw negativity that has become officially 'negated' (or structurally sublimated?).

I look forward to reflecting more on this. At the moment I am working on two parallel projects - So I hope we can continue to discuss these ideas. [...]

25.04.2024

Hi R.,

I am truly grateful for your thoughts, especially as I am also reflecting around the connection between negation and sublimation – Indeed a passage from one state to another, a structural change in condition for an unchanged matter, so to speak, from a scientific perspective (and yet valid in the specific as well). At least, as far as sublimation is concerned. Negation, on the contrary, is a concept that does not apply to the visual sphere (following Wittgenstein): only language can indicate that that does not happen. Hence the need to recur to a language-based approach while exploring the negation of an action, the negation of an act, through my visual practice. But here negation can also be addressed as obliteration, rather than "inactuality" of a manifestation, of an event, of a position. The radical difference between the two dichotomies, negation-sublimation and negation-obliteration, is still for me unresolved and an object of current investigation. [...]

10.05.2024

Hi Cristiana,

Thank you for your comments. Yes, I agree with what you say about negation and the visual field. Lacan says something similar: what is possible in the field of the image/imaginary must ultimately be tracked to the domain of the symbolic/language which overdetermines the visual field. Incidentally, this is how I understand Duchamp when he refers to the 'conceptual' domain – not some realm of ideas or notions but the structures of language and the logic of the signifier in which all mechanisms of subjectivity and desire originate. This is why I believe his writings, the textual frame for the Large Glass, are so important. For Lacan, desire is an excessive product of language – in effect, the empty word produces its own 'jouissance' or pleasure. Joyce knew this well...Duchamp's notes are similar: they are

penetrated by a negativity proper to language that foregrounds what Žižek calls the 'stupidity' of the word.

I am also quite interested in the sublimation-negation/negation-obliviation

On this note, I have actually shifted my attention very recently from the art historical project (around Duchamp/materiality) to a book looking specifically at how these ideas relate to the technological domain. The main hypothesis here is that technology has co-opted the aesthetic framework of sublimation/desire – flattening all possibility of obliteration – and is now utilizing an imperceptible materiality to co-ordinate the dynamics of desire and subjectivity. The neuroscience is clear on this ('triggering' of dopamine is the industry term) but there is a real need for psychoanalytic theories of identity construction and desire. And, art, of course. [...]

17.05.2024

Hi R.,

thank you for your elaboration on the subject: like usual, your psychoanalytical reading opens new perspectives, and I sincerely look forward to reading your essays!

I have recently read Andrea Emo's reflections on art (In principio era l'immagine¹⁵⁶), and I found these quotes that reminded me of our last conversation on zoom. Apologies in advance if I misunderstood the nature of your research: I just thought I would share this with you:

"L'arte è come la divinità; cioè è un'entità che noi possiamo creare, ma non possiamo guardare in faccia senza morire, appunto perché, guardandola e conoscendola, la uccidiamo, e moriamo con essa. Antico mito del divieto di conoscere." (Q. 269, 1964)

("Art is like divinity; that is, it is an entity that we can create, but we cannot look in the face without dying, precisely because, by looking at it and knowing it, we kill it, and die with it. Ancient myth of the prohibition of knowing.")

"La nostra magia moderna è appunto l'arte, in cui l'immagine e la parola sono resurrezione, forma in cui l'atto immediato risorge dalla sua negazione; esse agiscono sulla nostra vita in quanto sono una continua vittoria sulla morte, la morte inevitabile dell'atto." (Q. 315, 1968)

"our modern magic is precisely art, in which the image and the word are resurrection, a form in which the immediate act rises again from its negation; they act on our life as they are a continuous victory over death, the inevitable death of the act."

"L'atto del vedere è una resurrezione appunto perché è un atto; è una trasformazione e non una passività. Che cos'altro trasformiamo noi se non lo stesso atto della nostra negazione? L'assoluto è immagine perché è metamorfosi; interna trasformazione perché interna negazione. L'immagine è la metamorfosi dell'assoluto, dell'attuale." (Q. 366, 1974)

¹⁵⁶Andrea Emo, *In principio era l'immagine* (Bompiani, 2019), passim.

"The act of seeing is a resurrection precisely because it is an act; it is a transformation and not a passivity. What else do we transform if not the very act of our negation? The absolute is image because it is metamorphosis; internal transformation because it is internal negation. The image is the metamorphosis of the absolute, of the actual."

Emo has been defined a "Christian nihilist" and the quotes here well support this interpretation. The connection that he established between creation and death implies the Christian acceptance of resurrection, which I tend to read not through a religious lens but rather a symbolic one, and not only because of my agnosticism but also in relation to an inclination towards overcoming strict "orthodox" filters in favour of more open interpretative models.

I am curious to know your thoughts on this...

P.S. the translations are mine: I have transcribed the original texts, in case you would like to acquire better ones (besides for the purpose of a correct citation).

12.08.2024

Hi Cristiana,

Thank you for your email and suggestions (which I love). Just a short message to excuse my silence – I have had a very hard few weeks: my mother was sick and sadly passed away just two weeks ago. [...]

2.12.2024

Dear Cristiana,

Thank you for your previous message and my apologies for the long silence. As you might understand, the last few months have been hard.

The violence you refer to is indeed more penetrating than ever, on so many levels. Personally, I am reflecting a lot on the violence of medical abstraction that my mother's body was subjected to over long periods of sickness. In the end it was a question of medical instrumentalization – a different kind of violence I know but for some reason the idea of the body – and bodies – inflicted, objectified and under attack seems so real on so many levels.

ps. I thought you might like this photo of my mother engrossed in reading about your work in LAD. And another of her in front of Tarek's work. And finally a shot from the rugged coast of I. of my 3 girls following in her footsteps!

7.12.2024

Dear R.,

thank you for your words, and for sharing these images of your mother and girls, thinking through legacies...

It is a coincidence of course, but I can't stop myself from noticing that I was in a mourning phase at the time of the LAD show (my father passed away just a few weeks before the opening), and then we lost Tarek, and another circle of grief started.

Circles they appear to be, with their parables and intersections: repetitions of a process are never mere occurrences of past steps, rather a renewed errancy on a previously traveled path. [...]

20.12.2024

Dear Cristiana,

I am so sorry I didn't realise you were grieving during the show – this must have been a terribly challenging time for you, particularly when we lost Tarek.

They say time is a healer but I am not so sure. How have you been since your father passed? I have lost my father too...and I only now realise that after he passed I was so focused on looking after my mother his loss is only now being felt to its full extent. One's father is one's father – the protective roof over the house of life.

I am struck by what you said about the circles of grief. I have been thinking a lot about death, loss and grief and how, in reality, they are all very different experiences. Death is like a 'tear' through the flat pattern of life while loss is the extended – and never-ending – effect of this tear, like trying to come to terms with the fact that life has become a series of pieces, ripped up and thrown into the air. But grief is something else entirely – and it is perhaps the most difficult to articulate. It is the feeling accompanying death and loss.... the experience of the tear and the dispersion which connects the two as a circle. [...]

6.01.2025

Dear R.,

I am not sure either, about time and how it could potentially heal. Unless by healing they mean that the pungent feeling of loss becomes less acute, that it turns into a softer membrane, that it starts fading its contours, like a fabric long exposed to the action of a strong sunlight inevitably loses its neatness, and manifests the pattern through a softer colour palette.

Two decades ago, when I was newly married, my father in law suddenly passed away: he was young, in good health, and a very active man. I was especially attached to him and of course this was a shock for the whole family. While I went through a particularly acute grieving phase, my ex-husband didn't

manifest any visible reaction: he played the role of the strong man he was taught to impersonate and went on with his life. I feared the heaviness of the loss would resurface and that actually happened, as I was expecting my second son. The responsibility of a renewed fatherhood translated into a panic reaction towards parenthood. Time plays tricks, rather than healing, it doesn't guarantee the remuneration of relief, and perhaps only our belief into 'salvation' can induce the conviction of a progress in the experience of mourning.

A few days ago I was talking with a friend who was recounting with disdain about a lack of insurance on the sale of expensive plants. I was surprised one could ever think of labelling a living being – animate or inanimate – with the guarantee of return in case of death or major damage. Life doesn't respond to the safety network we try to build around ourselves, it doesn't respect it, and apparently – from our human-centric perspective – even mocks it (although that is of course an exaggeration, disregarding nature's indifference).

It is almost inhumane, this attempt to word death, loss and grief, inhumane because in order to examine the difference, we need to renew our experience of those terms, to wide open the wound and move the tools in our hand in and around, as in a surgical theatre.... "a surgical theatre," and the performativity of the experience strikes, as theatrical performances are characterised by repetition, by the revisitation of a gestural and verbal connection able to convey meaning [...]

30.01.2025

Dear Cristiana,

Thank you for sharing these thoughts, which are so eloquently expressed.

The fabric comparison is quite powerful, particularly the idea of manifesting the pattern. I wonder often about the fundamental patterns that are brought into relief in and around the moments of death – like the collective funeral ritual and the 'performances of woe' that occur around the lifeless corpse. This practice is still strong in I., where we 'wake' the body for 3 nights by singing, telling stories, being physically present.... Then the immediate trauma of the event, against which the pattern seems like the only defence possible, recedes and we create new, more stubborn patterns of practice that protect us against the raw reality. The event has now become a process of sequential traumas: the death, the loss, the absence, the grief.

The experience of your ex-husband does sound familiar to me. Psychoanalysts might call it a symptomatic eruption – an excessive and retroactive (and thus real) response to the constitutive blindness of the original, un-acknowledged trauma. Even on a neurobiological level, there is evidence that the brain reformulates and narrows its neuronal connections around a sudden intrusion of something unexpected, inexplicable, traumatic. The narrowing creates and reinforces the cerebral conditions for a future disruption. So, as you put it, maybe the process of mourning requires and rests

on a conviction directed towards some future position of relief... a leap of faith beyond the struggle that allows for a more direct and meaningful engagement with the struggle.

A widening of the wound as you say, that has to be performative in the final instance – a performativity that empowers rather than weakens and secures. In the sense that it takes the trauma as the source rather than seeking to avoid, displace, elide it. In a world where all trauma is flattened into a form of easily digestible (mediated) meaning, maybe death in all its forms is one of the last truly real experiences.

..'perhaps only our belief into 'salvation' can induce the conviction of a progress in the experience of mourning.' There is a lot in this sentence to think and talk about [...]

(b) "absentee" means -

o (1) a person who, at any time during the period between the 16th Kislev, 5708 (29th November, 1947) and the day on which a declaration is published, under section 9(d) of the Law and Administration Ordinance, 5708-1948(1), that the state of emergency declared by the Provisional Council of State on the 10th Iyar, 5708 (19th May, 1948)(2) has ceased to exist, was a legal owner of any property situated in the area of Israel or enjoyed or held it, whether by himself or through another, and who, at any time during the said period -

- □ (i) was a national or citizen of the Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Trans-Jordan, Iraq or the Yemen, or
- □ (ii) was in one of these countries or in any part of Palestine outside the area of Israel, or
- □ (iii) was a Palestinian citizen and left his ordinary place of residence in Palestine
 - □ (a) for a place outside Palestine before the 27th Av, 5708 (1st September, 1948); or

(b) for a place in Palestine held at the time by forces which sought to prevent the establishment of the State of Israel or which fought against it after its establishment;

o (2) a body of persons which, at any time during the period specified in paragraph (1), was a legal owner of any property situated in the area of Israel or enjoyed or held such property, whether by itself or through another, and all the members, partners, shareholders, directors or managers of which are absentees within the meaning of paragraph (1), or the management of the business of which is otherwise decisively controlled by such absentees, or all the capital of which is in the hands of such absentees¹⁵⁸

I have been investigating absence for a long time, and within the specifics of this research, for three years, without being able to solidify my thoughts around the very concept.

Law provides definitions, but we must recognise that these are shaped by interpretation. It constructs meaning and defines essence in order to establish a shared framework, an agreeable terrain for figurative contestation. Much like the set up of a boxing ring, the space for the confrontation is outlined, and the tools are prescribed.

Demarcate, delineate, circumscribe... including and excluding, the endless manifestation of a power that, like a knife, cuts only on one side.

¹⁵⁷ *NOT SET IN STONE*, 2023. Hand embroidery on felt, set of 4, 60x42 cm each.

¹⁵⁸ "Absentees's Property Law, 5710-1950," accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.adalah.org/uploads/oldfiles/Public/files/Discriminatory-Laws-Database/English/04-Absentees-Property-Law-1950.pdf>

NOT SET IN STONE was realised during the months of August and September 2023, with grim timing. The work reproduces a selection of articles that illustrate the main aspects (terminology, rules of expropriation, expulsion, and demolition of buildings, responsibility etc.) informing the 'Absentees' Property Law,' actually establishing 'the legal regime for expropriating refugee property¹⁵⁹'. Far from being an instrument for settling legal controversies over the right of ownership, the law defines in discriminatory and advantageous terms the pre-conditions that will facilitate and *de facto* ratify Israel's settler-colonial expansionism process.

Rendered in a monochrome grey embroidery on 4 felt panels, the work clearly and directly addresses injustice and how legality frames it and justifies unfair – but not unlawful, under those specific circumstances – actions.

The title sharply introduces the question of rights over the construct of legal protection and entitlement. The formula 'set in stone' meaning 'to be very difficult or impossible to change¹⁶⁰', its negation opens up the claim for a subversive approach, and rewriting of law and history.

By declaring the "Land of Israel"—that is, the land of historic Palestine—to be the "historical homeland of the Jewish people," and by absenting Palestinians from the law's purview, the new Nation-State Law secures in legal writing what has been impossible for Israel to attain militarily, politically, and legally—the erasure of Palestine and the disappearance of all Palestinians. Or such is its aspiration.¹⁶¹

As Sharad Chari and Samera Esmeir brilliantly summarise in their introduction to the roundtable discussion about the "Basic Law: Israel—The Nation State of the Jewish People" (2018), the legal frame legitimises and achieves what militarily force has failed to accomplish: that is the disappearance of all Palestinians.

What is significant from the perspective of this research is the recourse to an interpretation of political violence (expressed militarily, legally, socially, architecturally, etc.) finalised to the disappearance of the perceived enemy, of 'the Other'.

¹⁵⁹Established in 1950, "The Absentees' Property Law of 1950 replaced the Emergency Regulations on Absentees' Property of 1948 and established the legal regime of expropriating refugee property. Under the law, any Arab who left his or her place of residence during the war was an absentee, even if he or she did not leave the newly formed state. In this way, the law enabled the expropriation of the land of Palestinians who were present and were citizens of the state but were legally classified as absent." (Sharad Chari and Samera Esmeir, "Legislating Settler Colonialism Today," *CRITICAL TIMES* volume 4, issue 3 (December 2021), accessed January 24, 2024, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-times/article/4/3/562/294166/IntroductionLegislating-Settler-Colonialism-Today>).

¹⁶⁰"Set in stone," Cambridge Dictionary, accessed January 24, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/set-in-stone>.

¹⁶¹Chari and Esmeir, "Legislating Settler Colonialism."

[...] the law also wishes its own destructive colonizing powers away by presenting the land as empty of Palestinians and therefore available for the Jewish state to expand or settle into. This production of emptiness is a typical colonial power operation; the more the law refuses to recognize Palestinians, the more its colonizing operations are evident.¹⁶²

This 'production of emptiness' perfectly condenses a mechanism that translates through numerous tactics of annihilation. The production of emptiness. The word production is more appropriate than creation, which implies the spontaneity of the process, the discoveries that come along, and the openness to an outcome¹⁶³. Production refers to a structured, sequenced, orderly, often mechanised process, one that doesn't embrace the unexpected, and aims at reducing it to a point of non-nuisance.

Following the 1948 war, Israeli law recast Palestinian refugees as "absentees" so as to enable the expropriation of their land and their transfer to the "Custodian of Absentees' Property." Among those refugees, there were also Palestinians who did not leave the newly formed state but became internally displaced. They would become "present absentees," that is, Palestinians who were present, but the law regarded them as "absent" in order to facilitate the takeover of their land.¹⁶⁴

To be present and yet being absented, being rendered invisible, made disappeared. Such is the aim of the architecture of confinement discussed above, which physically segregates, restricts and ghettoes those citizens who are regarded as pariahs, as outcasts. But here surfaces a new level of discrimination, an added layer of cruelty: not only the physical body is targeted, but also the legal persona. The designation of 'present absentee' signifies a new degree in degradation, one that cannot be resisted with one's own bare hands, one that obliterates the name after eliminating the body. It anticipates a process of extermination that many still refrain from naming as genocidal.

The ultimate level in the progression of annihilation is the legal one, as perfidiously exemplified by 'The Nation State of the Jewish People, 2018.'

The magic of this Nation-State Law [...]. While it treats present Palestinians as nonexistent, it does not classify them as "absent." Instead, their absencing is left unremarked. The act of effacement is itself effaced; there is no trace of their existence, not even as "absent."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶²Ibid.

¹⁶³I am thinking here of the poetic approach to emptiness as a generative, originary concept, as conceptualised by Mounir Abou Debs, *L'acteur et le vide* (oser dire éditions, 2019).

¹⁶⁴Chari and Esmeir, "Legislating Settler Colonialism."

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

Law is assimilated into magics for its ability to make disappear what is right in front of your own eyes. In popular circuses of the past, where tricks were performed as entertainment, the magic of the prestidigitator was to make disappear an often sleeping beauty, or a rabbit, or some other cute thing. Here, the disappearing one is the unwanted presence that haunts the 'prestidigitator' – a reminder, still resonant in the etymology of 'nimble fingers' – like an original sin.

By legal means, almost magically, the presence is effaced: once declared absent, they still exist, albeit as shadows. But to remove even the mention is like performing a trick before an audience, only to then anaesthetise them entirely, making them forget they ever witnessed the event. An extreme prowess, if exercised as entertainment; a fabricated immaculateness, a laundering practice now equipped with legal implications.

And yet, this evacuation is still a project, not an accomplished reality. Palestinians remain and continue to struggle against the colonial settlement project. The legal text cannot will them away; it can only aspire to do so.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ibid.

has no right to occupy it, the Custodian may confirm such fact by a certificate under his hand. The certificate shall have the effect of a judgment in favour of the Custodian.

Where the vested property is a plantation or agricultural land, and the Custodian has handed it over to a person for the purpose of cultivation that person shall be entitled to enjoy the produce, and his right shall have priority over any charge vested in another person, therefore

Where the Custodian has done any act in respect of any property in the honest and reasonable, but mistaken, belief that the property is absentee's property, the Custodian shall bear no civil responsibility.

"Absentee" means

a person who was a legal
party situated in the area
was a Palestinian citizen

party situated in the area of Israel and who
was a Palestinian citizen and left his ordinary
place of residence in Palestine

"Palestinian citizen" means

a person who, on the 29th November 1947,
was a Palestinian citizen according to the
Palestinian Citizenship Orders, 1925-1941

"absentee's property" means property the legal
owner of which has ceased to exist, was an

December 11th, 2024

during my morning yoga and meditation practice, the teacher invites us to pay attention to what cannot be seen but still can be felt. The invite relates to the ability to perceive our internal organs during an intense breathing exercise that contemplates a three parts directed inhalation, with an imaginative perception and stretch towards the back of our bodies. An expansion of the rib cage, frontal as well as backwarded.

Of course my mind runs in a different direction, as soon as I hear “pay attention to what cannot be seen but still can be felt.” Because this is at the core of my whole research, the perception of what cannot be seen but still can be felt. Presence is so strictly related to our sight, to the point that ‘to be out of sight’ becomes a synonym of being absent. Is it so? Why this primacy of sight should extend to the point of denying presence to what cannot be seen?

I would argue in favour of the dominance of ‘feeling’ in matters of presence and absence, the visual availability of the person, place, or reality we are longing for being actually of a secondary importance. All other senses are equally neglected, and that regardless of the transfer quality implicit in smelling or tasting, as Proust eloquently and famously has pulled our attention to, making a culinary experience the medium for a jump in a remote past, remained sealed for decades and then unexpectedly offered back to the unaware us. And what could we say about sounds, in their capacity to build, to reconstitute a full scenery, if we only close our eyes and let imagination run back in time?

‘Close your eyes’ seems to be the originating action for allowing memory to populate our mind, to occupy the space, to repurpose the past and serve it nearly as fresh as it once was, when it was the present. From the realm of vision I have moved into dignifying the other senses and over-imposing them on the fading image portrayed by our visual memory. I am driven to think about the mixing sensory quality of sight, and not being sure about the neural reasons for this, I tend to fantasise. Visual memories seem to be strictly connected with a level of awareness and mental processing that the other senses are spared of, in their immediacy and more direct connection to a physicality that is precluded to sight. When I smell jasmine flowers, independently from where I am, I am transported into a late spring night in Beirut, my neck adorned with a white flowers improvised necklace. There is an automatism in this, it is totally un-reflexed. On the contrary, a visual reference will perhaps take me to the same place in time, but it will do it with a mediation, and the overlapping of an image that is not part of my mnemonic vocabulary, creating a dictionary where the biographic, intimate and personal mix and merge with the acquired, external, and shareable material I have encountered.

The immediacy of the evocation is another problematic concept, as induced memories constitute a considerable segment of our mnemonic panorama, and often it is through our ancestors' or older relatives' memories that we acquire the inclination towards a specific absence.

I open my eyes, once completed the breathing exercise, I stretch and get up, turning towards my sticky mat to roll it after class. It is then that I notice the traces my body left on the mattress after years of practice: hands and feet mark their presence with a shadow. My very human stigmata, and yet I can't stop myself from thinking of the far more famous ones, the shadow of a revered body preserved through the linen that supposedly enveloped his flesh.

Beginning with a reflection on the actual meaning of political ideas turned ideologies (such as currencies and flags – broken, faded, or on the verge of exploding, – as their signifiers), and continuing with investigations into the opaque remnants of past history (*An Atlas of Clouds. Colonial Clouds*), *Archive of Silence* is closely linked to a number of series that centre on questions of access to civil rights and the gap between the civic body and its so-called “representative” power (‘Black’; ‘Commemorative Stamps’). This line of inquiry leads to the most recent works created over the past three years, which directly address state-inflicted violence (*The Echo of the Void*; *The Eclipse of Words*; *Nation / Narration*; *Monument to the falling Wall*).

The knitted audiotapes conjugate different levels of documentation: the audiotapes are first of all recorded, but the voice remains inaudible as they are then functionally transposed and become the very material for a textile piece, thus being deprived of their original function. The recorded voice, hence supposed to be documented, is here re-coded, silenced and instrumentalised to support the creation of a soundless, sonic fabric. The transition from text to textile, from sound to silence, addresses the challenges of effective communication, of the civic community’s audibility, a presence that is more often than not, regrettably, negated.

The work interrogates silence from a perspective of imposed censorship and internalised self-censorship while “playing” with those concepts and almost literally “playing them.” The audiotapes, bearing potentially subversive or unfitting contents, are first silenced (transformed/ transposed into threads) and then actually exposed, although rendered indecipherable¹⁶⁸.

Questions of concealment and camouflage, of the impossibility of openly manifesting specific urgencies, are both evoked, invoked, and addressed¹⁶⁹.

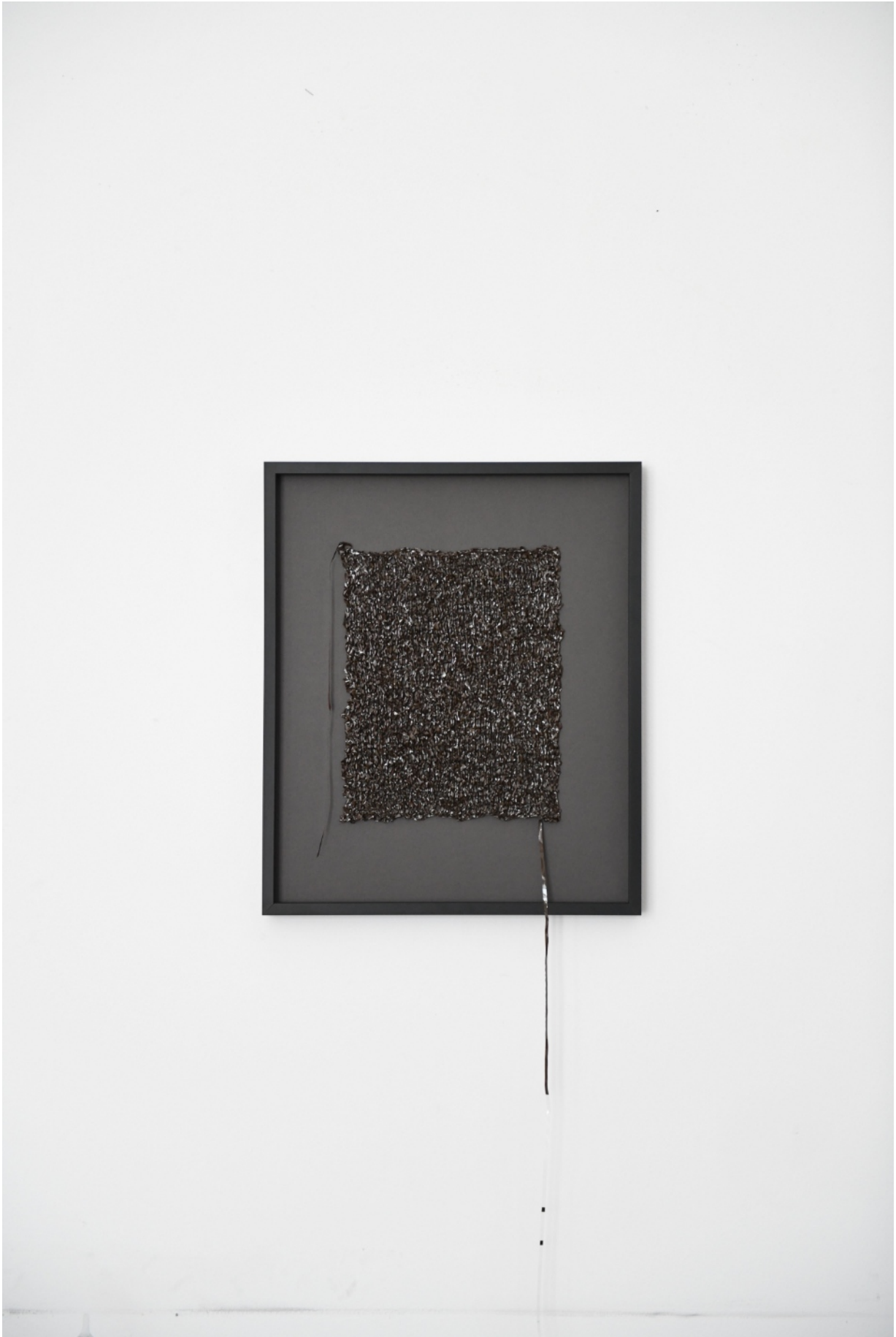
¹⁶⁷ *Archive of Silence*, 2023-ongoing. Hand knitted pre-recorded audiotapes, dimensions variable.

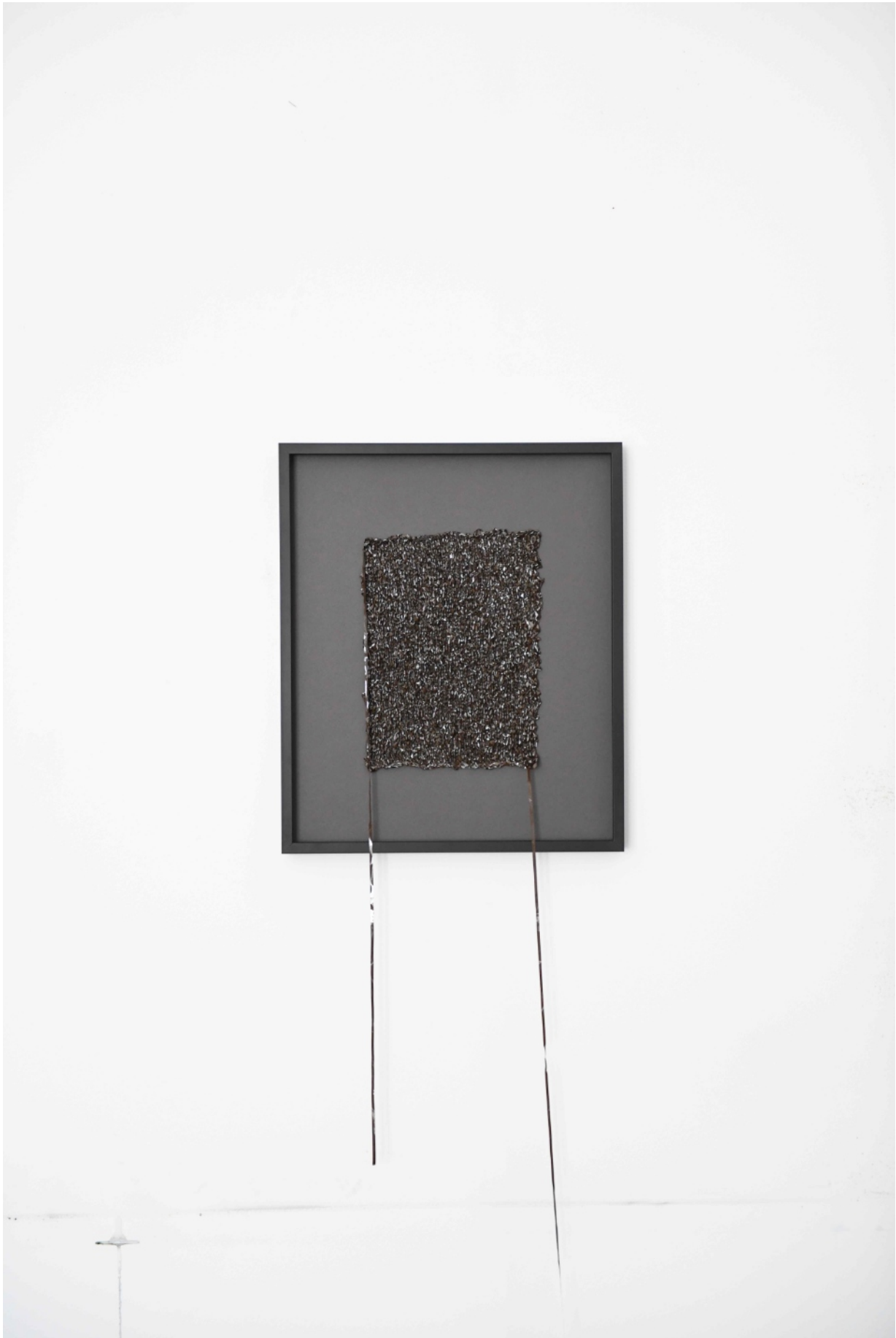
¹⁶⁸ See here *Speaking the Unfathomable* and part II, chapter 10 “Commemorative Stamps. Aphasia” for additional annotations on the principles informing this series.

¹⁶⁹ Artistic practices are situated, and in their situatedness, they are forced to engage with the political landscape in which they operate, with the rules, regulations and laws that they are confronted with.

I moved to the United Arab Emirates 19 years ago, and since then I have faced the need to find ways to evade the omnipresent censorship, especially given the nature of my practice, which is mostly political. Consequently, I find myself reflecting on how to convey criticality without resorting to overt criticism. The flip side of this experience is the internalisation of censorship, the self-questioning that constantly crosses my and my fellow artists’ minds as we try to avoid explicitly addressing critical subjects while ensuring the work remains relevant, concealing our intentions without diluting our message.







Over the years, I have frequently developed projects that foreground and have at their core language accessibility. All these works share the same strategy, that is, a conscious, conceptual misunderstanding in their premises, in the very way they are offered to the viewer. Prior to *Archive of Silence*, two other series vividly exemplify ongoing tensions, controversies, and struggles surrounding principles of legibility, entitlement and agency.

The first series is titled 'Black', each project being followed by a subtitle to identify the specific legal texts I am questioning¹⁷⁰. The articles are translated into English braille and reproduced in a monochrome black on multiple black canvasses, each one numbered in Roman numbers, to emphasise the connection to the legal frame that they define and operate within, while also claiming agency for us, the people.

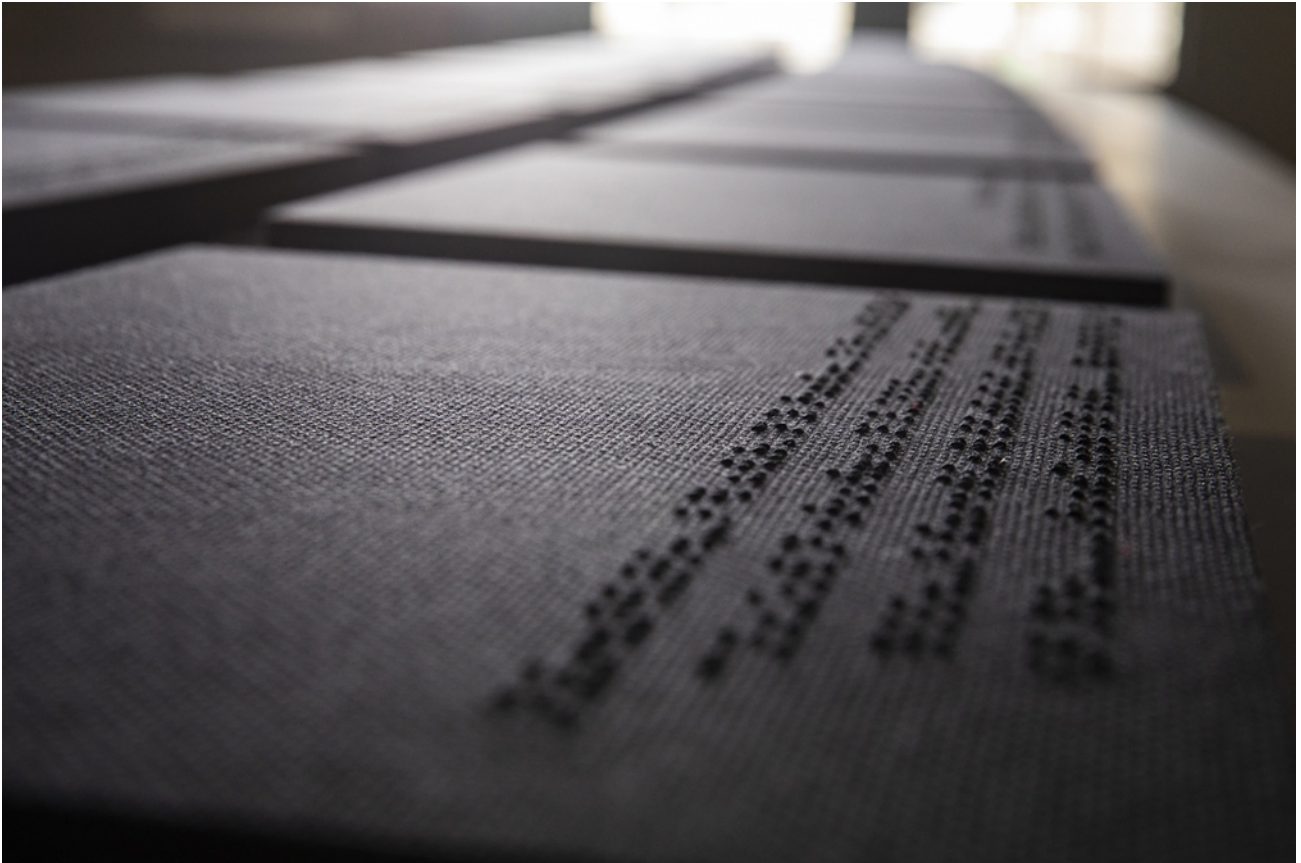
Social blindness manifests when the texts are translated into braille. The rendering is almost imperceptible, the opaque marks emerging subtly, identifiable only with willing and careful scrutiny. This modulation prompts new considerations of the tenets' status, power and relevance. Re-appropriated and presented in an inscrutable form they are swaddled and coded, indicative of how collective apathy amounts to a quasi-complicity in the dispersal of the declaration's urgency, facilitating their violation.

As the very nature of braille implies tactility to read the text, an action that is negated as it comes to fragile artworks, that consequently cannot be touched, I point at the core question of accessibility, or rather inaccessibility, of those same rights.

Stripping away the linguistic impact of the articles, a kind of mute censorship is enacted and the viewer is lulled by the neutralised, non-confrontational minimalism. The process of transformation calls into question the concept of universality – can such principles be understood and shared by all? As the linguistic power of each is challenged, issues of viability are raised – existing and inscribed, yet not adhered to, have these declarations been consigned to a collective blindspot? Using a coded form that is incomprehensible to most, 'Black' highlights that its existence as a formal legal statement, in fact, cloaks the reality it is meant to describe and shape. Form overrides function giving rise to a feeling of discomfort at the impotence of a declaration enunciated but not enacted. We witness the seductive stasis in which we exist, where codified declarations are present, yet we fail to penetrate their surface, to grasp their intent and purpose¹⁷¹.

¹⁷⁰Black. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 2013; Black. *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, 2013; Black. *International Criminal Court*, 2014; Black. *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 1992*, 2016; Black. *Convention on the Status of Refugees*, 2018; Black. *Aarhus Convention*, 2019.

¹⁷¹This section paraphrases passages from the catalogue accompanying my exhibition "Finer: a Thread... In the Swell of Wandering Words," which I co-authored with the curator of the exhibition, Cima Azzam.



Black. Convention on the Status of Refugees, 2018. Hand embroidery on canvas, set of 20, each 30x40cm.

A similar short circuit is activated in the series 'Commemorative Stamps,' which are either created out of litter that I collect in my urban peregrinations or entirely fabricated based on online sources and appropriated imageries pertaining to specific research fields (i.e. capital punishment and environmental justice). Reflecting on the subjects of representation reproduced on stamps, the series subverts notions of celebration and national pride, instead drawing attention to the mundane, ambiguous, and even shameful elements specific to societies, the elements that are often concealed. Because of their very nature – spontaneous, popular, but not legitimised by a state validation – the stamps cannot grant free circulation to the letters. As they are unable to reach their recipient, the letters embody the discontinuous communication line between an individual's voice and a nation, the social body's inability to affect major political decisions, or even to be heard. At the same time the entire process of creating fake stamps, of fictionalising a form of communication, opens up a space for freedom. By transforming mundane and dismissed objects into stamps, the act serves to authenticate, validate and empower the expression of an otherwise inaudible citizenship, as they appropriate one of the identity-defining instruments sanctioned and licensed by national entities.



Commemorative Stamps. Environmental Justice, 2019. Fabricated letters and stamps, Set of 50, circa 11.5x16 cm each. Commissioned by the Saudi Art Council for the 7th edition (2020) of “21, 39 Jeddah Arts” (Jeddah, KSA).

Still reflecting on contradictions and adopting them as a visual method for drawing attention to, and potentially reclaiming negated rights, the series of knitted audiotapes (*Archive of Silence*) conjugates different archival strategies with the purpose of questioning their actual outreach.

Voice recording has often been regarded as a primary and reliable source of documentation: faithful, unfiltered, and unedited, it ostensibly preserves the voice of the witness. Yet, this same voice risks obliteration beneath the sheer volume of collected material that fills the archive, condemning the voice to remain inaudible, or unheard, unless consciously retrieved.

Here the audiotapes, initially recorded, are deprived of their original function, and almost violated as they become the very material for a textile piece. The recorded voice, therefore intended to be preserved, is transferred to the tactility of a silent, sonic fabric. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the transition from text to textile, from sound to silence, addresses issues of effective communication, of the interaction between power and civic community, or rather of its inefficacy. Censorship is also at the core of this work, the recorded and re-functionalised tape alluding to the secrecy of expressed divergent opinions that are then neutralised as they reach the public sphere. Or re-shaped, quite literally¹⁷².

[...] the labor of missing asks that our words dialogue with silence rather than seek contact. [...] Such a conversation is not a soliloquy when silence is understood as the presence of another who has not yet answered – one exceedingly physical, namely interred, even if tangibly unavailable.¹⁷³

¹⁷²Although not immediately relatable to the political discourse that forms the conceptual framework for these and other works, Cassin's, Apter's and Lezra's *Dictionary of Untranslatables* serves as a valuable resource and makes a claim – positively stated – for the impossibility of equalising languages and for the need to approach their untranslatable nuances and specific idioms.

Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, eds., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

¹⁷³Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny," 126.

Someone emerged from the shadows of history and said they knew the place where

Entering the elevator

The end of a working day

Almost holiday

After a man in a light training suit

Coming from what seems to be

A regular walk

A healthy habit

And followed by a second man

A nervous half-elf

Carrying a cushion and a computer bag

A delivery guy slips-in through closing sliding doors

That feeling of catching a moving vehicle

Whatever direction they move through in space

And then realising it's the wrong one

Quickly exiting with that same smile

An accidental success

the avoidance of a mistake

Serendipities of all sorts

The half-elf quickly presses the button

To fasten the closing of the doors

Almost on the exiting body

Of the delivery guy

Another brown body

As echoes in my memory

The comment of a man with claims of

Equanimity

32, 48, 51

The man in light training suit exits first

NoHiNoBye

The half-elf quickly jumping to accelerate

The doors closing mechanism

he must be tired after a day at work

Or having someone at home

He is anxious to meet again

The repetition of a ritual

The news today are all about this

Someone emerged from the shadows of history

And said they knew the place where

A carrousel of voices echoing one another

After decades of silence

Everyone saw it, everyone knew it

No one spoke or could speak

quite a nuance

I'm next in line

I throw a goodbye followed by silence

Before leaving the cubicle

And catching with the back of my eye

The rapid movement of his hand

Accelerating the ascension of the elevator

The book I'm reading opens on

another painful chapter

Of silenced traumas

Almost the same exact plot

Decades and thousands of km apart
Witnesses emerging after decades
Half centuries

To share the horror of their testimony
Is it a relief?

Après m'avoir écoutée, ils repartent, tandis que je reste des jours à me tourmenter.

*Ce que je n'ai pas dit jusqu'ici?
... Que peut-il encore y avoir à dire?*

I feel like I have a “mission” to move beyond the need to only be understood through one single marker of belonging. I ask myself how to honor the need for an elective “isolation,” without being excluded from partaking in a community or society. This is where dialogue can help. I feel that translation is one of the strategies that demand a dialogic exercise. But also, I consider translation as an inconclusive negotiation. [...] I'm always translating to make meaning¹⁷⁵

Language-based practices are deeply rooted in my artistic research approach. Often resorting to the verbal sphere, words are explored through their insertion into the structure of physical objects: in this isolation, attention is drawn to their intrinsic, inherent meaning.

As mentioned above, The Commemorative Stamps¹⁷⁶ consist of fabricated sets of stamps which are then activated for fictionally posting letters addressed to pertinent governmental ministries and institutions worldwide, thus referring to issues of dialogue between the people and their representatives and the possibility of solutions being circulated from the constituent base of society. Just as the stamp cannot accord the necessary official authorisation for the missive to circulate, so too do the words transcribed in those letters or postcards remain trapped in a vacuum, unheard and unreceived. Language is questioned in its very possibility to reach its addressee and to satisfy the conditions of positive, impactful communication. If the function of language is predominantly framed in negative terms, asserted as a lack, then, conversely, the urge to overturn this perception emerges, raising questions of alternative ways to incorporate audible voices and activate them to become publicly incisive and effective.

The idea of legibility – or rather of the lack thereof – is equally relevant. The fictional letters remain unreachable, unreadable: they could be written in any language or alphabet, or they could bear no writing at all. The viewer becomes a voyeur, trying to catch a glimpse, to capture a hint that would guide them towards solving this minor dilemma.

And yet this is not just an exercise on futility: curiosity is regarded as a potent trigger to activate questions at a deeper level, to independently pursue a path of further investigation.

Borrowing from the idea of the palimpsest, where the original writing is effaced, yet its traces remain visible underneath the over-imposed text, both notions of forceful, resolute action and of a no less indefatigable repetition are inferred. The very fact of focussing on the repeated use of a same support to carry more than one text presents the advantage of visualising the circularity of thoughts connatural

¹⁷⁴*Commemorative Stamps. Aphasia*, 2020/2025. Manipulated digital prints, envelopes, overall dimensions variable.

¹⁷⁵“Making as Translation. A Dialogue with Christian Nyampeta,” in Cotter, *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, 175-176.

¹⁷⁶The ‘Commemorative Stamps’ series originates from a project developed in 2018, within the frame of The Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF), Abu Dhabi, and has been developed over the past years to address socio-political issues (capital punishment, environmental justice), as well as to acknowledge the fleeting nature of our mundane desires.

to the process of “absented” thinking (the longing mind, the nostalgic approach), which repeats the same discourse and, in doing so, erases the previous words to replace them with nearly identical ones. The palimpsest makes absence – understood as negation, unavailability, deficiency, deprivation – visible, through its haptic evidence. The scarcity of available materials necessitated the reuse of existing surfaces, following a process of erasing the previous text.

Erasure is another interesting concept to consider in relation to absence, if contemplated from an archival perspective, that is from the perspective of the perseverance of memory. The palimpsest by inevitably negating the mnemonic function embedded in the written support, enacts as an intentional re-writing of history, it replaces the past with the present and, in doing so, consigns entire fragments of past histories to oblivion, to a condition that constitutes a form of perpetual absence.

The work, *Commemorative Stamps. Aphasia* fictionalises a correspondence about the notion of absence, emptiness, and void. As a first step consists in the creation of the stamps, I opted to revisit the catalogue of my previously fabricated philatelic collection, which is predominantly made out of litter: discarded, unwanted, abandoned, these materials are devoid of function, therefore implying a gap, even if only functional, or appreciative, as they are left behind, neglected, rendered useless. The selection of the texts that constitute the content of the envelopes is heterogeneous, not strictly academic, mostly responding to a personal digest, a non-methodical summary of literary findings. Correspondence is, by definition, an acknowledgement of distance, a marker of absence. By addressing the letters to impossible receivers or to addresses that can no longer be located, attention is driven towards the impossibility of the exchange. Silence, which is implied in the medium of writing, is expanded by the condition of a forced acceptance: the impossibility of receiving an answer, the negation of a dialogical reasoning. What remains unfathomable is not only the content of the correspondence, but also its fixed structure, as the subject matter resists full exploration or comprehension through a conversational mode, and is mono-directional since its outset. Why call it a correspondence, then?

Grammatically speaking, unfathomable is the negative form of an adjective. The noun it is derived from, ‘fathom,’ which represents “a unit for measuring the depth of water, equal to 1.8 meters or six feet¹⁷⁷,” is rarely used in its positive form. The original sense related to the body, considered as an instrument, able to provide an accurate enough meter, a relational standard, the average outstretched arms clearly reaching to the measure indicated in today’s dictionaries’ definition. It is curious and perhaps ironic to observe that the prevailing negative use of the adjective and verb seems to invalidate the effectiveness of the meter: the outstretched body is not standardised, the depth of waters is

¹⁷⁷“Fathom,” Cambridge dictionary, accessed, 28.08.24, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fathom>.

inaccessible – in its countability – to the unassisted human body. Approximation is the only ascertained truth.

Establishing a correspondence within these accepted parameters of indefiniteness becomes then suitable, sufficiently good, and certainly convenient. The aborted conversation also highlights, in this very premise, the vacuum left by a removed agent. The subject matter occupies the page in a manner that exceeds any human capacity to disclose, reveal, or profess a comprehension of its constituent nature, one that, in fact, remains inaccessible to the very logic we try to employ in order to decipher it. The work also serves another purpose, as it addresses a nodal point in my artistic practice, which is the intersection between the material expression of my doing and the verbal sphere that always accompanies it. Poetry, hybridity, and exophonic practices are all aspects intrinsic to this body of work. Often issued from a poetic register, the texts incorporated in this work, as well as in other similar works¹⁷⁸, suggest the possibility of adopting non-linear, composite and associative vocabularies to approach truths that are, and remain, beyond reach of logical discourse.

Writing in a language that is not one's mother tongue encapsulates the existence of a gap, of a divide between an originating mental structure and an acquired one. A widely shared condition, often forced upon entire communities, mostly accepted and even invited at an individual scale, exophony makes the link between language and identity undeniable. As it is recurrently the case, at least in my practice, the gaps, the crevices where certitude slips and new meaning can be created, represent a privileged focus, with their spontaneous, but also with their carefully orchestrated adoption of a momentary void for introducing a question around impermanence, dissonance and dissimilarity as generative spaces. One final consideration concerns the creative process specific to this body of work, which is consistently marked by a notable dose of playfulness, to offset the weightiness of the subject matter, and to introduce a counterbalance, or counterpoint.

¹⁷⁸See *Museum of Innocence*, 2018. Vintage tin box, fabricated stamps, postcards, dimensions variable: a fictionalised archive of postcards, where the texts are mainly excerpts from my diaries, transcribed on empty, non-panoramic postcards, addressed to either fictional or unreachable recipients.





11.06.2020

Beirut, at last!

Travelled back on a repatriation flight, making me think about notions of home and belonging, a corrosive thought...

The dictionary has set the question and provided an answer: repatriation is the return to one's own country. In my case, not the land of fathers, rather the land of my children...

M. Sa

¹⁷⁹The postcards reproduced here belong to a series created during the summer and autumn of 2020 (June – November), physically mailed and addressed to T.

Cristhian de Marchi, Blue (Hands), 2020



23.06.2020

"... the effort to become language ..."

Handwritten signature



Cristiana de Marchi, Anzio, 2020

7.10.2020

"... al tempo succede qualcosa. Io so che succede qualcosa al tempo e non parlo dello spazio. Io sento che succede qualcosa e che per di più non è la prima volta che succede, anche se trattandosi del tempo ogni volta è la prima volta e non c'è esperienza che valga, ma in fondo è meglio così perché l'esperienza in genere è una frode"

MA

To focus on the gestures, work with silence.¹⁸⁰

“Mother” draws inspiration from a tragic event in Isadora Duncan’s biography, following the death of her two young children in a car accident on April 19, 1913, and is imbued with intensity and participatory expressiveness, aiming to foster a profound connection between the dancer and the audience¹⁸¹.

My first encounter with Isadora Duncan’s *Mother* was a mediated encounter. In the spring of 2020 I happened to watch Damien Manivel’s *Les enfants d’Isadora*¹⁸². The movie follows the trajectory of three women (a dancer, a choreographer, a spectator) who approach Isadora Duncan’s piece from their individual positionalities: re-enacting it, bringing it back to life, and internalising it. *Mother* represents itself through an absence: “there is no film of Isadora dancing this piece. There is no photography. The only document left is a partition, wrote in Labanotation.”¹⁸³

It has been claimed that this work, which came to be known as *Mother*, is a dirge-like lament for Duncan’s own children—or perhaps for her own weariness. The “mother” theme is a familiar one in Russian folklore, which abounds with references to feminine personifications, such as Mother Russia, Mother Volga and Baba Yaga.

The dance is a masterpiece of simplicity, reduced to a single descending line in which the dancer progresses diagonally across the stage. Sinking to the floor at last, she extends one arm in a final anguished appeal which calls to mind Duncan’s forlorn note to Victor Seroff: “Think of me & play Scriabin—perhaps you will be nearer to my spirit when the body with all its material nuisance is not there.” (Seroff, *The Real Isadora*, p. 429). [...] this dance is [...] a poetical statement of bleakness implying crushing images of human loss.¹⁸⁴

The universal and personal images of hope, care and loss refer to both Duncan’s life and to the timeless relationship of parent and child. The movement itself pulls and heaves through the body, emphasizing the weighted approach that Duncan was taking in her choreography at the

¹⁸⁰Daniel Kasman, “Whatever She Will Do, It Will Be a Dance: Damien Manivel Discusses “Isadora’s Children,” *MUBI Notebook*, 4 November 2019, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://mubi.com/en/notebook/posts/whatever-she-will-do-it-will-be-a-dance-damien-manivel-discusses-isadora-s-children>.

¹⁸¹*Mother* is an original choreography by Isadora Duncan, created in 1921 to Scriabin’s “Etude, Op. 2, No. 1.” The piece, categorised as a dramatic dance, is part of a trilogy of dances, and was premiered in 1923. It was revived by Irma Duncan in 1927, and restaged by Julia Levien in 1978.” (Isadora Duncan Archive, accessed October 19, 2020, <https://isadoraduncanarchive.org/repertory/38/>).

¹⁸²Damien Manivel, *Les enfants d’Isadora (Isadora’s Children)*, France, South Korea 2019, 84 min.

¹⁸³Kasman, “Whatever She Will Do.”

The Laban notations are a written sign language that allows a translation of movement on the page.

¹⁸⁴Nadia Chilkovsky Nahumck, *Isadora Duncan: The Dances* (Washington DC: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994).

time. Like in many of Duncan's works, the dancer represents both the mourner and mourned, the body and the spirit.¹⁸⁵



The images reproduced here¹⁸⁶ clarify an essential element that connects this specific choreography to my research on absence.

The performance shows the body of the mother emotionally involved into a series of caring gestures and actions directed towards the bodies that the viewer is invited to identify with those of her children. Nevertheless these bodies are materialised as absences, their volume evoked and yet unreachable. The absence of the child figure is magnetising.

In this tension and visual manifestation of absence, a first point of contact is established with my research in a palpable attempt to make absence present. Another aspect that will be explored more thoroughly later consists in the shape of the dancer's body, more often during the representation traceable to a triangular one. Here only one edge is clearly readable, constituted by the inclined body

¹⁸⁵Catherine Gallant, in "Isadora Duncan Archive," accessed August 27, 2024, <https://www.isadoraduncanarchive.org>.

¹⁸⁶Kelli Edwards, in *Mother*, performed in Boston, 2014. "Isadora Duncan Archive," accessed October 19, 2020, <https://www.isadoraduncanarchive.org/video/115>.

of the mother: if the absent body of the children is suggested in its horizontality and constitutes the base of this ideal triangle, the third edge remains an open terrain for speculation.



Do not think that you can fight this just by exaggerating your separateness.¹⁸⁸

As an extension of my investigation into political violence, specifically state-inflicted violence, encompassing visual representations and documentation of executions, as well as literary accounts bearing witness to the hardship of prolonged segregation and imprisonment as a mechanism to silence political dissent¹⁸⁹ – the figure of the mother has resurfaced as an emblem of a secondary, so to speak, victim. ‘Indirect’ could appear to be the most appropriate adjective to describe the effect of an action inflicted contingently. But ‘indirect,’ with its implication of accidentality, unintentionality, and derivativeness from its primary cause, doesn’t account for the intensity of the emotional and physical involvement that a mother, or a close of kin, a lover or partner, could actually testify of their sorrow, of their distress, of their inability to cope with the world’s demands as they would in times of normalcy. ‘Second-level victim’ seems to convey the urgency of the status, that of being assailed, while also clarifying that the suffering, the wound, is inflicted through a third party, through an interposed body

¹⁹⁰

Focussing on the representation of the mother in European painting – typically confined to either a blissful figure in adoration of the infant, or a grieving one mourning her dead son – I started a textile series based on classical depictions of the lamentation, in which the mother holds her son’s lifeless body on her lap, cradling his head, her upper body inclined tenderly towards him.

The works in this series are based on classical figurations, beginning with Giotto¹⁹¹. In my monochromatic rendering, the figures of this representation – originally conceived as a *sacra rappresentazione* – are translated into contours, into outlines. As the silhouettes preclude the portrayal of facial expressions, the sense of desolation in the face of irreparable loss is conveyed solely through the relational positioning of the bodies. The unnatural condition of mothers holding their adult sons on their laps is emphasised by the sons’ bodies exceeding the physical boundaries of the mothers’ forms. The rigid horizontality of the dead body, while the mother is bending towards his head, in an attempt to

¹⁸⁷*The Material Thickness of Time*, 2024. Hand knitted wool, 171x138 cm.

The Material Thickness of Time, 2024. Hand embroidery on canvas, diptych, 26,5x28 each.

¹⁸⁸Édouard Glissant, “The Cry of the World,” in *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020), 11.

¹⁸⁹Primary sources for the research on the political use of imprisonment are the letters written by Gramsci during his long and eventually fatal incarceration: Gramsci, *Lettere dal carcere*, and the collection of letters written by political prisoners of the resistance against Italian fascism, who were sentenced to death: Piero Malvezzi and Giovanni Pirelli eds., *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana (8 settembre 1943 – 25 aprile 1945)*, (Einaudi 1952).

See also here part II, chapter 4.

¹⁹⁰“Only twice comes that cry of the mother which one hears as without one’s self – at birth and at death. [...] Why the same? Since one is the cry of supreme joy and the other of sorrow. I do not know why but I know they are the same,” Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (Éditions Lambda, Alexandre Penigaut, 2017), 303.

¹⁹¹Giotto di Bondone, *Compianto sul Cristo morto*, 1303-1305 circa. Fresco, 200x185 cm (Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy).

revive a contact repeated thousand times in their childhood and now forever precluded¹⁹², creates a geometry of the interrelation that translates into a near triangle. The question that arises and which will be examined in greater depth in the following pages, concerns the third element that would ‘close’ the triangle.

The textile pieces recreate the scene not only through a reduction of medium –namely, the monochromatic rendering –but also by adopting another intrinsic technical characteristic: the specific nature of knitting, which constructs the background simultaneously with the formation of the figuration¹⁹³.

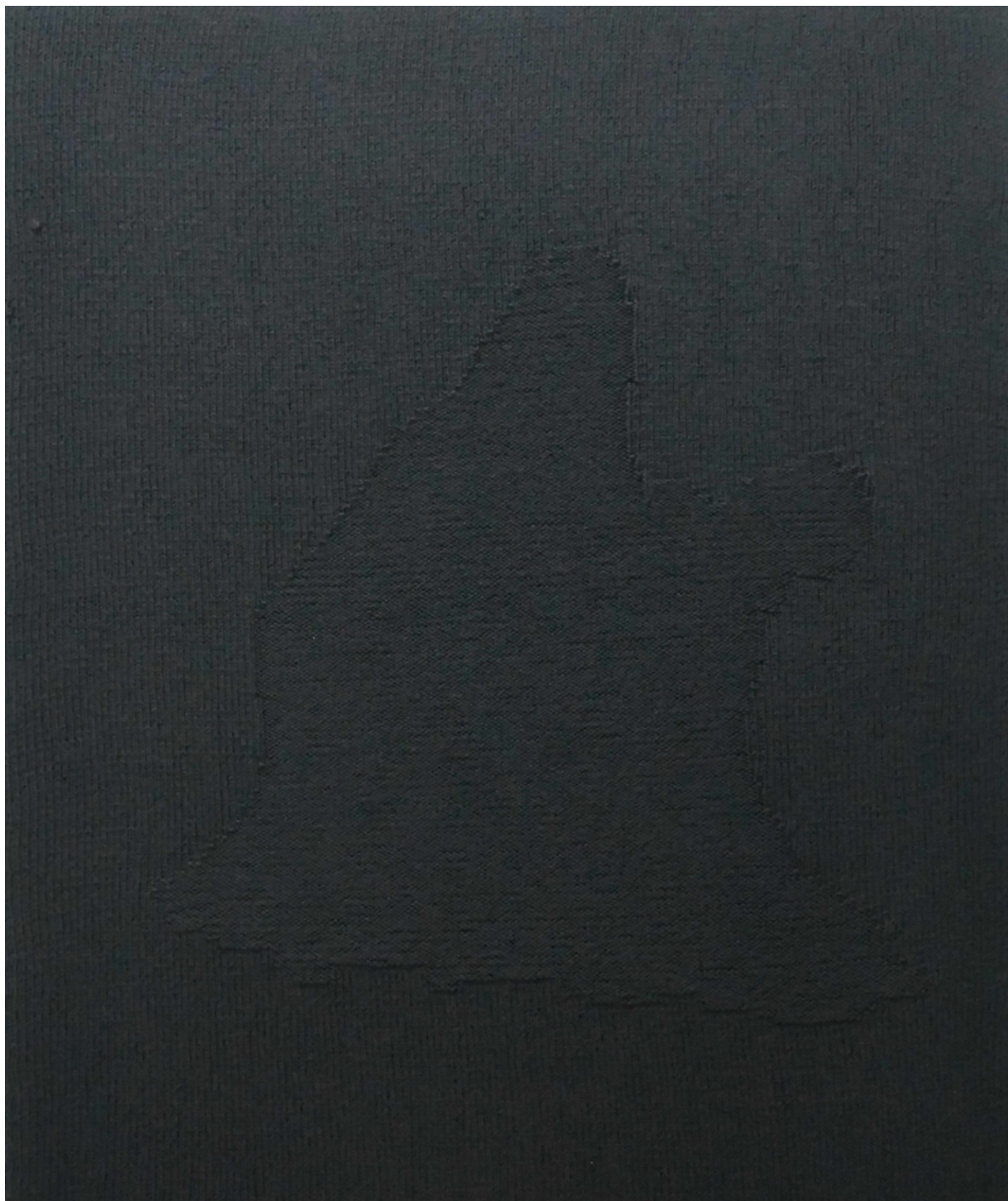
In this extreme abstraction from the initial reference, the intention to dissociate the representation from the context of a religious affiliation becomes urgent and explicit. Working with multiple layers –and often with a superimposition of several of them –I have, for this series, gathered readily available visual documentation from online sources: images from recent and current conflicts, which regrettably, form an abundant archive. These images depict the strikingly similar gesture of mothers mourning their grown children, holding their bodies for the last time—an ultimate act of care, in which one body seeks to envelop another with its own¹⁹⁴.

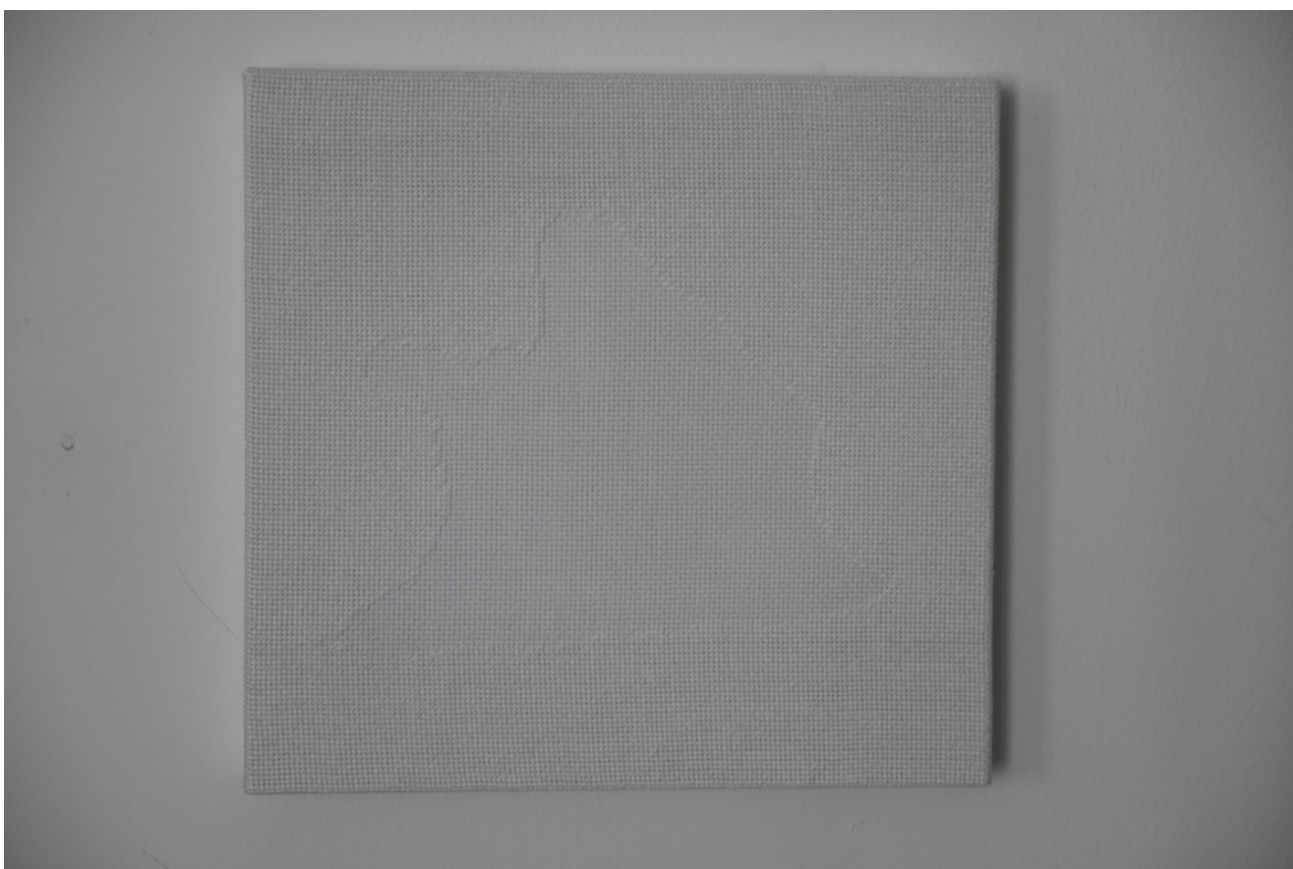
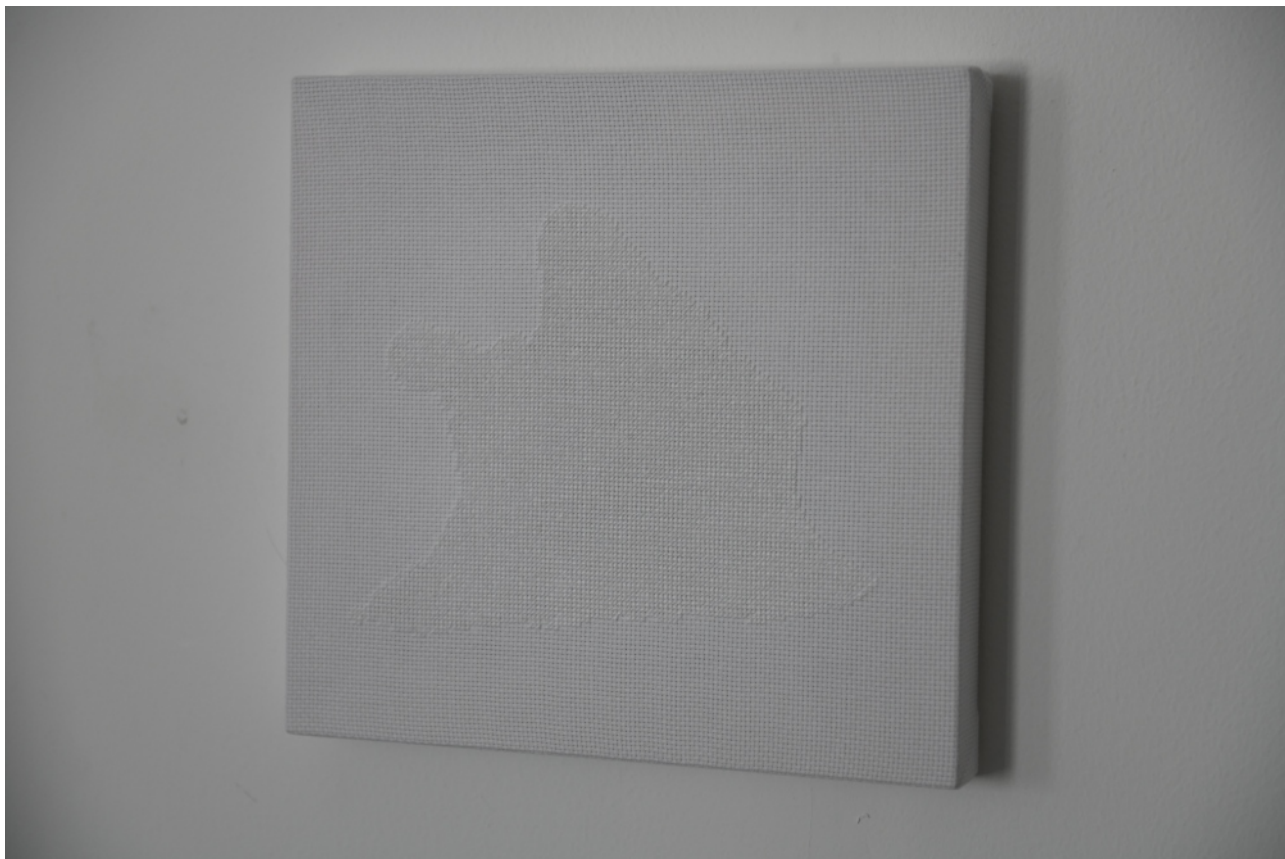
Through the filter of these many images, with their nearly perfect postural overlap, single configurations are built as silhouettes, abstractions of gestures rather than references to specific occasions, thus offering the representation of a human experience instead of a religious symbol. This same silhouette is reproduced in a small diptych, repeated once in relief and then as an embossed figuration. In its hollowness, the latter becomes a literal embodiment of the trace, the shadow and the spectre of the corresponding positive canvas. Or inversely, the positive appears to be extracted from a mould, subsequently left void, like a cast shadow.

¹⁹²“I took no account of time – I had entered a dreary land of greyness where no will to live or move existed. When will sorrow is encountered there is for the stricken, no gesture, not expression. Like Niobe turned to stone, I sat and longed for annihilation in death,” (Duncan, *My Life*, 306).

¹⁹³This is an extremely important point, which I have already mentioned earlier (see part II, chapter 6), as it comes to reflecting on the relevance of specific episodes within the larger texture of historical deployment, and on the notion of contextuality.

¹⁹⁴The media offer us, and actually submerges us with, ample opportunities to witness ‘the pain of others,’ to make it ours, or to observe it from a distance – that of the screen, that of geographic or cultural differences – to sense our own impotence and even the shame of being unable to intervene.





In the wide circles of timelessness, everything material and temporal will fail, including the manifestation of the beloved.¹⁹⁶

In her book titled *Inclinations: A critique of rectitude*¹⁹⁷, the renowned philosopher Adriana Cavarero quite literally introduces the position of the ‘inclined body’ as a corrective to the dominance of the upright, erect posture. The contrast between these two figures – the rigidly vertical body, traditionally seen as a prerogative of the masculine; and the forward-leaning, almost ‘protruding’ body¹⁹⁸, attending to others, often more fragile, or vulnerable bodies, associated with the feminine sphere – inevitably invokes geometry as a means of visualising their opposing ways of occupying space.

An expansion on Cavarero’s analysis of the feminine relational model, which is mostly directed to the cure and care of an infant body, can be applied to the Pietas’ archetype. After revisiting a selection of memorable representations of the Lamentation, from some of the most notable Renaissance figurations to more recent images issued from the chronicles of the present, it became apparent that the reciprocity of the bodies creates a geometry that can be roughly referred to as a triangular shape, where the inclination of the mourning mother’s silhouette represents one of the sides, while the ‘base’ is always coinciding with the dead body.

This observation allows for the introduction of two additional marginal annotations. The first one concerns the inherent horizontality of the dead body: a condition almost universally acknowledged and reflected in funerary practices, where the body is generally laid flat to rest in earth, with various materials interposed between the bare body and the ground’s surface. This fundamental opposition to the vertical body transcends the disparity between the masculine and the feminine, as it visually announces the passage, the transition from life to death.

¹⁹⁵The traditional lamentation finds its origins in ancient Greek rituals and stretches through the manifestation of contemporary rites: more specifically, in the Levantine socio-political milieu, emotional manifestation in contexts of grief and mourning exudes the private sphere. Both in classic literature and in ceramics and sculpture – our main source of information about the classic Greek world, which is the primary field of research here – mourning is portrayed as a feminine prerogative.

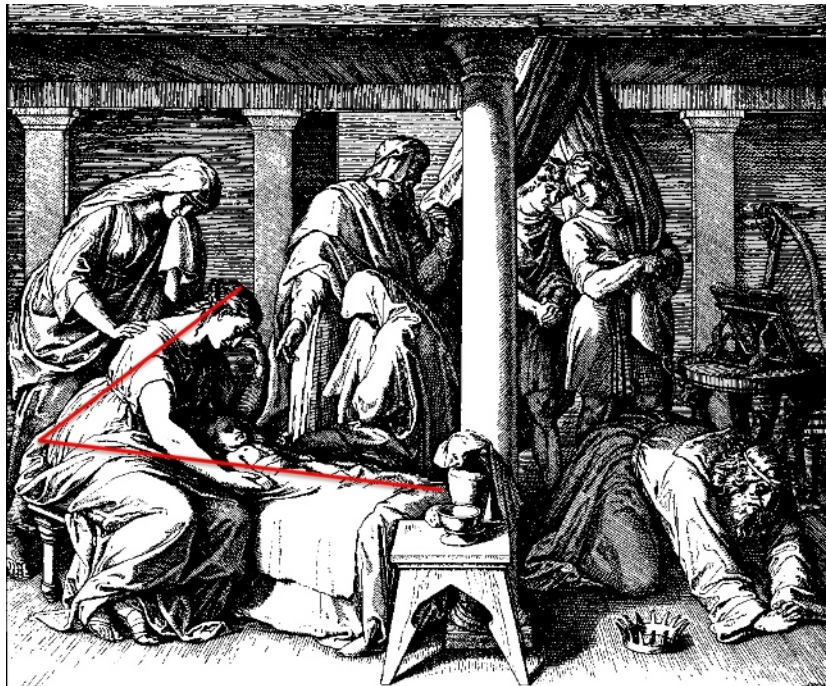
¹⁹⁶Mary Oliver, *Winter Hours*, 1999, cited in: Lee Weng Choy, *Hours, Accidental and Arbitrary: A Year of Writing Lonely*, (Stolon Press, Sydney, 2023), 22.

¹⁹⁷Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinazioni. Critica della rettitudine* (Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2013).

¹⁹⁸A revelatory verb, as ‘to protrude’ mostly applies to the lips, as they are ready to offer or receive the gift of a kiss, another manifestation of openness and relationality.



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, 1498-1499¹⁹⁹



Julius Schnorr von Karolsfeld, *David and Bathsheba Mourning the Death of Their Child*, 1839²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹"Pietà," Wikipedia, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietà>.

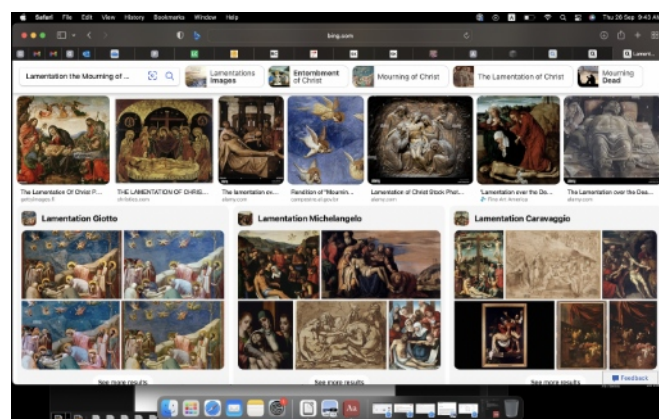
²⁰⁰"I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel, 12:23): this biblical passage, where David mourns the death of his son, interestingly echoes Walid Sadek's considerations on the impossibility of return for the forcibly disappeared. Steward Hall's considerations in response and against the question if 'one can ever return,' are equally enlightening,

Lying – also called recumbency, prostration, or decubitus in medicine (from Latin decumbo 'to lie down') – is a type of human position in which the body is more or less horizontal and supported along its length by the surface underneath. Lying is the most common position while being immobilized (e.g. in bedrest), while sleeping, or while being struck by injury or disease.²⁰¹

This definition brings us back to the feminine body, as it tends to other bodies, less able, more fragile, or already defunct, in what seems to be an existential drive, entailing the preservation of and care for the physical integrity of other bodies: external although often mothered by the feminine body, and hence only partially external, as I would argue, thus reinforcing the dimension of intimacy implicit in all forms of physical care.

Turning to the second consideration anticipated earlier, the inclined body constituting one of the triangle's edges – either on the right or the left, – the geometry remains open, at times completed by surrounding figures, partaking in the mother's grief. But as it comes to the equation between the mother and the son, nothing equal or proportional seems to close the triangle. There you have the inanimate body of the son in his horizontality, the mourning body of the mother, inclined, and on the other side, a void of comparable energy.

This is the void that opens toward the after, a vacuum that may be understood as the vastness of the grieving process. The open edge, while withholding the third element required to create a closed surface, instead gives way to the emergence of a volume, shaped by the labour of mourning, thereby surpassing the zero-dimensionality of a sealed corner²⁰².



although with regards to a different field of research focusing on creolisation. And as exile is evoked, especially within the cultural frame of Palestinian diaspora, Mahmoud Darwish's poetic reflexions are an unmissable reference: Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, trans. Ibrahim Muhawi (University of California Press, 1995).

The woodcut reproduced here is sourced from "Mourning," Wikipedia, accessed August 27, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mourning#/media/File:Schnorr_von_Carolsfeld_Bibel_in_Bildern_1860_103.png.

²⁰¹“Lying (position),” Wikipedia, accessed October 8, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lying_\(position\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lying_(position)).

²⁰²The corners, also called vertices, are zero-dimensional points while the sides connecting them, also called edges, are one-dimensional line segments,” (“Triangle,” Wikipedia, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triangle>).

The morning horoscope – extravagant version of those I remember from childhood, mother and aunties secretly reading them in sunny afternoons around the round table, always with a cup of coffee and cigarettes; during the past decade or so, horoscopes have been transformed into fragmented, inspirational suggestions, instead of the prescriptive character, both against and for, they used to have: real directions, real indications of paths to follow or to avoid, now reduced to flavoured allusions to potentials, a crossword with multiple outcomes, – lists three words.

These lists of words have become ubiquitous: to set intentions, to write poetry, to prepare for a meeting... whenever concentration is demanded, or a beginning is ahead of us, we are invited to list words, as if we were throwing dice, setting boundaries, or drawing lines before sowing seeds.

The one word that catches my attention is ‘dirge,’ which the online dictionary defines as follows:

dirge | dɜːdʒ | noun

- a lament for the dead, especially one forming part of a funeral rite

DERIVATIVES

dirgeful | -fəl | adjective

ORIGIN

Middle English (denoting the Office for the Dead): from Latin *dirige!* (imperative) ‘direct!’, the first word of an antiphon (Ps. 5:8) formerly used in the Latin Office for the Dead²⁰³.

The research draws on a range of references, including the expected *Requiem*, the Mass for the dead in Christian tradition, notably set to music by 18th and 19th century composers; the less expected funeral march, which once again unites music and movement, ritualising bodily expression of grief through an accompanying ‘soundtrack’; and the non-verbal traditions of keening and the death wail, in which pain is reduced to the repetition of sound, often modulated across various tones and at times merging with the lament of another mourner. Here the meaning of mourning [mourn | mōrn] becomes truly embodied, a moaning [moan | mōn].

The ethnographer in me is curious about other cultures and different ways of honouring the departed, of keeping them close by, of letting them go.

²⁰³“Dirge,” New Oxford American Dictionary (Second Edition).

I discover that "An oppari is an ancient form of lamenting in southern India, particularly in Tamil Nadu and North-East Sri Lanka where Tamils form the majority. It is a folk song tradition and is often an admixture of eulogy and lament. The oppari is typically sung by a group of female relatives who come to pay respects to the departed in a death ceremony. It is a means to express one's own grief and also to share and assuage the grief of the near and dear of the deceased. Sometimes professional oppari singers are recruited, but it is a dying practice."²⁰⁴

In China, ritual "... wails and laments were not (or were not always) uncontrollable expressions of emotion. Albert Galvany argues they were in fact "subject to a strict and complex process of codification that determines, right down to the finest details, the place, the timing and the ways in which such expressions of pain should be proffered."²⁰⁵

In Australia, early accounts date back to the mid-19th century. More recently, Roy Barker, a descendant of the Murawari tribe, born on the old Aboriginal mission in the late 1920s, offers the following witnessing to the death wail:

"You hear the crying and the death wail at night, it's a real eerie, frightening sound to hear. Sad sound... to hear them all crying. And then after the funeral, everything would go back to normal. And they'd smoke the houses out, you know, the old Aboriginal way."²⁰⁶

But it is the ancient world that consistently informs my understanding of such phenomena, the lamentation embedded in epic remembrance: Achilles' torment over Patroclus' dead body, Priam's sorrow over Hector's slaying, and mourning that accompanies the fall of Troy as a whole.

In ancient Greece, both spontaneous wailing and professional lamentation were performed by women. The first was the privilege of kinship, while the second was a public, social, constructed, and ritualised practice to manifest grief. The two main forms of lament are known as *thrênos* and *góos*, both meaning a shrill cry.

[...] Homeric and archaic usage may have distinguished *thrênos* and *góos* according to the ritual manner of their performance, using *thrênos* for the set dirge composed and performed by the professional mourners, and *góos* for the spontaneous weeping of the kinswomen. Further, early instances point to the *thrênos* as more ordered and polished, often associate with... performers and a dominant musical element [...]; the *góos*, on the other hand... was from Homer onwards more highly individualised, and since it was spoken rather than sung, it tended to develop a narrative rather than a musical form.

²⁰⁴Death Wail,' Wikipedia, accessed 27.12.24, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_wail.

²⁰⁵Ibid.

²⁰⁶Ibid.

These are tentative distinctions, drawn from pre-classical and fragmentary evidence only. In the classical period, the *thrênos* was still remembered as a distinct type of lyric poetry, but it was interchangeable with *góos*, especially in tragedy, and could be used to refer to any kind of lament, not necessarily for the dead. The older distinctions are partially retained in the later scholarly definitions of *thrênos* as a lament for the dead which contains praise, sung before or after burial or on the various occasions for mourning at the tomb; the element of the *góos* on the other hand is less frequently emphasized after tragedy...

The *kommós* is first known as a specific type of tragic lament. The examples collected and analysed by Diehl suggest that it was accompanied by wild gestures and associated with Asiatic ecstasy, like the *íálemos*. These eastern connections, which seem to be old, make it unlikely to have been a term exclusive to the tragedians, and it may have evolved as a dramatic form of the ritual antiphonal lament between the professional and predominantly choral mourners on the one hand, and the mainly solo and narrative improvisations of the kinswomen on the other. [...]

From the classical period onwards,... there was a tendency to treat as synonymous the different terms for a poetic lament, which had originally denoted distinct aspects of the ritual lamentation of the women. The explanation may lie partly in the fact that the most usual forms of official lamentation were no long primarily musical or poetic, but rhetorical.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷Alexiou Margaret, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Roman & Littlefield, 2002), 192-193, accessed 29.12.24, <https://chs.harvard.edu/book/alexiou-margaret-the-ritual-lament-in-greek-tradition>.

L'esperienza della mancanza è, infatti, ciò che traduce la scomparsa in una perdita. Avverto allora la sua mancanza come una strana forma della presenza. [...] Definiamo, dunque, nella nostalgia quel sentimento che più di ogni altro illumina il resto sempre presente di un lavoro del lutto, l'impossibilità del suo definitivo compimento, ovvero il suo carattere interminabile.²⁰⁸

This segment of my artistic research—still ongoing, and not yet amenable to conclusive presentation—currently focuses on emotional manifestations within contexts of grief and mourning. It traces a lineage from ancient Greek lamentation rituals to contemporary mourning practices, with a particular attention to the Middle Eastern and Levantine socio-political milieu²⁰⁹. A segment of my investigation also addresses potential “translations” from verbal (primarily expressed through literary texts) to non-verbal language in contexts subject to emotional violence and trauma.

This is also where the potential for a choreographic approach started developing, as the abstraction, the universal qualities embodied in dance and theatrical representations offer a compelling parallel, in the realm of movement, to the methods I typically employ within the more rigid frame of an object-based practice.

The Atlas of the Impossible is loosely based on Isadora Duncan's choreography introduced earlier. Initially conceived as a re-enactment by several dancers of “Mother”, the work conjugates intimate and political dimensions through the notion of repetition as an always individualised act, one that expands and introduces the notion of the universality of the particular.

Repetition is an aspect I am deeply concerned with, as my hand-made textile practice interrogates the possibility of creating meaning and knowledge out of such an unmemorable exercise.

A “polyphonic dance,” almost a relay race, seemed to potentially translate this preoccupation. And yet, as I progressed in my ruminations, I came to question this approach in relation to conveying the relevance of individuality, of the singularity of the experience.

How might one reconcile these two poles—the significance of reiteration and the uniqueness of an individual experience—while engaging with the work of mourning?

²⁰⁸ Massimo Recalcati, *La luce delle stelle morte. Saggio su lutto e nostalgia* (Feltrinelli, 2022), 90.

“The experience of lack is, in fact, what translates disappearance into a loss. I then perceive its lack as a strange form of presence. [...] Let us define, therefore, in nostalgia that feeling which more than any other illuminates the ever-present remainder of a work of mourning, the impossibility of its definitive fulfilment, or rather its interminable character,” My translation.

²⁰⁹ Among these rituals, an exemplary one is Ashura: “... for Shia Muslims, Ashura is a day of mourning as they annually commemorate the death of Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad and the third Shia imam. [...] Ashura is observed through mourning gatherings, processions, and dramatic reenactments. In such ceremonies, Shia mourners strike their chests to share in the pain of Husayn. Extreme self-flagellation, often involving self-inflicted bloodshed, remains controversial among the Shia [...]”

“Ashura,” Wikipedia, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashura>.

Dabkeh, a traditional folkloric dance common to the whole area of the Levant, represents another, radically different approach to performative action in relation to grief (See Wilson-Goldie, *Beautiful, Gruesome and True*, 129).

One possible point of departure lies in the concept of natality, as articulated by Hannah Arendt. Natality, the condition of being born, marks a unique event that nonetheless partakes in a collective structure—every birth is singular, yet bound within the universal fact of human beginning. Grief, in turn, can be understood as the inverse of natality in two critical ways. First, more obviously, the emotional connotation associated with the two events, one marked by sorrow whilst the second one is immediately felicitous. Secondly, the duration of the process, as natality is characterised by the immediacy of its appearance, while the work of mourning is a process, marked by a lengthy protraction in time. And yet, if we move away from the image of biologic birth and instead embrace Arendt’s notion of natality, a parallel with grief becomes apparent: grief, too, can be described as a form of “disjunctive temporality,” one that opens the gap between a before and an after. This gap mirrors the core principle of natality, a moment of interruption that brings something new, a rupture that unsettles, redirects paths and shifts trajectories within otherwise seemingly stable contexts²¹⁰. Both are punctuations in lived experience that suspend ordinary time and establish new relational or existential coordinates—suggesting that the tension between reiteration and uniqueness might, in fact, be inherent to both.

By adopting a transdisciplinary approach, I also aim to explore the realm of lamentation, moving away from its static representation in art history and literature to explore the connection between architecture and choreography and the attainability of choreographic outcomes based on motionless artistic and literary expressions of grief and sorrow²¹¹. The perspective embraced here, posed as an open question, ideally departs from the objectivity of representation, and ventures into the intensity of embodiment and emotional participation.

The newly devised choreographic sequences, reflecting on themes of incommunicable pain, personal and collective struggle, and the endlessly recurring experience of loss, were collaboratively conceived with dancer and choreographer Andrew Champlin²¹², and are accompanied by an original musical score by Jumairy²¹³. In a further attempt to bridge disciplinary gaps, the piece reads, translates, and incorporates segments from my dramaturgic script *The Material Thickness of Time*²¹⁴, also investigating, and almost excavating, questions surrounding the trauma of grief and loss.

²¹⁰Diprose and Plowoska Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics*.

²¹¹This segment of my research on the presence of absence is still in process, and constitutes a novel direction, as it opens up an exploration of the interconnectedness of visual arts, architecture, literature, and anthropology. In fact, the approach I am taking, while addressing what I have coined as “motherly orphanage,” or *paidorphanage* (the Arabic language has a word to describe a mother who has lost her child, “thakla,” loosely translating as bereaved), involves the ongoing collection and codification of a representative number of characterisations and renderings of grief and mourning in classical, modern and contemporary art history and theatre (from Antigone to Wajdi Moawad, including the revered Ann Carson and Louise Glück, among others).

²¹²Andrew Champlin is an American dancer and choreographer based in Berlin (andrewchamplin.com).

²¹³Jumairy is a multimedia artist born and living in Dubai (jumairy.com).

²¹⁴Cristiana de Marchi, *The Material Thickness of Time*, Research Catalogue, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2738062/2738063>.

The choreography is offered as a potential tool for expressing and manifesting emotions through artistic, bodily, and performative strategies, without aiming to activate a therapeutic process. While refraining from the consolation of a cathartic perspective, the work rather aspires to explore the representability of grief within a shareable space²¹⁵.



²¹⁵With reference to the research on rendering emotions tangible, see J. F. Christensen, L. Bruhn, E. M. Schmidt, N. Bahmanian, S. H. N. Yazdi, F. Farahi, L. Sancho-Escanero, W. Menninghaus, "A 5-emotions stimuli set for emotion perception research with full-body dance movements," *Sci Rep.* 2023 May 30;13(1):8757. doi: 10.1038/s41598-023-33656-4. PMID: 37253770; PMCID: PMC10229576. Here the attempt to systematise dance movement for emotional interpretation echoes the Laban's notations adopted to transcribe movement into a written language and further supports an interdisciplinary discourse around the creation of intuitive and codified vocabularies.

PART III. CONVERGENCES

1. THE AFFECTIVENESS OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE. STANDING FOR, STANDING AGAINST. RE-READING JEAN FISHER

[...] art does not in any straightforward way represent an indexical real.²¹⁶

Much of my work questions existing, protracted socio-political issues from a critical and often dissenting position. With my standpoint remaining undeclared, the work serves as an invitation for the audience to find or revisit their own perspectives on the subject matter. By adopting a critical approach, the work aims to uncouple the immediacy of the relation between meaning and referent, refresh it, renew its perception, through a process grounded in reminiscence, which operates as an instrument of activation, to elicit both emotional and mental responses.

This same strategy is also adopted in those works that are apparently characterised by a lighter approach, and where paradoxically I recur to a metaphor of playfulness to introduce a negative perspective (*Maternal Love; Undoing. Future; Red, White, Blue; Home*). In these works, actions such as blowing a balloon, playing dominos, building a house of cards, or throwing dice, function as expressions of the unattainability of a stable condition, the inevitability of revisiting prior circumstances, and the intrinsic impermanence of any constructed order.

Other bodies of work, often those apparently marked by a more subdued approach, inversely imply a direct, combative involvement, and the contradiction of officially stated claims is exposed in its fallacy. This is particularly evident in works like the *Black* series (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Status of Refugees, International Criminal Court*, etc.), where by reproducing the articles of constitutional texts into braille, monochromatically embroidered on black canvasses, I point at the very inaccessibility of those same rights, which are tacitly valued.

[...] often, in our laziness, what we demand of art – that it gives us ready-made interpretations of the world. It is also the strategy of forms of ‘politicised’ art, which do not pay sufficient attention to the affectiveness of the aesthetic carrier, confusing the proper place of the ethical in art.²¹⁷

The opposition of pro vs. contra reinforces a binary perspective that I consciously resist. The question

²¹⁶Fisher, “Work Between Us,” 20.

²¹⁷Ibid., 23.

is not of promoting a position to the disadvantage of an alternative one, but rather of inviting an autonomy of judgment, against the plague of a uniformed, uncritical, flattened, and aligned acceptance of officially approved, or predominantly circulated positions. Although within the limited, circumscribed context of art circles, the aesthetic experience can suggest and encourage a reconsideration and a criticality that are invited at a less cerebral level, and rather encompass an affective response.

This is not meant to be an attempt to reconcile politics and aesthetics, as the question about their interrelation keeps recurring. The controversy is actually about the very process of aestheticising social and political issues, and even suffering in its manifestation, and whether that can be regarded as opportune, moral and ethical.

Another debate concerns the potential process of weakening or ‘taming’ the subject matter, once filtered through an aesthetic reading and presentation. An aesthetic approach can function as a foil leading to deeper finding, borrowing an image from the hunting field, the archaic meaning of “foil” referring to “the track or trail of an animal,”²¹⁸ which eventually leads to the prey. If while hunting the promise of prey is the very purpose of the activity, similarly the disclosure of a question, the revelation or reminder of an unresolved issue can be equated to the ambition of artistic creation and display.

I consciously embrace art’s “powerlessness,” its peripherality to power structures, and tend towards a universal stand, although necessarily informed by the singularity of my positionality. This became adamantly clear as I engaged with the creation of *Monument to the Falling Wall*, as I was forced to consider and relate to the growing wall not only in terms of a specific occurrence, but also as a universal concept, as a symbol for frozen sociopolitical conflicts.²¹⁹ In my practice, I refrain from the biographic: whatever my personal reasons, the work is where the specific becomes, or aims to become, universal, to expose historical events or narratives and invite the audience to reconsider their accepted legitimacy.

I was interested in knowledge; which knowledge we produce and how we produce it. [...] How can we make it felt in the body and in the emotions?²²⁰

The artwork can thus be understood as a re-enactment, with the title offering an interpretative clue that aligns with the purpose of this endeavour. The textile-based, hand-made reproduction of a segment of a separation wall is intended to reverse its evidence, to appropriate the means of its display within the

²¹⁸“Foil,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed July 27, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/foil>.

Another acceptance of ‘foil’ being “someone or something that makes another’s good or bad qualities all the more noticeable” (ibid.), the adoption of specific aesthetic strategies highlighting socio-political concerns reveals an increasing transparency in the intentionality of their purpose.

²¹⁹I renew my gratitude to Dr. Micha Payer, for her thoughtful response and attentiveness to the various implications of my work and for her thought-provoking questions.

²²⁰“Embodied Knowledge. A Dialogue with Grada Kilomba,” in Cotter, *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, 142.

space, and to avail the potential of destruction which is always implicit in any construction. As a slow motion, falling is continuously happening since the inception of the making, it is embedded in the texture of the work, and it represents its ultimate finality.

The wall symbolising the presence of the other, it materialises that feared presence. The question of fear is obviously central to the discourse of divisiveness. Although a feared presence does not immediately equate to an absence, the latter becomes implicit, emerging gradually, as an aspiration first, and later as the outcome of a deliberate sequence of actions. Among these, preventive incarceration and territorial partitioning are just two possible strategies, paradoxically contrasting in terms of visibility, as detention seeks to efface a presence—silence its voice— thereby producing a disappearance, whilst monumental barriers are overtly visible, rendering ‘the absence of the Other’ palpable.

Once, I was asked if one could fade out the political dimension of this artwork, and just refer to the sensual, existential experience and psychological aspect of a wall as a symbol of mutual absence. Although this would undeniably be a more desirable stance to adopt, such a position remains inaccessible, as we are continually confronted with the persistence of unresolved political issues, fragmentations and fractures that not only endure, but multiply, rather than ideally diminishing in number and urgency.

The question also addressed the haptic experience of the work and its memory-engrained relationality. Textile-based practices remain attached to a dimension of domesticity and the supposed gentleness of femininity. By adopting contradiction as both a conceptual model and a methodological approach, the pain inherent in sewing, knitting and related techniques that transform a line of soft matter into bi-dimensional evidence is reclaimed and embedded within the work, along with the temporal duration required to complete it²²¹. Anti-commemorative, ultimately futile, and fundamentally imperfect, yet marked by an apparent neatness, the work acknowledges the danger of perfection, its potential to suffocate the meaning, and categorically rejects the possibility of perfection becoming its aim.

2. SCALE IT UP!

During the Spring of 2022 I had the pleasure of being featured in a major solo survey at the Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah, UAE²²². On the occasion, a video was produced to document the exhibition: the typical format adopted by Maraya, as well as many other art centres and foundations concerned with

²²¹Time serves as an essential yet unexpressed component, rendering the work almost indistinguishable from a durational performance.

²²²See footnote 97. I like to express my gratitude to Cima Azzam, the curator of the exhibition, and to Dr. Nina Heydemann, the Director of Maraya Art Centre, for the trust and invitation to exhibit there.

similar tasks, being that of a frontal interview, I found myself at odds with it. Not only for an intrinsic refusal of the staged interview – often in the privacy of the artist’s studio, hence voyeuristic in its connotation, – but also for the very nature of my practice, which is elusive, to say the least. The video was then shot, and my voice was added as voice-over, pre-recorded reading a text that primarily addressed my strategies for showcasing a coherent ensemble of works, created over a span of a decade²²³.

The main strategy that I always apply is a strict selective process: I start with accumulation, with a congregation of materials that seem to coalesce around a common axis. I let them sit for a while, and then I start trimming, removing, and reducing. The process is based on thematic notions as well as aesthetic principles, to minimise the number of works without prejudice to the conversation, and even more so to enable the conversation through pauses and gaps that are intentionally created in the space. The dialogue between the artworks and the gallery where they are exhibited is equally important as the addition of the spectator’s body. This is particularly evident with sculptural works, especially those that through their oversized scale invite the audience to engage physically with the surrounding space.

My practice has long and almost exclusively consisted of small works, often acting as modular components in larger compositions. It was only in 2017, during the Salama bint Hamdan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF), that I was first confronted with an invite to consider dimensionally expanding my works. My first encounter with American Academia was often interspersed with the resounding solicitation: “Scale it up!”

I must admit my persistent reluctance, which ended up with me receding into the creation of a new series of miniaturized sizes, the *Commemorative Stamps* I have mentioned above.

And yet eventually, with the complicity of the forced immobility brought by the pandemic, in 2021, I started working on my first monumental piece.

I slow process stimulants, as I was once told, within a different context.

3. ON NEOLOGISMS AND THE POTENTIAL TO RENAMING THE WORLD

In the spring of 2024, I was the recipient of a Fellowship at alMawrid, the Arab Center for the Study of Art at New York University, Abu Dhabi.

The invite was to interact with the archive from an artistic perspective. The artistic response could take any form and I very naturally turned towards writing. I ended up with an essay, including, combining

²²³ I tend to be involved in curatorial decisions regarding the display of my work, not only due to a controlling mania that I should probably address, but also because of an innate inclination towards the conversations surrounding the practice, how it is received by other art professionals, and how it can be offered to a larger audience.

and stratifying in loose pages, archival documents, transcripts, commentaries about them, visuals (reproductions of actual documents and a few sketches), and autobiographical, diaristic sections²²⁴. Driven by my interest in absence and void, my entry points to the archive followed the same keys. This archive is peculiar in its focus on the conditions that surround art making, and in its apparent disinterest towards the very result of that same creative process²²⁵.

I am explaining to a friend, who tries to understand the nature of this archive and what I am doing here – this happens over a Moroccan tea served with grace, – that the archive preserves the paraphernalia of an artist's practice: the documents, the sketches, the journals, notebooks, postcards and letters, personal photos as well as published catalogues and paper clippings. Everything but the artworks, everything witnessing the daily exposure to the artistic practice, the very surroundings of being an artist. A void is left intentionally unexplored, the actual core for most art historians, who typically focus on the outcome of an artistic practice, rather than on the process behind it.

Is the archive always a testimony of life? This one seems to be, rather favouring life over creation. But in that configuration, then, I see my obsession for absence satisfied: the archive I am exploring is structured around the absence of the artworks represented in their legibility, represented in their realism.

I am walking along the periphery of creation, that's why walking in circles seems so appropriate. I am not even trying to recreate a clear path followed by a specific artist, at a defined moment of their trajectory. I am flirting with the traces of their understanding of being an artist, and often simply of being a human being²²⁶.

The archive contains documents in several languages: primarily Arabic, but also English, French and Italian, which are all easily accessible to me. With Arabic I still struggle, although I can read it. The quest for a language responds to a notion of belonging, to a sense of participation that can be negated in the absence of a shared idiom. I am going back to the concept of home, or rather of unhomed-ness. A perpetual attempt to fit in, or to evade, according to the circumstances.

I build a vocabulary, slowly, and probably adding mistakes to those printed on the old documents I am checking in the archive. Relatively old, to be correct.

²²⁴“This, then, is how the essay is distinguished from a treatise. The person who writes essayistically is the one who composes as he experiments, who turns his object around, questions it, feels it, tests it, reflects on it, who attacks it from different sides and assembles what he sees in his mind's eye and puts into words what the object allows one to see under the conditions created in the course of writing.” (Max Bense, “Über den Essay und seine Prosa,” *Merkur* 1:3 (1947), 418, quoted in Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Columbia University Press 1999), 17).

²²⁵“The essay... is concerned with what is blind in its objects,” In Adorno, “Essay as Form,” 23.

²²⁶de Marchi, *Hidden Ways*, 76.

Where does it originate, this interest into translation? It has been with me since childhood: translating for the shadows (“the shadow-wows”, “le om-ombre”) first, then as a penitent exercise over old, musk-smelling French and English grammar books that belonged to my mother, at the time when she was a young lady and she was pursuing her education.

But before discovering the very existence of the languages of diplomacy, for many years, learning Greek was my ultimate purpose: all seasons marked by the expectation of a progress, more often by the repetition of the little already acquired, on new grammars brought from Athens during my grandmother’s summer trips. When did we – my sister and I – realise that our grandmother would never be as determined as we were, our desire to learn unmatched by her willingness to teach us her native language?

Greek, the language of a lineage I belong to, un-credited. A lineage that doesn’t stop to my grand-grand parents (in Crete and Athens, respectively, as I was told), but that roots me back into the land of heroes I have grown up with – literature grants me rights I can hardly claim as an individual addressing the State, – an elective family of unshakeable values and terrible vendicateness.

And now, of course, among all, the very one language I miss the most, the Arabic of an ascendance, rather than a descent. So do I move through time, through times. Always with a dictionary, always unable to fully speak or even understand the language. The language of presence – of belonging – as well as the language of a lost country, once that of my ancestors, later that of my descendants²²⁷.

But it is only in the autumn of the same year, when I was invited to contribute a poem to a publication on the theme of *Pause*, and to co-create another one with the two organisers, who are both artists and writers from the UAE²²⁸, that I further explored the potential for neologisms to redefine the terms of relationality.

To further mirror our layered conversations, enhance textures and surface intersections, we developed neologisms (some of which pre-existed in our own vocabularies) that the others had to write a definition for intuitively/humorously/resonantly, without knowing what meaning the word-coiner had in mind, before the neologizer’s intended meaning was shared. We did not resist any predispositions to diaphanous deordering²²⁹, in fact, we found ourselves drawn to the uncomfortability²³⁰ of any

²²⁷Ibid., 13.

²²⁸Shamma Al Bastaki and Sarah AlMehari.

²²⁹deordering (n.) (v.)

1. to cause chaos, to make your own order, to destabilize order
2. to shuffle, to make arbitrary, to tip and topple
3. the process of changing the order of a specific sequence of actions: not in a strictly inverted way, but rather leading to a different outcome.

²³⁰uncomfortability (n.)

1. the feeling of not being settled
2. disquiet
3. a state of discomfort moved in the space of potentiality

*syllablubber*²³¹ that emerged and demerged in the process. Do words filter their meaning through the texture of neologising? Do we understand each other when we create words that familiarise the unfamiliar, that introduce the inexplicable? Possibly, the space—the pause— as the solid signifier of a transition²³².

Handbooks often recommend writing the introduction only after the main text is complete. That rule, at least, was followed. Everything else was, if not a deliberate subversion, then a synergetic attempt to bend conventions, to question the fixity of language and to move fluidly through linguistic registers. A poethics of border crossing that doesn't require stamped passports.

Lexical freedom is freedom, nevertheless. Granted right to playfulness within the realm of accepted conventions. Do words filter their meaning through the texture of neologising? Do we understand each other when we create words that familiarise the unfamiliar, that translate our foreignty, that introduce the inexplicable?

4. ON THE POTENTIAL OF UNDOING

I am going back to the notes on the margins of *Caesura*, which are reproduced here:

“Can it be undone? If the act of undoing is necessarily imperfect, declaredly unsuccessful, and often merely rhetorical, the empowerment associated with the act of—or the attempt to—reverse the many injustices of the past – whether far, recent, or even contemporary – can nevertheless be authentic. The concept that is strictly connected to historical revision is that of memory—and with memory, its opposite: forgetfulness, oblivion, erasure.”²³³

The connection established here is between the undoing as an artistic strategy and ‘revisionism,’ not intended in derogatory terms, but in its positive acceptance, that is a policy of revision based on evolutionary rather than revolutionary principles. This connection is particularly visible and almost palpable within the urban texture, when it comes to dealing with the process of addressing the monumentalising of historical figures who represent positions that, over time, have come under a

| the uncomfortability of Capitalised words in the middle of a Sentence

²³¹*syllablubber* (n.)

1. blubber of words – a series of syllables melding or melting into one another to form incoherent verbiage
2. fumbling of a word, when you say a word that sounds correct, when you say a word too much it doesn't sound like a word no longer, when a word is at the tip of your tongue, when you word vomit
3. dropping words or concepts that adhere to one another

| the professor liked to engage in syllablubber

synonym(s): syllablob

²³²Shamma Al Bastaki, Sarah AlMehari, Cristiana de Marchi, “Intro,” *PAUSE* (in print, 2025).

²³³Part II, Chapter 2.

critical lens and are subject to reconsideration, often in the perspective of a removal. Removing a monument can be seen as a manifestation of that tension towards the undoing: most of these monuments are not destroyed²³⁴ – although they are often disfigured in the phases leading to their removal – less because of their intrinsic artistic qualities, which would grant them a preservation in some less visible setting, than for their historical value. To put it in simple words, the remnant of a past injustice now rectified must be preserved, as to avoid the temptation to forget that it was there in the first place.

Clearly, undoing is always imperfect, and it cannot heal, correct, or restore any past wrongdoing. The function of the undoing is the *prise en charge* of a past that no longer can be glorified, and actually must be addressed in its complexity –more often in its blatant injustice –and publicly condemned, refused and removed. If this move cannot correct the past, it can at least pave the way for a future, in which those mistakes shouldn't find any chance to be repeated with impunity²³⁵.

The practice of 'undoing' can be read through the lens of a 'negative creation'²³⁶, where the undoing is not only represented as an act in opposition to a previously exerted and positively accepted action, as a form of resistance but rather as a creative act in its full rights. Intervening on a pre-existing situation – material as well as not necessarily identifiable in material forms, – and reverting it by repeating the same steps that have created or determined it in a reverse order profoundly differs from destroying, tearing down, smashing or otherwise blowing up. Although both interventions amount to eventually dismantling the targeted past entity, the modality is deeply contrasting. The immediacy of an aggressive approach may provide the satisfaction of annihilating the evidence of a past wrong-doing (judged *a posteriori*) without necessarily understanding the steps that have determined its very establishment. A negative creation might, on the contrary, provide that very understanding, as it repeats the single movements in reverse. I like to underline here how this cannot be seen as a regression but rather as a progression in its own terms, as it aims at reaching a status of renewed and newly re-conquered agency.

An example issued from the realm of science consists in the phenomenon of 'apoptosis,' where the 'programmed cellular suicide' allows a regeneration of the organism²³⁷.

²³⁴I am referring to the notorious phenomenon of the *damnatio memoriae*, implying the physical erasure of visual representations or mentions of disgraced public figures.

²³⁵This argument could open a wide-ranging debate on the recurrence of historical patterns and the question of history's tendency to repeat itself in nearly identical modes. Starting with Thucydides and extending to our troubled times, which so clearly exemplify memory's failure to serve as a guide for better political choices, this is not a suitable context in which to explore the vast body of literature accumulated on the subject.

²³⁶The definition is derived from Louise Glück's poem "Persephone the Wanderer" (Glück, *Averno*, 16). Poetry represents a considerable segment of my references and is incorporated as such in my research, with the potential for further interpretative 'poetic licences' that imply an appropriation of concepts and their adaptation to the artistic process in development.

²³⁷"Apoptosis (from Ancient Greek: ἀπόπτωσις, romanized: apóptōsis, lit. 'falling off') is a form of programmed cell death that occurs in multicellular organisms and in some eukaryotic, single-celled microorganisms such as yeast. Biochemical events lead to characteristic cell changes (morphology) and death. [...] In contrast to necrosis, which is a form of

Another example highlighting the creative potential of destructive processes –here in terms of knowledge creation, –can be found in the very principle of archaeological excavation, which proceeds from the most recent towards the most ancient layer stratified in the terrain, destroying each layer before moving to the next one.

I hereby argue in favour of the ‘undoing’ as a process that actualises the meaning of the work, which is not in the making but in its negation, as it comes to the potential of rewriting history – the macro as well as the micro, – by means of reenacting historical, or even individual, episodes²³⁸. Thinking of ways for healing can then – as it has been explored by several artists²³⁹, within the context of Black diaspora studies – naturally turn towards gatherings, shared moments, and more or less choreographed collective performances. This approach introduces the possibility of an alternative narrative, reclaiming presence against a historicised annihilation of that very evidence.

In the specific context of my work, the idea of a collective undoing of the wall presents itself as a compelling possibility, envisioning a gathering of people around the textile hanging in the hall, or alternatively an intermittent and discontinuous presence that, in exchange allows for a prolonged engagement. This would involve participants in a gradual process of removal, of methodical disintegration, a disassembling of a pre-existence²⁴⁰.

[...] Doing it, undoing it,
doing it, undoing it, doing, undoing, doing, undoing,
doing–like some crazed German expressionist
film from the ‘30s–

I get out my knitting.
People laugh when I say it keeps me sane.
What are you knitting? Says Miss Pearl Bailey.
She is eating almonds from a ziplock bag.
The fall of Troy, I say.
Big theme, she says.

traumatic cell death that results from acute cellular injury, apoptosis is a highly regulated and controlled process that confers advantages during an organism's life cycle. For example, the separation of fingers and toes in a developing human embryo occurs because cells between the digits undergo apoptosis. [...] Because apoptosis cannot stop once it has begun, it is a highly regulated process [...],” (“Apoptosis,” Wikipedia, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apoptosis>).

²³⁸See Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, 4, where she argues that “Destruction too is formative,” and that “The fact that all creation can only occur at the price of a destructive counterpart is a fundamental law of life.”

²³⁹Sally Berger, John Muse, Gustavus Stadler, James Weissinger, eds., *Performing Past–Present: Transforming Reenactment* (Haverford College, 2022).

²⁴⁰I want to dispel the expectation of a cathartic experience, which is not envisioned as a potential outcome of this performance/interaction with the reproduction of the wall. While an emotional release is not ruled out, it is not implied either.

Yes, and I am putting in every detail.
 Every blade of grass on Priam's lawn,
 Every lick of wind on a warrior's cheek,
 Every thin brown bat that whistled past the Greek tents at dusk,
 Every fly that buzzed over their shit,
 Every pointless prayer,
 Every opaque oracle,
 Every bone that broke
 In the baby they tossed over the wall on the last day.
 Just then there's thunder.
 Flashes of lightening shoot up from water to sky.²⁴¹

5. ON PERFORMANCE AND RE-ENACTMENT: RELATIONAL PRACTICES AND THE QUESTION OF REPARATION

Agency is not given or 'out there', but emerges through interdependence and "dynamic topological reconfiguring / entanglements / relationalities / (re)articulations of the world."²⁴²

After completing the textile works addressing imposing and threatening architectures of confinement, I started exploring the legal and juridical aspects of both the perpetration of state-inflicted violence, and of its potential reparation. This is a question that remains unresolved, both at a collective level as evidenced by the Lebanese post-civil war failed (because never publicly addressed) reconciliation process, and at the level of artistic strategies that engage with the subject matter of collective trauma.

Once again, I resort to literature, and more precisely to Wajdi Mouawad's numerous texts that re-examine, often with unendurable ferocity, the complexity of living within a state of protracted and unresolved conflict. Language is here at the forefront of the conflict, as Primo Levi, with a synthetic formula perfectly enunciated:

[...] dove si fa violenza all'uomo, la si fa anche al linguaggio [...]²⁴³

²⁴¹From, Anne Carson, *Era una nuvola* (Crocetti editore, 2021), 96, 98.

²⁴²Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 141.

²⁴³"[...] wherever the humanity is subjected to violence, so is language [...]." Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Einaudi, 2007), 75, my translation.

Mouawad's attempts to make sense of the past and to reclaim dignity for the victims, move through the fictionalised revisit of the Lebanese civil war via the theatrical medium:

[...] jouer au théâtre procède de la même nécessité de redonner un sens à ce qui n'en a pas²⁴⁴

On a toujours besoin d'incarner l'incompréhensible, l'inenvisable. Comment vivre sinon dans l'abstraction des corps disparus, si cette disparition ne revêt aucune forme?²⁴⁵

- ... les bourreaux... Ceux qui ont fait ça, les personnes réelles, je veux dire, je ne les vois pas. Qui s'ont-ils et que sont-ils devenus?

- Chauffeurs de taxi, épiciers, certains sont partis vivre à l'étranger. Ils sont tranquilles à Paris, à Toronto, à New York. À la fin de la guerre, en 1991, le gouvernement libanais a fait voter une loi d'amnistie qui exempte de toute poursuite judiciaire la plupart des crimes politiques commis pendant la guerre. L'hécatombe est restée impunie.

- L'amnistie est devenue amnésie...

- Et l'amnésie, ignorance. C'est banal. Petit, j'ai cru que l'on avait tué seulement ma famille. Pendant des années j'ai cru ça. La première fois que j'ai eu conscience du mot massacre, du mot peuple, du mot camp, du mot miliciens, de tous ces mots que vous avez prononcés, je devais déjà être à l'université.

Et tout ça ressurgit maintenant. Une explosion de silence. De plus en plus lourd à porter. Un trou noir. Il absorbe toutes les lumières, il empêche le temps d'avancer, de se déployer...²⁴⁶.

As Mouawad explicitly mentions, amnesty has turned into amnesia, and the unaccountability of the perpetrators has negated any possibility to grant the victims the deserved reparation. What is denied here is the possibility of healing the collective trauma, which can happen through transitional justice.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴"... acting in a theatre stems from the same need to give meaning to what has none." Mouawad, *Sang des Promesses*, 44, my translation.

²⁴⁵"We always need to embody the incomprehensible, the unthinkable. How else to live in the abstraction of vanished bodies, if this vanishing takes no form?" Wajdi Mouawad, *Anima* (Actes Sud, 2012) 375, my translation.

²⁴⁶"... the executioners... Those who did this, the real people, I mean, I don't see them. Who are they and what have they become? - Taxi drivers, grocers, some have gone to live abroad. They are quiet in Paris, in Toronto, in New York. At the end of the war in 1991, the Lebanese government passed an amnesty law that exempts most political crimes committed during the war from prosecution. The carnage went unpunished.

- Amnesty has become amnesia...- And amnesia, ignorance. It's ordinary.

As a child, I thought that only my family had been killed. For years I believed that. The first time I became aware of the word massacre, the word people, the word camp, the word militiamen of all those words you said, I must have already been at university. And it's all coming back now. An explosion of silence. More and more heavy to carry. A black hole. It absorbs all the lights, it prevents time from advancing, from unfolding." Mouawad, *Anima*, 337-338, my translation.

²⁴⁷"Transitional justice is a process which [...] consists of judicial and non-judicial measures, implemented in order to redress legacies of human rights abuses. Such measures "include criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programs, and various kinds of institutional reforms" as well as memorials, apologies, and various art forms. Transitional justice is instituted at a point of political transition, classically from war to positive peace, or more

One measure adopted by Transitional Justice is truth commissions, also known as truth and reconciliation commissions (TRC) or truth and justice commissions.²⁴⁸

In his interview for *Refiguring the Archive*, Derrida is asked about how his idea of the “death drive” manifests in the TRC archives. He answers as follows:

I think the death drive is at work at least in two ways. One is the drive to destroy the very memory, the very trace and the very testimony, of the violence, of the murder. The perpetrator tries not only to kill, but to erase the memory of the killing, that is, to do, to act in such a way that no archive is left. [...] Now, another part of this effect appears on the opposite side. That is, when in order to oppose the destruction, you want to keep safe, to accumulate, the archive, as such, not simply living memory – because we don’t trust the living memory, you trust the archive. [...] [T]here is a perverse desire for forgetting in the archive itself. The death drive is not simply at work in killing, in producing death, but in trying to save, in a certain way the memory [produces] forgetting by remembering.²⁴⁹

Reading from a Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s testimony:

Mrs. Mhlawuli: I read the postmortem documents. Reading them I was really worried, because it has to explain in detail what happened. I read through and came to understand that he had many wounds, in the upper abdomen were five wounds, these wounds indicated that different weapons were used to stab him or a group of people stabbed him. Now in the lower part he also had wounds but the wounds in total were 43. One other thing that we understood, they poured acid on his face, after that they chopped off his right hand, just below the wrist, I don’t know what they did with that hand.²⁵⁰

A few considerations emerge on the periphery of this dramatic testimony: the necessity to sever, to isolate, to identify, to describe in detail, to surgically delve into the factual cruelty of what transpired;

broadly from violence and repression to societal stability (though some times it is done years later), and it is informed by a society’s desire to rebuild social trust, repair a fractured justice system, and build a democratic system of governance. [...] The core value of transitional justice is the very notion of justice—which does not necessarily mean criminal justice.”

“Transitional justice,” Wikipedia, accessed April 12, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transitional_justice.

²⁴⁸“A truth commission, also known as a truth and reconciliation commission or truth and justice commission, is an official body tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing by a government (or... non-state actors...), in the hope of resolving conflict left over from the past. [...] In both their truth-seeking and reconciling functions, truth commissions have political implications: they “constantly make choices when they define such basic objectives as truth, reconciliation, justice, memory, reparation, and recognition, and decide how these objectives should be met and whose needs should be served.”

“Truth commission,” Wikipedia, accessed April 12, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_commission.

²⁴⁹Harris, Verne, ‘A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive’, in Hamilton *et al.* (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (David Philip Publishers, 2002), 66-68, cited in Antjie Krog and Nosisi Mpolweni, “Archived Voices: Refiguring Three Women’s Testimonies Delivered to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, no 123, (2016): 96-112.

²⁵⁰ Krog and Mpolweni, “Archived Voices,” 100.

the production of impartiality, ostensibly achieved through that meticulous process of verbal dissection; the law's inability to assert, acknowledge, document and discern in order to establish an unequivocal truth; the burden of witnessing; the onus of proof, its nearly offensive character as it comes to reinforce the hegemony of abusive powers, in its narrative duty; the recognition of the existence of a forced, yet unavoidable murder-witness relationship, where the burden of proof rests on the witness.²⁵¹

These notions are all interconnected and constitute the frame for both the accountability reclaimed by the juridical system and the overarching ambition to completeness claimed by archives of various sorts.

Also looking back at the development of the research and at its nodal points, I am induced to very briefly mention a few possible directions for facing the past and re-appropriating it, wherever access has been precluded or denied.²⁵²

The first strategy consists of reenactment as an alternative and active approach, hence acknowledging and taking into account Walid Sadek's concerns about the role of the victim. Re-enactment actively condenses and allows one to perceive two temporalities at once, as it observes, enables, and offers an overlapping or projection of a past event onto the texture of the present²⁵³.

Historical reenactment has traditionally been associated with white cultural practice, a "white people's thing," particularly within the context of the United States, where it overlaps with white supremacists' parades and re-evocations. Within a larger context, it is and remains a past winner's attempt to solidify the volatility of memory around and through a physical re-occurrence of historical events—often won battles—and representation.

What is then the place for reenactment in the current assumption that history is written by the winner? Could reenactment intervene in the process of reversing this understanding?

It is now appropriate to introduce the profound difference existing between an actor and a re-enactor: far from merely playing a scene, repeating a score, or rehearsing a line, reenacting involves adherence to a conviction. Often conceived as long-term projects, reenactment seeks to answer the question of what happened in the absence of documentation and amidst the intentional erasure of evidences.

²⁵¹This has a parallel in the perpetrator-victim relationship, where the burden of the proof rests on the victim.

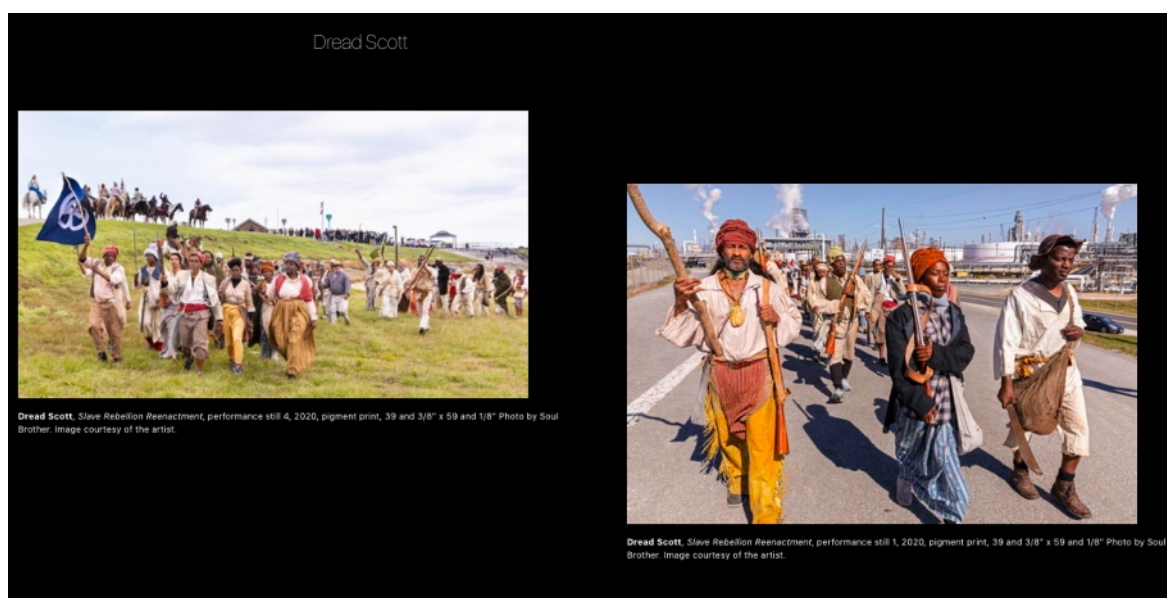
²⁵²With regards to my artistic project, these directions are foreseen as future steps, and are not fully developed at the current stage of the research.

²⁵³It is worth mentioning that reenactment is a practice still largely contextualised and confined within the panorama of the USA, and is virtually absent in the MENA region, which is the geographic focus of this research. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the numerous attempts to grapple with past protracted historical trauma, as reflected in both Palestinian and Lebanese theatrical works, including dance and playwriting. For an overview of Lebanese theatre's attempt to elaborate on past traumas, see Michel Abou Khalil, *Art et conflit. L'impact du théâtre au Liban* (Slatkine Érudition, 2022).

A recent novel by Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail* (New Directions, New York 2020) also recalls and tells an erased episode of violence perpetrated by the Israeli army against a Beduin teenage girl back in 1949 in the Negev desert.

Instead of halting at, and thereby rejecting the proposition that “this never happened,” it ventures into “this is what might have happened.” As it excavates the contradictions buried in history books and narratives, it examines the alignment between historical accuracy and the core questions that underpin the re-creation.

To exemplify the distinct nature of these projects, I have selected two artworks that operate on different premises. The first is Dread Scott’s *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, a community-engaged project that reenacted the largest rebellion of enslaved people in US history. The performance took place in 2019 and deliberately omitted the common practice—when it comes to reenactments—of selecting scenarios where the weight of modernity is minimised. Here, in contrast, the collapse of past and present, along with their collision and overlapping, is intentionally pursued, to interrogate history in its implicit, inevitable, and enduring nature of casting a shadow over the present²⁵⁴.



The second work is Marisa Williamson’s *The Fire (Wild is the Wind)*, a 2017 live animation, which was also featured in the show titled “Performing Past-Present. Transforming Re-enactement,” curated by Sally Berger, and presented at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, at the Haverford College in 2022.²⁵⁵

The video is self-explanatory in its approach to confronting centuries of abuses, slavery and oppression by creating a space for a ritualised, cathartic activation that harmlessly permits an inversion of roles.

²⁵⁴The project was featured in Vanity Fair, The New York Times, Christiane Amanpour on CNN and highlighted by [artnet.com](https://www.artnet.com) as one of the most important artworks of the decade. Oliver Laughland published a documentary on SRR for The Guardian, 11 Nov. 2019: <https://youtu.be/v2to3S0iabE>.

²⁵⁵ Marisa Williamson, *The Fire (Wild is the Wind)*, 2017. Live animation, color, sound (Nina Simone’s *Wild is the Wind*), 5:03 min. Courtesy of the artist.

The two images on this page are reproduced from the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery website, <https://exhibits.haverford.edu/performingpastpresent>.



The point here, therefore, is the use of resurfacing, uncovering, and revisiting past trauma in order to heal from its damage. This approach, which may range from a painful repetition of past episodes of injustice to the liberating reversal of their occurrence, is often fuelled by a very physical involvement, that translates into a shared collective experience. The claim in favour of reenactment is that it offers a tool for inverting dominant positions and correcting narratives, with potential healing effects on society or segments of it²⁵⁶.

The second strategy relies on language as a tool to investigate trauma: language in its poetic sense, not in its legal context. Besides the archival references mentioned earlier, and often relying on them, reclaiming an active role in confronting past violence amounts to an act of *Poetic Justice*. I don't use poetic justice as a rhetorical figure,²⁵⁷ but rather in its literal definition, as "a punishment or a reward that you feel is just, especially when it is unexpected or unusual."²⁵⁸ This reversal of past injustices is arguably characterised by a strong determination to redress former inequities, by a deep

²⁵⁶This healing potential is notoriously described by Sigmund Freud in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle: "The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past," (*The Standard Edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1955), vol XVIII, 18.

²⁵⁷"In literature, poetic justice is an ideal form of justice, in which the good characters are rewarded and the bad characters are punished, by an ironic twist of fate. It is a strong literary view that all forms of literature must convey moral lessons. [...] Generally, the purpose of poetic justice in literature is to adhere by the universal code of morality, in that virtue triumphs vice. The idea of justice in literary texts manifests the moral principle that virtue deserves a reward, and vices earn punishment," ("Poetic Justice," literarydevices.net, accessed 27.07.2023, <https://literarydevices.net/poetic-justice>).

This notion of morality remains external to my research, which recognises individual attempts to address past injuries, yet without expressing faith in any overarching scheme of justice.

²⁵⁸"Poetic Justice," dictionary.cambridge.org, accessed July 27, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/poetic-justice>.

understanding of those historical circumstances, and often by an unconventional approach to language.

Once again, aside from references to the few Lebanese writers who, particularly in the field of theatre, have consistently explored past collective trauma, the use of poetry as a means to restore voice to individuals—whether real or fictional—who have been dehumanised throughout history, appears to remain a prerogative of American experimental poetry.

It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void.²⁵⁹

First published in 1982, *DICTEE* is difficult to define by genre. Although often referred to as a novel, its dominant poetic approach tends to overshadow the linear development of prosaic sections, illuminating them with the aura of its fragmented, associative, estranged word amalgamations. It is unusual to introduce Theresa Hak Kyung as a representative of American literature: de facto a Korean-American or an American of Korean descent—as labels in American museums tend to reproduce in similar cases. *DICTEE* “is part autobiography, part biography, part personal diary, part ethnography, part auto-ethnography, part translation. And all these genres are presented with an intertextual mix of photographs, quotations, translations, and language so as to create a history. Cha's move in *Dictée* is to collage multiple voices American, European, and Asian---so as to build a history.”²⁶⁰

To create a history, to give it evidence, to manifest it whereas it has been ignored, neglected, marginalised. Similarly another Korean writer, Han Kang, recuperates uncomfortable episodes of South Korean history, with her elusive approach, at the margins of reality, and yet referencing it with precision, almost quoting it, transferring the monstrosity of those events to a misty, ethereal and shadowy dimension so to create a space for their assimilation²⁶¹.

To return to the American experimental poetry I mentioned as earlier, I will limit myself to a few references, starting with M. NourbeSe Philip's *ZONG!*²⁶²

With absolute technical mastery, M. NourbeSe Philip relies on the legal case known as “Gregson v. Gilbert,” a rare account of the massacre of African slaves that took place in 1781 on the ship named *Zong*, where the captain ordered the murder of 150 Africans. The book does not retrace events; rather it elevates a lament for the victims, including these and many others whose suffering has not been documented. The untold story is also one that cannot be conveyed, yet must be communicated. How

²⁵⁹Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE*, restored edition (University of California Press, 2022).

²⁶⁰Juliana M. Spahr, "Postmodernism, Readers, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 'Dictée'," *College Literature*. 23, no 3 (1996): 23–43, accessed 13.02.25, [JSTOR 25112272](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25112272).

²⁶¹Han Kang, *Atti umani*, (Adelphi, 2023), and *Impossibles adieux* (Grasset, 2023).

²⁶²M. NourbeSe Philip as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng, *ZONG!* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

then? Through fragmentation, a fragmentation that, like a puzzle, the reader first attempts to assemble in their obstinacy to understand, to factually know, to learn, gradually shifting to a rhythmic dimension, giving voice to the sparse wording, following it on the page, often inconsequently, before eventually surrendering to the whisper, the howl, the lament, the anathema that the words offer.

Similarly, albeit with a different focus, Gregory Pardlo's *Spectral Evidence* examines the effects of law when subjected to the defence of a given order. "Spectral evidence is evidence that, technically speaking, does not exist."²⁶³ This form of legal evidence relies upon the declarations –employing the terms testimony or witnessing here would be inappropriate considering the very nature of such statements, which were allegations rather than affirmations of the truth, despite being delivered under oath – from those who claimed to have experienced visions or apparitions. Spectral evidence was frequently accepted and even encouraged during the witch trials of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The specific interest of Pardlo's poetic exploit not only lies in the variety of themes connected through the pages and in his wanderings among them, nor exclusively in his approach to the use of fear adopted by the legal apparatus in order to "rationalize the persecution of people imagined to be in league with and possessed of supernatural forces,"²⁶⁴ but also in his questioning of the role of the witness, a key figure that has appeared earlier on a few occasions, and of memory altogether.

Eyewitness testimony is notoriously faulty because it relies on memory, which decays almost immediately²⁶⁵

To conclude with an artwork that incorporates poetry, I shall quote Kaelen Wilson-Goldie's annotations on Amar Kanwar's *A Night of Prophecy*, a 77 minute "tour de force piecing together various recitations of established and vernacular poetry– about violence, conflict, tragedy, pain– in eleven languages from across India. [...] Over time, Kanwar's experience with political injustice and environmental degradation had coalesced into a theory: if acts of violence continue to occur, despite all the available evidence that should be used to stop them and achieve lasting justice, then perhaps it is how evidence is conceived, constituted, and understood that needs to change. Kanwar's proposition... is to consider poetry the most powerful form of evidence to convey the magnitude of what has happened, over forensic, eyewitness testimonies, or facts and figures."²⁶⁶

²⁶³Gregory Pardlo, *Spectral Evidence* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2024), xiii.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*, xv.

²⁶⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶⁶Wilson-Goldie, *Beautiful, Gruesome and true*, 45.

The video is fully available on youtube, at this address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh0w-BggDHg>.

CONCLUSION / POSTSCRIPT

Nothing I have said here serves directly to answer these questions. But in laying the groundwork that permits us to pose them, I have tried to shed some light on the current conjuncture. [...] The path to its resolution can only go through deep structural transformation of this social order.²⁶⁷

I hesitate to title this last section ‘conclusion,’ as nothing is less conclusive than what I am about to say. My research began with the confidence of the naivete: I posed a set of questions, traced a research plan, and foresaw the works I would create during the programme. In short, I believed I had everything under control. Needless to say, the process unfolded quite differently. I shifted trajectories, explored new routes, followed unexpected paths. Additional works were created over the course of my doctoral research, and many more might have come to light under its ramifications – were it not for the necessity of bringing this chapter to a close, at least provisionally, in order to meet the requirements of academic completion. Ideally, this closure holds the promise of future expansions.

To recap, the research project, as initially conceived, consisted of three artworks (*Monument to the Falling Wall*, *Commemorative Stamps*, and *La mère*), each one addressing a different declination of absence.

The wall, which has been at the core of my research for over two years, remains central to my artistic and non-artistic preoccupations. As I moved through the successive stages of sampling, withdrawing from the enterprise, engaging in, and creating a monumental sculpture from hand-knitted wool, my reflection on the wall has yet to be exhausted. After dedicating a full year to creating samples of partitions, in various colour tones (black, white, and two shades of grey) and articulations (the figure of the accordion is pertinent, as are the dividers of old memory), I paused my material research on the wall to focus on another line of thought, which ultimately developed into a full body of work, titled *The Echo of the Void*. Only after completing that project, was I ready to resume my confrontation with the idea and material evidence of the barrier. The time in between, as often occurs, introduced a slight shift in direction, as I engaged with the question of exhibiting a so-called work of art that would replicate a segment of a separation wall, hence an architectural substantiation of oppression. I continued to ruminate on these ideas during the many months it took me to complete the six-and-a-half-metre sculpture: on the impossibility of participating in the process of reproducing such a physical manifestation of despotism and injustice, without exploring representation from a standpoint of reclaimed agency, without at least positioning the work as an endeavour to introduce a prospect of empowerment.

²⁶⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review*, 100 (July-August 2016), 99-117, 117.

If the physical object – the recreation in wool, then stretched to its maximum potential, of a modular element of a separation wall – serves as evidence of a system of subjugation and brutality, how can one convey the hope of ever overcoming it? The conclusion I reached, which translated into the installation of the finished work at the Maraya Art Centre (Sharjah, UAE) for a show that surveyed my practice, was to depict the monument in the act of falling, almost photographically frozen in its descending curve. This would enable me to acknowledge the existence of ‘the wall,’ as a symbol of the ever-growing number of barriers we are witnessing being erected worldwide, whilst simultaneously introducing the potential for their removal, the prospect of bringing them down, and celebrating this as an achievement.

Clearly, as positive a message as this may be, I cannot delude myself into believing in a brighter future. The disproportion between the forces at stake has also led me to acknowledge the impossibility of responding to a collective trauma of such proportions with just one work. Hence, I realised the need to bend my response into different forms, and to multiply the act of a "negative creation" to avoid the false gratification of exhausting the subject once the work is completed.

I therefore embarked on the creation of a second module, virtually identical to the previous one,²⁶⁸ which I nevertheless approached from a different perspective. As I reflected on the interaction between the barrier and the human body, I realised the need to emphasise that relatedness: looking back at *The dying animal*,²⁶⁹ the idea of remnant, of relic, of a left-behind membrane resurfaced.²⁷⁰ While reconsidering the unexplored potential implicit in establishing a similitude between the exhibition of a skinned animal and that of some of the structures used in the process of inflicting violence – separation walls, prison cells, etc. – I began interrogating the solidity, the depiction of unbreakability that is constantly associated with those oppressive architectures. If a rebellious position is already clearly implied by the very circumstance of my viewpoint on the subject matter, then why stop at the reproduction of a segment of a hypothetical partition? Why ‘credit’ its existence? And as I also question the standards of representation, why comply with the canons transmitted by centuries of art history, and limit the presentation to the regularity of the square stretcher? Why not evade those structures and free the work – and myself, as a reflex – from the constraints of this rigidity? Why not go beyond that stiffness, that inflexibility?²⁷¹

What was implicit but not quite consciously accessible in my previous piece, became manifest later, retrospectively, by establishing a relation between the wall and the bare body, in all its flexibility. That led me to explore the possibility of dismissing the categories of proper presentation (stretched, legible work) and instead offering the work in a ‘post’ status that refuses all limitations, viewing the fence as a

²⁶⁸The notion of reproduction is clearly inaccurate as it refers to a hand-made process that, by definition, will always differ in its outcome.

²⁶⁹See part II, chapter 5.

²⁷⁰I like to thank Christoph Weber for his comments and feedback, which has been helpful in articulating some of these thoughts in a more cohesive way.

²⁷¹I am sincerely grateful to Sabih Ahmed, a dear friend and brilliant curator, for his suggestions and comments, which proved to be of great encouragement for me to elaborate further on the consequences of my premises.

dead body, akin to a skinned animal. This simple shift embodies a greater level of violence, so to speak, in its impoliteness and disregard for all conveniences.

Back to the idea of introducing the perspective of a negative creation, the passive experience of confronting the work in its solidity would then be subverted by this disrespectful display, which introduces the potential of seeing the work –now resembling an organic material, almost becoming alive, but only in order to die –from a perspective of elevatedness, of dismissal and moral superiority.

Most themes investigated during my doctoral artistic research remain unanswered: the artist's commitment to a determined set of social values; the possibility, or not, to reconcile the artistic and the political; space-time dialectics; the critical question around over-aestheticising, while addressing issues of social and political relevance; and the role of poetry in the process.

A clarification is needed: although the questions remain unanswered, this has not resulted in the frustration of an unsuccessful attempt. Throughout this investigation, the questions have guided the works; they have served as the vessel for a journey that has been arduous, if not perilous. To extend the metaphor, they have functioned as my compass. A compass is not designed to solve problems, but to provide orientation. Likewise, my research questions did not yield the relief of definitive answers; instead, they kept me in adherence to the process of questioning.

“Is it possible to materialise absence? To give it substance? And if so, to what extent?”

Although the outcome of the research threatened to merely confirm the degree of impracticability implied by those questions, the creation of artworks aiming to reverse and disrupt the passivity of historical violence can be considered as one of the results of this artistic inquiry. The research and the resulting artistic projects relied on the prospect to exploit gaps and introduce variables within a stricter cause-and-effect scheme, aiming to break the predictability of those very logics and transform an aesthetic experience into a potentially disruptive political action and a tool for empowerment on both individual and social levels.²⁷² In this process, it referenced a tradition of artists and scholars, who have realised and theorised the role of visual arts as a potential actor in political discourse, while also encouraging more conscious participation from the audience.²⁷³ The risk for artistic practices that confront political issues, to fall into the trap of over-aestheticising their representation, is always impending²⁷⁴. In contrasting this tendency to condescend to a mystifying approach that would contain absence within barriers of innocuousness, I examined other art

²⁷²“The principle of emancipation is the dissociation of cause and effect,” Rancière’s quote is reproduced in Nelson, *Art of Cruelty*, 117.

²⁷³See Wilson-Goldie, *Beautiful, Gruesome and True*; and Vincenzo Trione, *Artivismo. Arte, politica, impegno* (Einaudi, 2022).

²⁷⁴The opposite path chosen by many artists working at the intersection of arts and politics, is the documentarist, almost journalistic approach. This risks banalising the subject, flattening it through a pretended media-style impartiality, or excessive literality, thus losing its evocative potential. In doing so, it may fail to generate a response in the audience that would transcend the mere transmission of information.

practitioners' responses to violence, and the strategies they have employed to expose physical and symbolic violence through representational, performative and interventional means. How can visual arts open critical spaces to explore violence without reinforcement or recuperation? How can political violence be understood or interpreted through art? How are artistic interventions conceived to shift, challenge or respond to public perceptions of political violence, and in what ways are they simultaneously constrained or shaped by those very perceptions?²⁷⁵

This also allows me to raise the question of legitimacy, which often coincides with a question of belonging: on what basis is my claim to represent 'the pain of others' founded? The pain of individuals or communities to which I do not belong by birthright, but only through an elective sense of affiliation, an empathic sentiment, a fortuitous encounter? Is the adverb 'only' truly well chosen and positioned in the sentence? Why does nature still seem to take precedence over reason when it comes to choosing one's own belonging? Are we still engaging in the same old debate regarding nature and reason?

It is certainly peculiar that whenever an individual born and raised in the Global South obtains citizenship from a Northern Hemisphere nation, their rights are acknowledged, granting them the new privilege of speaking on behalf of that country. In contrast, when the reverse occurs – a scenario that is notably rarer – the fortunate citizen of a Global South country, but born and raised in a Western nation, must justify their desire to advocate for the causes of their new state, often needing to defend their credibility in this regard, due to their acquired citizenship status.

As we reconnect with some considerations advanced in the introduction, we need to examine from a different angle the shift in perception from the condition of refugee/foreigner to that of guest/stranger. This involves looking at the unlikelihood of re-rooting and the challenge of positively and fully settling in a new place. The perception of the foreigner remains that of a stranger, someone who is made absent in two ways: physically absent from the place they left (yet emotionally present there), and physically present in the new context (but perceived socially and emotionally as an absentee).

On June 19, 2021, I wrote the following in an email to Sandi Hilal, who has over the past decades pursued an investigation on the notion of 'host' in the most admirable and intelligent way:

During our last session, I ended up keeping my thoughts contained (spaces of confinement seems to be the rule...) and I didn't intervene in the conversation as my reading felt irrelevant, at some point, considering how the discourse was shifting towards the politically charged definition of neighbour in counter position to that of coloniser.

What I was exploring was rather a reflection around the verbal area of "host" and "guest". I was considering the development of the conversation, the space to follow, to be created. How could these

²⁷⁵Ruth Kinna and Gillian Whiteley (eds.), *Cultures of Violence. Visual Arts and Political Violence* (Routledge 2020).

two roles evolve? As I much enjoy playing with words (and I admired your transfer between English and Arabic to internalise the notion of hostility, which seems to be associated to that of neighbour in both languages), I imagined potential combinations (I don't know why, I could only conceive a way forward through contamination...): alternative resulting roles could be the "ghost", as the protracted guest disappears in a set of rules dictated by the host, or the "quest", as a personification of a space for joint exploration.

The question of language always haunts me, and I couldn't omit it in this specific context. Especially since we are considering the 4th day, the day when the word takes full space and the virtual silence investing the first three days is broken. What happens when the word is pronounced? When the guest is asked to answer the question "who are you"? and "what brought you here?"

What happens if the guest and the host don't even share the same language?

The traditional way of thinking would suggest that the guest has to learn the language of the host (thus, again, inserting notions of morality and gratitude within the larger discourse of a spontaneous, unmediated relationship). But then again I go back to the "absurdity" of the "quest", as a refusal of any standing point and an investigation into potentially new connections. The point of contact, which could start at the level of language, would then be the reciprocity in accepting and opening to the language of the "Other." Not only the guest feeling the obligation to learn the language of the host, to feel integrated in a pre-existing set system, but also the host embracing the destabilising path of venturing into the unknown, of learning the language of the guest, as a more vulnerable, therefore more welcoming position, able to shift from the role of the host to that of guest (in virtue of the very nature of learning something new, that expose us to the insecurity of exploring an unfamiliar area). The host could then turn to be the guest of a foreign language...

It is in the common space created by both fragilities that I identify the space for experimenting without judgement, for exiting the structure, for accepting the liminality as a constituent, creative status. And explorative, meaning "open to failure"...

On the occasion of her presentation "Artistic Intervention about Archival Time," for the seminar titled "Autumn Intensive – *Emergent*," organised and directed with great acumen by Verina Gfader at Lund University, Malmo²⁷⁶, Özge Ersoy introduced and explored archival and curatorial practices treasured by the Asia Art Archive (AAA), an independent non-profit organisation founded in Hong Kong in 2000. Their institutional purpose being that of documenting the myriad recent histories of art in the region, Ersoy presented AAA's most recent library exhibition at that point in time, "In and Out of Time,"²⁷⁷ which examined the strategies of archives to counter linear time, addressing 'questions such as: do artworks

²⁷⁶October 8, 2024.

²⁷⁷This was a working title in Autumn 2024. I haven't verified if it had been maintained, as I personally thought it perfectly reflected the nature of the curatorial project it labelled.

and events have finite endings? How does the archive become an emergent site of re-imagination, rather than a site where history ends?'²⁷⁸

In *The Book of Disquiet*, Pessoa writes: "The only behaviour of a superior man is the tenacious persistence of an activity that is recognized as useless, the habit of a sterile discipline, the fixed use of norms of philosophical and metaphysical thought that we understand to be of no importance"²⁷⁹

While I would disagree with the notion that the exercise lacks importance, or is sterile, I would instead acknowledge its practical irrelevance at a political level. At the same time, I fully align with Ersoy's proposition regarding the potential embedded in the nonfinite nature of artistic practices – their conclusions tending towards openings, their capacity to cultivate the conditions for the 'emergent side of re-imagination,' rather than to assert, proclaim or enforce a definitive site where history comes to a close.

²⁷⁸These questions led me to revisit the notions of guilt and reparation, the inheritance of historical accountability and traumas, and the weight of intergenerational responsibility. On this, I would like to mention a small section within the last Sharjah Biennale 16 ("To carry"), titled "Speaking with the dead," and curated by Adam HajYahia as part of Bilna'es. The exhibition explores the conditions of debt and asks, among other provocative questions "What is debt as a binding condition, debt when inherited and debt refused?"

²⁷⁹Rabih Alameddine, *La traduttrice* (Bompiani, 2013), 115, my translation.

"Nel libro dell'inquietudine, Pessoa scrive: "L'unico comportamento di un uomo superiore e la persistenza tenace di un'attività che si riconosce inutile, l'abitudine a una disciplina sterile, l'uso fisso di norme del pensiero filosofico e metafisico che comprendiamo non essere di alcuna importanza."

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – FIGURES OF ABSENCE²⁸⁰

- The Farewell

The farewell is an experience of absence before even being departed.

In the farewell, past and future converge.

- The Horizon

The horizon is the presence of the elsewhere, the materialisation of its possibility, and at the same time of its exclusion.

The horizon reveals the very essence of absence, the nexus between seeing and not seeing.

The horizon is always beyond ourselves.

- The Sky

Beyond the myth, the sky does not join the earth. It departs the earth. The sky is what's missing: the endless extension of absence.

We look at the sky as a past shape, in its past tense. To interrogate the sky is to interrogate the time, its boundaries.

- Nostalgia, Exile

Mnemosyne is a presence that is looking backwards. A concentration around what's far away, or lost.

The language of poetry welcomes in its rhythm the sweetness and the painfulness of the remembrance.

The effect of the nostalgic is the effect of an absence impossible to dissipate, of a distance from the country of origin that is experienced as irreversible

We don't miss a place, but the time spent in that place, although no return can meet the time lived in that very place.

Whatever is lost, is lost forever.

²⁸⁰Prete, *Trattato della lontananza*, passim.

- How to paint Absence

Blue is the colour of absence.

Absence is not an abstract entity, a place to oppose to presence: it is made of gradations of distance, and it has relation with light and shadow.

- The Sound of Absence

The sound of absence is transformed in the sound of poetry. In poetry, beyond the specific language in which it is expressed, there is the sound of another language that is beyond all languages.

The fascination of the distance, the absence, the remoteness resides in the dream of an unreachable knowledge through the exploration of the proximity, through the visibility of things that are close to us.

Wind is somehow the audible voice of nature, the invisible becoming sound. It comes from absence, an absolute distance. Everything ends in the wind.

Similarly, the sound of the sea brings the distance with it, the sense of remoteness.

- Longing for a far-away Land

The poetry of love is always poetry of the absence.

The representation of love is not only the desire of something far away but also the longing for the impossible.

Among notions and images relating to absence, potentially enabling its rendered tangibility, the following represent an incomplete and growing repository:

black holes and blackbodies; implosion vs. explosion; the role of zero as a representation of an absence of all quantities (mathematically and philosophically); the disappearance of bodies: ghosts and phantoms, the bogeyman, liminal creatures between existence and non-existence; *desaparecidos* in different political contexts; periodical phenomena of shrinking back and away: low tide, moon phases, appearance of constellations in either hemisphere etc.; spectral evidence; the acoustics of echo (“everything that is, from now on, is an echo of the non-being”, D. Grossman); the end of an affair (the reabsorbing wave of love); the ancient Greek *horror vacui*; the material crossing of the canvas (Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, Eva Hesse, Marc Ronet, etc.); Claudio Parmiggiani’s *delocazioni*; the materialisation of emptiness (Yves Klein, Michael Heizer, Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalev-Gerz, Roberto Cuoghi etc.); the role of punctuation: *birzak*, the Arabic comma, as a representation of limbo, etc.; *damnatio memoriae* as a metaphor of oblivion and posthumous anonymity; the limbic condition of non-citizens: migrants, displaced, stateless; a poetic reminiscence of absence (David Grossman, Ramy Zein, Antonella Anedda, Paolo Ruffilli, Giuseppe Conte, etc.), the privative alpha; Arabic linguistic roots; quantum mechanics; the phantom note etc.

APPENDIX 2 – VACUUM

Why do dictionaries contain words to describe phenomena that do not exist in nature? Language is first and foremost observational and descriptive. Only at a later stage, and at a higher level of articulation, does it become prospective, investigative, and visionary, often doing so through periphrases or metaphors, by agglomerations of words.

The simplicity of wording is both relational and explanatory. One could, of course, invoke the well-established linguistics tradition that emphasises arbitrariness of language,²⁸¹ its non-constitutive nature, its status as not being an emanation of the world it seeks to designate or signify. And yet, we would still be within the frame of a relation to nature, to the world as we perceive it through our senses, even our enhanced senses.

Wording something that cannot be experienced, nevertheless, falls in the realm of visionariness.

The word "vacuum" comes from the Latin "vacua", which means "empty". However, there does not exist a totally empty space in nature, there is no "ideal vacuum". Vacuum is only a partially empty space, where some of the air and other gases have been removed from a gas containing volume ("gas" comes from the Greek word "chaos" = infinite, empty space). In other words, vacuum means any volume containing less gas particles, atoms and molecules (a lower particle density and gas pressure), than there are in the surrounding outside atmosphere. Accordingly, vacuum is the gaseous environment at pressures below atmosphere.²⁸²

Vacuum has no correspondence in reality: what we define "empty" would then technically be only a less densely occupied volume.

Philosophy has long been obsessed with vacuum, either looking for it or refusing it, and *horror vacui* has been a recurrent approach in different cultures and their artistic emanations.²⁸³

But let's go back to physics:

Vacuum is made by removing the various gases from the contained volume. This is done by many different kinds of vacuum pumps, which either remove the particles from the volume by

²⁸¹The nature of this dissertation, which is in no way a treaty on linguistics, makes it impossible to tackle the topic and summarise the long debate about the nature of language.

²⁸²Niels Marquardt, "Introduction to the principles of vacuum physics," CERN 1999, accessed August 29, 2024, <http://cientificosaficionados.com/libros/CERN/vacio1-CERN.pdf>

²⁸³"It was Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who claimed that nature is afraid of total emptiness and that there is an insurmountable "horror vacui." (Ibid., 1).

real pumping or trap them by binding them via physical or chemical forces, changing their form and keeping them trapped in the bulk of the pumping material, a so-called getter.²⁸⁴

In 1650, Otto von Guericke invented the first vacuum pump. Four years later, he conducted his famous Magdeburg hemisphere experiment, showing that teams of horses could not separate two hemispheres from which the air had been evacuated. Robert Boyle improved Guericke's design and conducted experiments on the properties of vacuum. Robert Hooke also helped Boyle produce an air pump that helped to produce the vacuum.²⁸⁵

As Aristotle anticipated, the idea of empty space would invite hypothetical states and conditions: he assumed motion without resistance, that is motion at infinite velocity. Thomas Hobbes, a contemporary of Robert Boyle, feared that the existence of a vacuum, if proven, could entail political consequences, as an absolutely empty space would be potentially exempt from government control, hence encouraging political turmoil.

Hobbes' denial of a vacuum stems partly from a need for political stability. It follows logically that if there is a space that is devoid of matter, then that is proof of "incorporeal substance"²⁸⁶ - an idea that priests adopted to gain the allegiance of the people by promising the safety of this substance, the immortal soul. This splits the allegiance of each person in a country between the Church and the Monarch, which creates social instability and ultimately, for Hobbes, the risk of civil war.²⁸⁷ He considered incorporeal substance a priestly conspiracy to "usurp power" from the true and legitimate leader - the King.²⁸⁸ The conflict could be resolved "by collapsing the hierarchy [spiritual government and material government] in favour of matter".^{289 290}

Hobbes' claims largely depended on his inclination towards the needs of a Restoration society. They also felicitously introduce an equation between vacuum and chaos, or political anarchy, which would be interesting to explore in more detail, referencing the artistic discourse developed throughout the programme, and within the larger field of contemporary artistic creation²⁹¹.

²⁸⁴Marquardt, "Introduction to the principles of vacuum physics," 7.

²⁸⁵"Vacuum Pump," Wikipedia, accessed August 23, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vacuum_pump.

²⁸⁶Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer, *Leviathan et la pompe à air: Hobbes et Boyle entre science et politique*. Trans. Thierry Piélat and Sylvie Barjansky (Ed. La Découverte, 1993), 83.

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 96.

²⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 98.

²⁹⁰"Leviathan and the Air-Pump," Wikipedia, accessed August 23, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leviathan_and_the_Air-Pump.

²⁹¹See Alice Creischer, "Das Etablissement der Tatsachen/ The Establishment of Matters of Fact," curated by Søren Grammel, Heidelberger Kunstverein (June 12 – September 11, 2022). The exhibition was preceded by an earlier iteration, with the same title, at KOW, Berlin (April 28 – July 22, 2012).

A radically opposite position can be argued, and revert the equation between void and anarchy. In fact, from a political perspective, and more precisely, from a state perspective, the use of void would instead translate into a manifestation of power. Here, as void, I specifically address the materialisation of authoritarian, State-inflicted violence through the use of architectural and town-planning strategies that eventually create “voids” in the urban landscape. My claim is that the erection of separation walls and other architectural barriers that define, delimit and separate designated areas, especially when this happens inside a residential agglomeration, with their modelling of annihilation, *de facto* shapes vacuum.

Void is here intended in the acceptance of a complete emptiness, which determines a lack in contact. Walls, barriers, and fences of various materialities and consistences, declaredly aim at discouraging proximity, often stretched to the point of negating all forms of connection between the communities settled on the respective sides of the partition.

Now a void is a *terra nullius*, a ‘land belonging to no one,’ a piece of uninhabited, unoccupied, unusable land. Far from being an inevitable side effect, this establishment of empty, devoid-of-all functions, unemployable segments of space, is the intentional consequence of well-planned state violence.

Similarly, in terms of strategy although profoundly different in its manifestation, the use of political incarceration would fall under the same category, where the creation of a void appears to be an embodiment of imposed despotic power, and the deriving vacuum is a political erasure. Here, the void equates silencing, in the most direct, and brutal way, by imprisoning political opponents, dissident voices that – from the perspective of a totalitarian State – need to be neutralised, emptied, and denied of presence. In order to do so, the architectural space that materialises this function is a void – often too densely populated – a prison facility that, in many cases, is hardly accessible, where the prisoners become voiceless to the outside world, and severed from it.

If we revisit Hobbes’ anxieties regarding Boyle’s scientific experiments intended to prove the existence of a vacuum, which would suggest the possibility of such a space being exempt from government control, we could argue that it is precisely that vacuum, that “absence of air from a space,” which can only be experienced within a confined context, that truly characterises the ultimate exercise of centralised, authoritarian State dominance.

APPENDIX 3 – ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

in loving memory of my father

in loving memory of Tarek

The years of my doctoral studies were regrettably marked by a series of important losses, which led me to establish quite literally a conversation with the dead. This is properly called ‘the work of mourning,’ and no other time could have proved more appropriate.

Besides this omnipresent, pervasive, and internalised dialogue, stimulating exchanges, tête-à-tête and confabulations were established with both physical and remote presences: a dense dialogue with authors and artists of the past, as well as contemporary and living ones, nurtured my hours and days.

I am sincerely grateful to all those who gifted me attention and care, both at a personal and professional level. I’d love to mention them one by one but that would make a very long appendix. I will remember here my supervisor Judith Eisler, who has infused a rare positivity with her support and trust in my research and practice; and the Artistic Research programme’s professors and fellow colleagues who offered their responses, suggestions, and advice with generosity and kindness, besides the competence one would expect.

Many years ago, when I first moved to the United Arab Emirates, I happened to meet the late Hassan Sharif and to be welcomed in the circle of his adepts. Those years, until his passing in 2016, were marked by a rich intellectual exchange, one that could not be replicated and whose memory I cherish dearly. My decision to embark in a PhD programme was partially motivated by the desire to be part once again of a community of like-minded with whom to engage in a protracted dialogue, one that would allow me to become familiar with peers’ practices while also exposing me to unexpected revelations about mine.

My gratefulness goes to inherited and adoptive tribes, for their uninterrupted encouragement, patient support, and unconditional faith in my capacities; to Mohammed Kazem, who has, since we met, trusted my research, sustained my quest and corroborated my thoughts – by means of validating as well as of questioning them – thus ultimately contributing to my artistic and human growth; and to my beloved sons Daniel and Jonathan, always, for brightening my days with their presence.