

A Lover's Discourse: Fictions

by

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Submitted to the Department of Architecture in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Art, Culture and
Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets a landscape to discuss intimacy as a political tool, using fiction as a methodology to create potency in the Arab world. Its concern with *critique* is on the actionable level. This document discusses projects that critique realities in Lebanon and the Arab World by proposing (1) that these realities are in fact fictions (2) that can be contested by creating new fictions through cultural practice. The arguments, challenges and defenses happen in public through observations and readings. The corpus of this thesis is the manuscript of a novel written between 2012 and 2015, “The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of Another Arab World,” and the methodology of writing it.

Keywords: *Fiction, Performance, Contemporary Art, Activism, Literature, Arab world, Politics, Roland Barthes, The Perfumed Garden*

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*to my family,
in all the forms it has taken and all the forms it will take*

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1. Introduction

“Critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend”
— pg. 19, *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

This thesis sets a landscape to discuss intimacy as a political tool, using fiction as a methodology to create potency in an impotent place. Its concern with *critique* is on the actionable level. Through the structure of this document, I will discuss projects that critique realities in Lebanon and the Arab World by proposing (1) that these realities are in fact fictions (2) that can be contested by creating new fictions through cultural practice. The arguments, challenges and defenses happen in public through observations and readings. The corpus of this thesis is the manuscript of a novel that I wrote from 2012 until 2015, “The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of Another Arab World,” and the methodology of writing it.

Still unpublished, this novel is the first edition of a series of novels intended to make room for narratives that don’t fit in the existing structure of the Arab World. Each novel will be a political manuscript, like a literary manifesto that requests an infrastructure for it to manifest. By performing an “autobiography,” it is enacting a log of things that happen in “another” version of a place that is the Arab World. It identifies its borders as different from the original’s, and claims territory, claims public. In *The Perfumed Garden*, geopolitical borders that have been assigned by the fictions of European colonial and mandate powers that controlled the Arab World until as recently

as the mid-twentieth century¹, do not apply. They are actively challenged with every stride of narrative. The Perfumed Garden's duel is with fictions such as The Future of Palestine² memorandum, the Sykes-Picot agreement³ and other proposals that claimed territory through linking themselves to power. The Perfumed Garden does not propagate the impotent victim role that stereotypes and conditions the Arabs into complacency, but is also in conflict with Arab Nationalism, Arabism⁴ and ongoing nostalgias to successive, yet distant, Arab Golden Ages.

While The Perfumed Garden's fiction will seem to advocate for the Arab World as one "nation," what this fiction tries to argue is borderlessness as terrain as opposed to borderless as unity pertaining to the idea that geopolitical borders are fictions enforced on the land which is the canvas. Inside The Perfumed Garden, this discrepancy between the old borders and the proposed terrains, and the differentiation between an unobstructed terrain and a consensual unity, makes space for a conversation about the borders of so-called realities and the potential outcomes of their absences. It allows me as an artist, the characters, and this other world to perform reality until the reality of the current world complies.

Until very recently, I would call the labor put into making The Perfumed Garden, a series of projects in various media, but currently think about it as one ongoing life

¹ Lebanon gained its independence from the French Mandate in 1943 after 23 years of mandate rule

² The Future of Palestine was a memorandum first presented by Herbert Samuel to the British Cabinet in January 1915, two months after the British declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire. The memorandum influenced a number of members of the British Cabinet in the months preceding the negotiation of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, and later the 1917 Balfour Declaration

³ This secret agreement between Britain and France spelled out their roles in post-war Middle East. It plans the transition between the Ottoman Empire's Active Fiction in the Levant and the Anglo-French one. It was signed May 9, 1916.

⁴ Arabism is an ideology advocating the idea of the Arab World through the unification of the countries of North Africa and West Asia from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea, and is closely connected to Arab nationalism, which asserts that the Arabs constitute a single nation.

project,⁵ a mode of being rather than a series of products, which makes this thesis also autobiographical. With it, I go over stages in this life project both as a demonstration and as an analytical reflection on my part to explore agency on the civic action scale and discuss the political power of intimacy.

This life project has been a format for me to exist in a place that does not want me to exist the way I want to. I am Lebanese, yet I do not agree with most of the political and socioeconomic landscapes of my immediate context. I know this sounds normal, as if I missed the memo that says, “Of course you’re going to hate the system,” but I did get the memo, and I do not agree with that either. I am interested in the activation of the role of the dweller, to inhabit a role more interesting than a national, a patriot, an academic, an activist or a professional, something that has potency to pro-create, to proactively create, home.

It is also not that I do not like the system that is supposed to govern my existence like I would like or dislike roasted eggplants, but rather that I am aware of the physical danger imposed by the systems of reality like I am aware of the physical danger of sharing a bed with a hungry anaconda. It is a state of hyperarousal⁶, myself in a [prolonged] fight-or-flight response where I have chosen to fight instead of flee away from home. It is not a metaphor to say that the State of Lebanon, as a manifested fiction, as a bordered, governed republic, wants to get rid of me.

As a queer man living in Lebanon, Article 534 of the country’s Penal Code that prohibits having sexual relations that are "contradicting the laws of nature," could put me in prison for up to a year. A trip to [Occupied] Palestine or a conversation with an Israeli

⁵ Allan Kaprow, On Kawara (footnote in progress)

⁶ An acute stress response that occurs in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival.

citizen, even if accidental, could be considered treason under two laws: the 1943 Lebanese Criminal Code and the 1955 Lebanese Anti-Israeli Boycott Law under the case of “naturalizing” interaction with enemy states regardless of what I would be saying. It is “normal” in Lebanon not to have access to 24/7 electricity at home, and has become “naturally expected” of the Lebanese parliament to renew its mandate without an election. I have serious problems with what is “normal” and “natural” in the place I consider home.

This perpetual disinterest in a [State-proposed-and-governed] status quo has been marking decisions I have been making my entire life. At 18, I sought in architecture the potency to produce inclusive space. In that, I failed to instill the change I assumed possible through architecture. What I underestimated is that under the academic façade of architecture as a heroic endeavor in world building, it is a profession obstructed by its own rules, dogmas and guiding principles that guide it within a larger real-estate economy. At 26, I sought in artistic practice the potency to breach space. In a sense, this thesis discusses experiments in this period of my life. I assume that the degrees of failure in that endeavor are still ambiguous, but I’m getting better at understanding my positionality with respect to the land I consider mine.

Now at 30, I discovered Barthes’s “A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments,” from which this thesis borrows its title and part of its structure, a book that offers utterances that Barthes calls “figures” illustrated through a series of short essays, indexed by things the lover speaks. “So it is a lover who speaks and who says”⁷ “absence,” “anxiety,” “compassion,” “declaration” etc., utterances that become titles and entry points to the

⁷ Roland Barthes. *A lover's discourse: fragments*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010).

lover's discourse according to Barthes. In my trajectory of understanding the drive behind my work, this book became a valuable interlocutor both in its structure and content. I took notes on the text itself, like an editor, adapting the text to become explicative of my work. It is what I like to call a social book, one whose existence is designed to speak, rather inform, and potentially find a long-term allocation of space in its reader's briefcase for further conversation.

Through reading "A Lover's Discourse: Fragments" I understood that through artistic practice, I have been courting the land I call home, as opposed to merely doing projects on it and using it as a site. Through this act of courting, I am attempting to arouse its curiosity about me, erecting more space for myself, performing reality until reality complies. I understood that I have inhabited the role of the lover, loving and intimacy, as a political tool. To love in public, as a political machina. Intimacy as the medium, not art or writing or architecture. Each work becomes a scaffold susceptible to intimacy and immune to inherited reality, a site of breeding of new fictions.

Today, I am in love with loving. Loving as an obsessive performance that bypasses the worldly, a performance that seduces subject, object and site into a zone of intensity where labor doesn't feel laborious, an engaged life project, something both individual and collective that could go on forever.

In this sense, what binds the works that I will present to you in this thesis is that role: the role of the lover, as a contender in the list of options to be, in the catalog of activity, not activism, as a dweller. I carve out the position of the lover [of the land of dwelling] as a counterpart to the national, the patriot, the academic, the activist and the professional. I do so because the lover sees beyond the problem and beyond the solution.

The lover does not try to solve the amorous object's detachment from him, but designs a seductive fiction he could inhabit. What I do with *The Perfumed Garden* is that. It is a constructed fiction that admits this love as imbalanced, but allows the lover his desired landscapes and his desired scenarios to manifest. While these landscapes are built in solitude, this lover enjoys company, he yearns for it, and the "communal" happens as a result of the seduction of the common into his zone of intensity. In that process, the chronology of activity does not come from the abstract to the action (as in the case of the national, the patriot, the academic, the activist and the professional where each "occupation" is an identification with a dogma), but rather from the sensual action to the abstract (as in the act of loving creates a zone of intensity that could seduce a voluntary communal before becoming a generated abstraction, a theory or philosophy).

2. Methodology

Through this logic I can explain the methodology of writing *The Perfumed Garden*, and the chapters of this thesis document. Starting from the conceptual diagram of the sensual action to the abstract (and potentially communal), each of the stages of this ongoing project has started at an instant of intimacy between myself (the lover) and a character or a place in the Arab World. These instances range from a basic conversation to the production of a feature film with a production team. These instances of intimacy will act as entry points to each of the following chapters.

Once these instances emerge, and through the process of their becoming, I write the text of the novel. This process marries the writing of fiction, and the occurrence of bits and pieces of "another" world through materialized scenarios from the lover's fiction. This renders "*The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of Another Arab World*"

a novel that does not solely want to be printed, read and perceived as a book, but rather be a publication as a constructive process, an active object in a public it participates in constructing through its fiction: writing as architecture.

I borrow from Barthes's introduction on how to read his book a useful paragraph that could establish the framework of how to access *The Perfumed Garden*.

What is proposed then, is a portrait—but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other, (the loved object) who does not speak.

And the edited version of the paragraph below:

What is proposed then, is an autobiography—but not an impressionistic autobiography; instead, a structural one which offers the dweller a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other, (the loved object) who is the site of being.

The underlined texts are my edits to the original paragraph, allowing the lover's discourse to engage with inhabited place as a lover, and allowing the autobiography in that context to be a structural one, not only a documentary, but a generator that could engage with a site and change it. In the segments that follow, I will go over slices of this ongoing project chronologically, each grounded in *The Perfumed Garden* using an excerpt from the novel.

The proximity of the novel text and the explicatory text of *The Perfumed Garden*'s manifestation, back to back, in this thesis document is intended to demonstrate the generative aspect of this proposed constructive fiction and writing as architecture. It will also appear in each segment that time is in a moment of blur or collapse. A lot of thought was put into the sequence of information to demonstrate this nonlinear process of writing. The novel text was not written as a clear blueprint for the projects to come, nor was it a documentation of projects after they happened, so choosing which text preceded

the other in the context of action/reaction is already invalid. It is the *fiction* that manifests into narrative text or tangible spatial form in public, not the *text* of the novel written as a proposal. This fiction is akin to desire, the lover's force, the lover's utterance. So each chapter will start with that utterance, followed by its materialization in the novel and then its manifestation in public as an installation, exhibition, film or infrastructure.

So it is a lover who speaks

and who says:

“I want to be your story”

In this excerpt from *The Perfumed Garden*, a narrator describes the world according to his grandmother. The text after it discusses this landscape, the birth of *The Perfumed Garden*, and sets the groundwork for the different projects in relation to the utterances that follow.

To my grandmother, every man is a universe within a universe where every other man and thing lives. He is free to communicate his knowledge, in whole or in part, aligning and contradicting himself for the betterness of his being. Every man becomes a better universe within a universe where every other man and thing would live better.

In her universe, everything required a bold leap of faith. Reality was not factually shared or communicated. A grasp of the latter was not a prerequisite to life or happiness. “My gray hairs,” she says, “are because of your mother’s perception of time,” she always said to me, “not mine.”

My grandmother disliked my mother. “May birds be sent upon her, in flocks, throwing stones of Sijeeel on her and her Reality!” She mediated life in filters of belief and increments of sincerity. She was honest, and was liable to only that.

I wasn’t supposed to believe my grandmother, but I did. They weren’t supposed to believe their references, but they did. And that made all the difference. Her stories were active weaves of characters and events. She never started or ended her stories, they all seemed to be excavated out of an ongoing stream of consciousness, just like Tarab. Just like Oum Kolthoum. I was never able to put my finger on where her ballads end, and where their siblings begin. Her repertoire becomes a set of Maqāmat sculpting a multidimensional being that can be approached with or without her voice. An intangible sculpture. An invisible monument. A catalyst of seeded sentiment. After my grandmother was done with her recitals, I would inhabit them.

Inside, I understood that audiences made stories, that stories made cities, that cities strived to be gardens, and that gardens were and will always be only liable to Eden. Inside, I saw ultimate beauty. I learned that the prophet, with Damascene gardens in his horizon, refused to enter the city. I learned that ultimates are only liable to my whims much like fleeting, ecstatic highs on nuances of ephemeral perfume. Ultimately, I learned that the prophet, with Damascene gardens in his horizon, refused to enter the gardens of Eden twice.

She never told me her stories without pictures at hand, be-it recently visited singles from the scattered prints off her coffee table, framed portraits off her wall or in series from chaotically rearranged photo albums indexing a saturated past. She didn’t particularly need visual aids. She just enjoyed her stories grounded in tactile imprints. She liked to touch things. My favorite memories were stories of Taheyya. I remember the first time she mentioned Taheyya staring at a picture of her, half nostalgic, half present,

“Her name was Taheyya. Of course that wasn’t her real name. But that was her. Taheyya. I met her on the beach in Alexandria. She, habibi, was the revolution. She was comfortable. She was comforting. At the time, women were allergic to their own flesh. I had friends who wouldn’t scream being fucked. I had friends who never got fucked. They married lieutenants that liked getting fucked. Those, habibi, I loved. The war, habibi, is a wonderful thing.

The Outpost magazine, issue zero: The Possibility of Possibility

The story of *The Perfumed Garden* goes back to the first issue of a dreamy magazine called The Outpost⁸, specifically, to the last week of wrapping up our debut issue before sending to print. It was a Saturday night at Sporting Club, a popular resort in Beirut overlooking two rocky formations a few meters away from the sea, iconic to the city. There was so much energy that night, the type of energy I love, one generated by people either drunk or high, that have forgotten their reference points.

In talking about *The Perfumed Garden*, reference points are similar to needing to learn another language to read a translation of a text written in your mother tongue: uncannily unnecessary. That night, everyone seemed like they were in tune with themselves, with each other, with the city and with the breeze, and everyone was smiling. Ibrahim's smiling face was changing color as he danced, from yellow to red to green to blue as the lit squares on the dance floor he was on alternated their glow.

Ibrahim was and still is my partner in crime and Editor-in-Chief of the yet to be public The Outpost magazine. We were dancing with our beautiful secret, "a magazine of possibilities in the Arab World" we called it, the most beautiful secret, that the idea of possibility in the place we call home was actually a possibility. The thesis of The Outpost was that our journalistic lenses would be somehow generative, that our stories would shed light on a generation of young Arabs trying to make their worlds habitable.

We divided the magazine into three self-explanatory sections: What's Happening, What's Not Happening, and What Could Happen. In the first issue we had young musicians in Lebanon that had become a common voice to the divided Arab LGBTQ

⁸ The first issue of The Outpost came out in Autumn 2012

community, civil rights enclaves in revolutionary Egypt, cultural spaces and entrepreneurial initiatives. There was a lot happening and a lot more that could happen. Ever since I could remember, I have been telling myself that things are getting better. My parents tell me that they have been telling themselves that since before I was born. Narratives and slogans about changing the world deflate my trust in it actually changing, but on that night, something clicked.

I was seduced by the land, the decaying concrete, the breeze, the crashing waves and the deafening speakers. In every corner I saw people that I loved either because they were my friends, family or people I share glances with on a daily basis. I was seduced to an undercurrent, a feeling that something was there, not waiting for me to become more radical, but to acknowledge that it is radical. Somewhat, I can say that *The Perfumed Garden* came to me as something that needed to be inhabited, activated, much more than built from scratch. The architect in me always wanted to build this world and make people come. The writer in me fell into the trap of textual criticality as the world around me was so wrong it begged for it, but that night was different.

Half drunk, I ran to Ibrahim and held his face and we were both changing color with the dance floor yellow, red, green, blue, and I told him I had an idea that I knew we did not have time for, but that for this idea, time would not matter, and Ibrahim's eyes opened wide and his lips smiled as his eyes and his lips do before I tell him ideas, "I am going write a novel," I said, "A short one, because we only have four days," Ibrahim nodded, "where all the people we featured in this magazine are characters, and they live in another Arab World, one that is closer to the one we need it to be," he was still smiling so I kept going, "And we are going to put it as a supplement in this issue."



Figure 1 – The Perfumed Garden’s first chapter in The Outpost magazine’s issue 0

The Perfumed Garden

The title of *The Perfumed Garden* is in reference to *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*, a fifteenth-century Arabic sex manual and work of erotic literature commissioned by the Hafsid ruler of Tunis to Cheikh Nefzaoui. Its most known translation is by Victorian intellectual and colonialist Sir Richard Burton. The main point of reference is a social and a political comparison between an Arab World when a book intended to explicate sexual intercourse could be commissioned by the State, and the contemporary Arab World where these conversations have been evacuated from the public. Through this note, I suggest that one of the issues to deal with on the civic scale in

the Arab World is the relationship of the Arab people with their flesh and the flesh of their lands. Reality has taken a toll on the morality and political libido throughout the general landscape, cemented through the cyclic reinstatement of impossibility in the narrative of the State.

In the Arab World, the State has become the Hakawati⁹ of a single truth, one that is boring, repetitive and impotent for the people. The State tells the history of the land, it plans its future and prosecutes the anomalies, the unnatural “minorities” that negate its story or prove it invalid. The State provides a dry terrain, devoid of enough juice for singular autobiographies for its people, let alone the land.

By admitting the landscape as the amorous object, and proposing public intimacy as a political apparatus, *The Perfumed Garden* is a project that is aware of “the danger of the single story,”¹⁰ and in its construction, does not rely on the narration of single characters, or a unified narration about the land. The second point of relevance in choosing Nefzaoui’s *The Perfumed Garden* as a launching pad for this project is its colonial context. In addition to translating it, Sir Richard Burton translated the *Kama Sutra* and *Arabian Nights*, icons of orientalist fetish choreographing the Western gaze onto the East, but also mirrors for our colonized reflections as Arabs. Our consumption of the long-lasting and hegemonic Western story rendered us orientalists upon ourselves. In a way, taking on *The Perfumed Garden* is also a tool to reclaim agency on what turns us on both in bed and on the streets.

For the reasons stated, *The Perfumed Garden* in this context is an autobiography of a land, of another land, an endowment of voice and perspective to a land that has been

⁹ Hakawati means storyteller in Arabic

¹⁰ Chimamanda Adichie. "The Danger Of A Single Story" (TED Talk July 2009).

muted by geopolitical borders. The Perfumed Garden in this context is An Autobiography of Another Arab World, a rhetoric lens that does not favor lover over another, but rather a proposal to have more agency over Arab present and Arab legacy. So in a way, it is also a plan for an alternative historiographical approach to that centered on the State, or official events, or heroes.

Casting for a novel: The Perfumed Garden

In “The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of Another World,” there are no clear heroes. Both the novel text and the projects in public space, decentralize the spectacle. To not have a hero, or a monument as a hero, is a choice of narrative politics. The Perfumed Garden is built on the premise of being a slice in time, rather than a beginning, a climax and an end, where indecisive characters seem to come and go, as if they are passing by and appearing in the camera’s viewfinder as the photographer (here the writer and the reader) takes the desired picture.

In this framing, much happens between the desire, which in this case is the lover’s utterance, and the prospective action, between desiring a particular picture and the click of the camera button. Indecisive characters seduce the photographer until he forgets, a million times over, the picture he desires. He either clicks on the camera to take the picture before rolling the film, or forgets to click the button altogether.

These indecisive characters transcend the boundaries of the viewfinder, become more interesting than the final picture, and seem to — in exchange for the entertainment and perplexity they are offering the photographer — expect some entertainment and perplexity in return. The photographer (here, the writer), instead of taking a picture, introduces objects that interrupt the flow of these characters in and out of his viewfinder.

He introduces objects that make them come more often or leave forever. He puts in the picture things they have never seen, and watches them learn how to use them, adopt them or let them go.

The actual picture becomes unimportant, and the initial reason for holding the camera, framing, calibrating and waiting changes. The indecisive, fleeting characters of *The Perfumed Garden* demand a flexible setting for them to thrive. The other Arab World being made, initially rallying for one nation, a potential sibling of Nasser's Arabism, refused to be written that way today. It demanded another Arab World.

Not all the characters of *The Perfumed Garden* know of or agree with or stand for its politics as mascots, parading its glory. A lot of them are based on surveyed people that have come into the novel's fiction in one way or another, and retain their characteristics in *The Perfumed Garden*. They are people, who in their being, become agents of their own fictions in *The Perfumed Garden*. And this competes with everything. This setup competes with the fiction of current post-colonial geopolitics, as well as the sentiment of previous generations that found in Arabism a vision or in Communism an antidote. It competes with my vision, whatever it is, and proposes a new relationship with the land, a form of malleable belonging where it's less about parametric definition (passport) and more about having place to unravel.

A new Arab World, or at least *another* one, cannot be a bordered space, but rather a zone of intensity, permeable and fertile for instants of intimacy. And so, following on the starting point of writing *The Perfumed Garden* as a congregation of people reported in *The Outpost* magazine, I set out on a series of "casting" research trips, to enact that

framing, inviting characters into my viewfinder without necessarily forcing them to make any decisions.

The indecisiveness of the characters is important because it releases them of the responsibility of enacting their stereotypes in front of the camera. Particularly in the past five years, the street cam in the Arab World has become a prompt for a recital of problems, habituated by news reports that hit the streets for a “real feel” of their respective cities. In trying to listen to leads into an autobiography of another Arab World, this casting project traverses multiple layers of engagement with the existing one, and a series of aspirations that would eventually constitute *The Perfumed Garden*.

Technically, these research trips alternated between being more formal performances by using a professional video camera, to less constructed ones using the video camera on my phone. All the videos are uploaded to a public, online database as a channel on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/NovelCastingTPG>, titled using their automatically generated file names by the device with no particular mention of geographic, narrative or event specificities. Licensed under Creative Commons to allow their disseminations and use in other projects, this casting archive of 170+ videos, in its indecisiveness creates a flexible matrix, an active weave of characters and events of stories that don't have particular beginnings or ends.

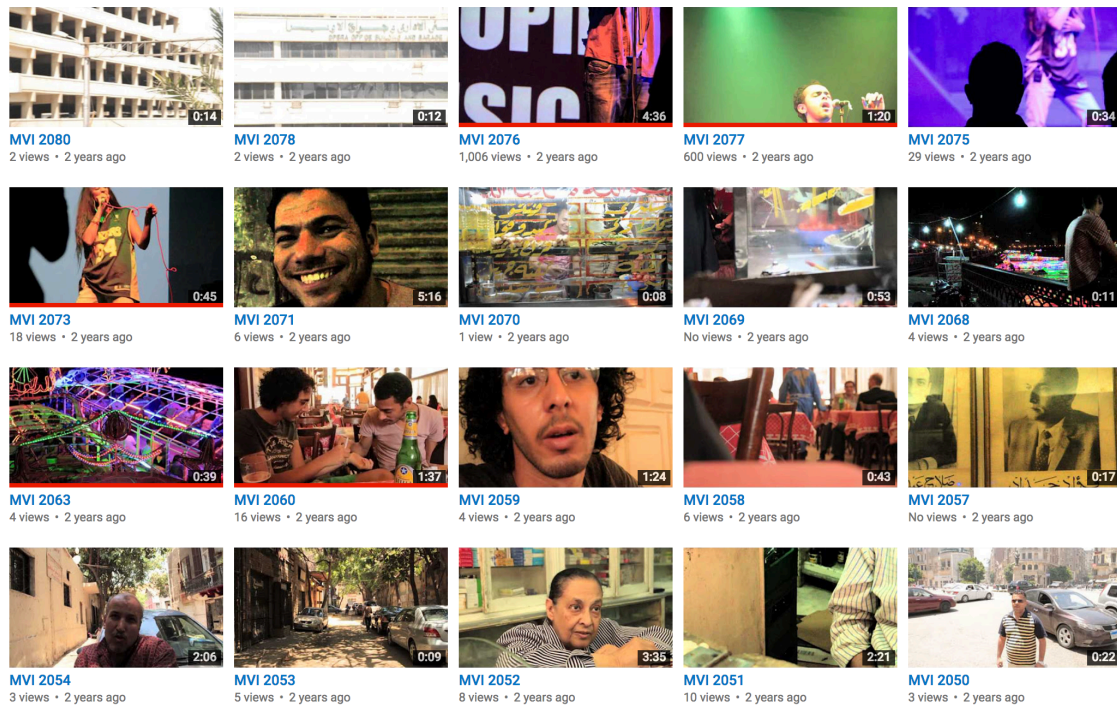


Figure 2 - Screenshot from YouTube channel page showing thumbnails and file names of the casting videos

This collection of conversations simulates an ongoing stream of consciousness where, through juxtaposition and montage, new stories can be excavated for new landscapes to be built. The conversation prompts were designed to remove the participants away from the street cam effect, with questions like “Could you count to ten in a different language?” before engaging in “Have you ever saved a building from being killed?” or “Do you listen to Tarab?” and “If you were the hero of a novel, what would you do and who would you be?”

The casting trips took place in Tripoli, Beirut (Lebanon), Cairo (Egypt), Amman and the Jordan River (Jordan). Over the course of four or five continuous days, I courted these cities with my fictions and rarely said no to any form of invitation. I made friends, some of whom accompanied me on journeys in their own cities, discovering them through the eyes of a lover and his indecisive viewfinder. I found that the naivety of a

curious lover is an exceptional research tool. It translates into blindness to hierarchal systems that govern territory at the expense of personal safety, a recurring motif in the process of working on *The Perfumed Garden*. It is a naivety that reminds the amorous object that the lover is not afraid to get closer, and to shift from the position of the observer to the position of the story.



Figure 3 – Screenshot from MVI 1133 <https://goo.gl/ZSVoQQ> at a moment when this fisherwoman says “No fish is more beautiful than another. Each is pretty in her own right.”

In the video above, I meet a fisherwoman in full costume on the corniche. A friend who accompanied me on this trip asked her where she goes when she is feeling bad, to which she answered: the sea. Her poker face is one designed around the performance of being a woman in a predominantly male profession. She smiles every time she talks about fish, or makes a witty remark. Twelve kilograms was her record catch; she thinks construction should pause in her city; and has mixed feelings about building demolition, almost doesn’t care, but then looks at the luxurious high-rises behind

us built on the expense of small fishing ports on the coast of the city, and her face does its calm magic again, “No, these buildings are too good to demolish. Demolish us instead.”



Figure 4 - Screenshot from MVI 2071 <https://goo.gl/eQPEZO> where a street food vendor enjoys his victory of not answering any of my questions

A street food vendor sees my camera and invites me for a sandwich. He has more questions for me than I for him, and successfully dodges all of mine. We were two Arabs of different States and different accents stumbling upon little specificities that made us both laugh. After refusing my questions, he proposes that I shoot a commercial for his food cart, and stages some glamour shots with his assistant, demonstrating their simple, delicious menu. This man did not care about being a hero in a novel. All he wanted was to expand his business, and I was a character in his story more than he knew he was in mine.



Figure 5 – Screenshot of P1000121 <https://goo.gl/K6eprW> shot from the East bank of the Jordan River

A zoom lens is the closest I have been to Palestine. Probably one of my most silent casting trips was to the Baptism site on the East bank of the Jordan River. As a Lebanese citizen, I cannot cross that river to Palestine, whose occupation by Israel occupies part of me. In this video, my conversation was that of a lover that comes with a promise both to himself and to the amorous object that I will soon be able to cross the river. The work done for *The Perfumed Garden* will make this trip possible, as such borders in the new Arab World will cease to obstruct the flow of its lovers. This trip highlights an important visceral aspect of the casting project, a valuable connection that happens physically in that zone of intensity, outside of verbal conversation.

The Outpost magazine, issue one: The Possibility of Moving Forward¹¹

In the second issue of The Outpost, and under the theme of “the possibility of moving forward,” I decided to experiment with a different format of writing as architecture, a process of materializing fiction in multiple systems and media, this time resorting to prototyping cultural practices through narrative and education targeted at a much younger generation, pragmatically those who will be responsible to upkeep this other Arab World. Below is an excerpt of the opener of issue one.

“We had our eyes on the future, armed with possibly distorted projections of *What’s Happening?*, *What’s Not Happening?* and *What Could Happen?*, while the future has been running around in Osh Kosh B’Gosh overalls right outside our windows. For this issue, we decided that instead of designing a connected Arabia, we would encourage a generation that would naturally do so themselves.

Included with this issue of The Outpost is an illustrated children’s book entitled *L’Origine(s) du Monde*, referencing Gustav Courbet’s 1866 painting. The narrative of the book is accessible to children, but is relevant to readers of any age. The message of the book centers on the fact that we are the origin of the world and tangibly share the universe. The book aims to make the idea of a shared body and a responsibility towards our own actions, perfectly encapsulating some of the themes running through this issue.

The book will be licensed under Creative Commons to encourage its dissemination, translation and adaptation in different educational and creative media. A digital copy will be available free to download on The Outpost website.”

— pg. 15-17, The Outpost, issue 01

¹¹ Winter 2012



Figure 6 – L’Origine(s) du Monde in The Outpost magazine’s issue 01

L’Origine(s) du Monde ¹²tells the story of Gamal and his grandmother, both characters from *The Perfumed Garden*’s first chapter published as a supplement in the previous issue of The Outpost. Gamal goes on several journeys, meeting characters, having conversations and writing them in a book of journeys he called a journal. Gamal’s experience mirrors the methodology of writing *The Perfumed Garden* and expands it to another audience, another public. An important premise of L’Origine(s) du Monde is that it uses the voice of a children’s book to write an architecture of safety, somewhere to speak about the otherwise unspeakable in public. In the passage below, Gamal meets a family of ducks made of two mothers and a duckling daughter:

¹² Beirut, 2012

“Can you read the book for us?” said the mothers.

“Please?” said the duckling.

Sometimes Gamal was polite, and did not ask a lot of questions, but Gamal loved to ask a lot of questions, especially when he was on a journey.

“Can I ask you a question first?” he said.

“Of course, anything,” the duck family said.

“How can someone have two mothers?” asked Gamal.

“Why not?” asked the duckling. The little black duck thought it was normal.

“We love each other and decided to make a family,” said the mothers.

“And love is enough to make a family?” asked curious Gamal.

“Yes. What else do you need?” said the mothers.

Gamal thought about it. He thought about it again. His mother loved his father. His grandmother loved his grandfather. He thought about it again and again, and thought they made sense. At least much more sense than the sky raining without permission, don’t you think?

And in this one, Gamal learns about performativity, action and consequence, and his relationship to the world around him:

His grandmother took the bear mask off of Gamal’s head and started playing with his hair. She told him that he can wear the mask for fun, but not to become someone else. Only sad people wear masks to become other people.

“You are my Gamal,” she said, “and, habibi, you can be anything you want,” she continued.

Gamal drank a sip of his purple juice.

“You can be Gamal the bear. You can be Gamal the pilot. You can be Gamal the grandfather. You can be Gamal the mother. You can be whoever you want, and you can be anything,” she paused for a little bit, and then said, “You are Gamal the great.”

She held his hand and took him to the balcony. The sky was blue and filled with red hot-air balloons. The sky was big and filled with stars. The seas were blue and filled with islands and fish. The seas were big and filled with waves. Gamal and his grandmother looked at the mountains, and the mountains looked back.

“See all of this?” the grandmother said, “even all of this is made of the same cookie dough as you and me.”

Gamal had another sip of his purple juice, and it was obvious that he still did not understand how the world is made of the same thing. Gamal’s grandmother put her left hand closer to his mouth and told him to bite her. Gamal loved his grandmother, and he would never ever bite her.

“Bite me,” she said. She looked very serious, so Gamal bit his grandmother’s left hand.

“Ouch!” said Gamal, “That hurt!”
“It hurt me too,” she said.

When Gamal bit his grandmother, he felt pain in the same place he had bit her. He bit her left hand, and his left hand hurt.

“We are all made of the same cookie dough,” she said, “the same thing.”

Gamal’s grandmother explained to him that when he does something to hurt someone or something, an animal, garden, sea or star, he is only hurting himself. Gamal’s hand was still hurting. She went to the kitchen and got a cube of ice. She put it on her hand and waited. Suddenly, Gamal felt better.

While the content of this short story is its main pillar, what I was interested in is the dissemination. Getting this interpreted, used and transformed became and infrastructural agenda, hence gearing it with a Creative Commons license that allowed that. Quite organically, L’Origine(s) du Monde was picked up by Lebanese director and drama professor at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, Lina Abiad to be adapted for the theater. I chose not participate in the production personally, and remain an audience member for the adaptation. I wanted to observe where the story would go without me.



Figure 7 – Poster of ‘Sika Barazek’ the theatrical adaptation of L’Origine(s) du Monde using original illustrations by artist Joan Baz made for the novel

Abiad and her team did a very interesting job with an adaptation that is faithful to the spirit of the story, but does not idolize it. It would be true to say that the short novel acted as a script for interpretation as opposed to enactment. I attended the opening with a mixed audience of children and grownups and was excited to realize the potential of transmission in public, and to offer things as ingredients as opposed to finalized objects as a thing to consider in future projects.

The Perfumed Garden as a fiction-making device that wants its fiction to blossom as landscape, and as public shared experience, learns from this experience about [sharing]

authorship and the necessity to build networks, not only commit to desires by executing them.

Away from truth, and into fiction

The admittance of fiction as the lover's tool is central to understanding the potential of *The Perfumed Garden* in creating another Arab World. This life project is an enactment of a particular tenderness that permeates throughout *The Perfumed Garden*, a tenderness that can only exist in an autobiography. A specific form of tenderness that births power, and by power births safety while being completely stripped down and raw. This tenderness is one that gains power and traction not through creating a fortress, but through creating a field of intimacy.

Its production of space is not about creating defined borders and ownerships, but rather allowing dissemination as a main pillar of its construction. To *The Perfumed Garden*, for a space to hold and sustain itself, it needs to be a desirable, networked scenario. And to be true to its proposal that through a lover's discourse, fiction that generates potency, this thesis proposes a conceptual structure for writing as architecture. The production of space in this scenario is a war of fictions. These fictions manifest into what is considered reality if they are desirable enough and networked enough to seduce authority and labor to procreate it. Reality is not the opposite of fiction. It is not non-fiction.

To facilitate conversation in the chapters to come, and elaborate the potency of fiction, in this context it will be categorized into two types: Active Fiction and Dormant Fiction. What differentiates the two types of fiction is not much their content as much as their practice, and how they are used. Active Fictions are those that have been desired by

a power structure able to perform them. A relevant example of an Active Fiction is a Nation State, its constitution, image and moral structure. The agent of such an Active Fiction is the State's government that creates, elaborates, governs and sustains it.

History shows that things that are considered real enough, like the presence of a nation, can change if overpowered by more potent fictions. A capital city could become a normal city overnight, and its developmental future will change once its privileges are revoked. Tangibly, the city will change once its fiction changed, leading to the proposal that what precedes the architecture of another Arab World is naturally a fiction that needs to be activated for this other world starts materializing. This conceptual structure sets the framework by which the writing as architecture does not seem implausible, but rather the actual historic model of radical change.

The second type of fiction is Dormant Fiction, a system of logic that has not yet been activated by a power structure, and remains subordinate to another Active Fiction. *The Perfumed Garden* at this point is in a state of Dormant Fiction, experimenting with different models of activation. It knows that its model of activation must rely on cultural omnipresence, a system of dissemination that makes it desirable and adoptable.

Tarab music as a metaphor for Active Fiction

Defined as a state of trance and ecstasy usually caused by music, but also used as a metaphor for intense emotion (joy or tristesse), Tarab music is a force that has been part of my research throughout my work on *The Perfumed Garden*. I choose Tarab as a metaphor for a medium to activate fiction, because even within the racial, ethnic and social divides of the Arab World, Tarab is one of the few things that could be described as its people's common denominator.

Tarab is something that moves people from one state to another, between their perceived realities and potential, assumed fictions. Through goosebumps, yearning and excessive surges of emotional transcendence delivered by the “Motreb/a,” the performer of Tarab, this music can ignite memories or build new ones.

Tarab’s geography is not bound by political fictions. Many Arab Tarab singers are household names across the Arab World. Egyptian Oum Kolthoum’s (1904 -1975) funeral was attended by more than four million people, almost the population of Lebanon and said to be more than the amount of mourners at Gamal Abdel Nasser’s (1918 - 1970) funeral, the second Egyptian president, whose main project was to unify the Arab World, a leader whose fiction got the Arab people closest to a feeling of [temporary] shared dignity through changing the landscape tangibly, not as a metaphor, with projects such as nationalizing the Suez Canal, and taking Israel to war.

In his day, Abdel Nasser used the intimacy of Tarab as a political tool. It is said that “between 1952 and 1960, Kulthūm sang more national songs than at any other time in her life; they constituted almost 50 percent of her repertory, and roughly one-third of her new repertory after 1960.”¹³ After Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war with Israel, Oum Kolthoum started a concert series across the Arab World to lift the national and Arab pride that was at an all-time low. She requested local poets in each country she visited to supply her with lyrics to sing, and performed benefit concerts raising more than two million dollars for the Egyptian government.

¹³ Virginia Danielson. *The voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthūm, Arabic song, and Egyptian society in the twentieth century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Her Thursday concerts, broadcasted on the radio on the first Thursday of every month, emptied the streets as millions of Arabs were glued to the radio sets,¹⁴ and Abdel Nasser is known to have timed some of his speeches in conjunction with these concerts. Oum Kolthoum herself is known to have described that state of control and evocation through Tarab while performing “as if I were at a school, and the listeners were pupils.”¹⁵

This emotive lubricant of constructive fiction [Tarab] is a poetic methodology that would raise the value of an Active Fiction’s currency. Sometimes, through seemingly sporadic projects and dispersed agents, *The Perfumed Garden’s* characters can appear unaware of what they are doing, but they are continuously *doing*. There is Tarab in doing. It is the Tarab of manifestation, the almost out of body experience that comes with substituting a world without your agency, for a world with your agency. It is the high, like the high in a riot, of patterns being broken.

¹⁴ A.J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World*, (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2003) 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59 & 64.

“Stay”

In this excerpt, a mysterious place called Khan el Thawra is described as the generator of the Arab World, an incarnation of a “certain point at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not perceived as contradictions.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Andre, Breton. 1934. "Breton What Is Surrealism?". *Sas.Upenn.Edu*.
http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/Spring02/104/Breton_WhatSurrealism.html.
Accessed May 6, 2017

Khan el Thawra was the Khan dedicated for the trade of the revolution. Built quite distinct from generic Khan typologies, the structure of Khan el Thawra is one of the most adventurous examples of organic Arab architecture. Its physicality could not be explained outside its mechanics and its users, a succession of people that accepted the good and the bad, the elasticity of time, the profanity of commonplace, that we are all one, that we share the same cloud of memories and the same grand mind and the same soul. The presence of Khan el Thawra could not be explained outside the parameters of its people's belief that everything was possible. Its exact shape is not tangible, as it has been growing since the beginning of time.

It is sometimes likened to a heart, beating frivolously to the drums of its world, while its alleys, underpasses and corridors are arteries and veins nourishing its organs made of theaters, hammams, madrassas, hotels and congregation spaces all over the Arab world.

Everything that had ever happened in the Arab world was either cooked or approved of at the Khan. Like a Big Bang that coexists with the universe it had created, Khan el Thawra is omnipresent. It just is. It designs, executes and overlooks things that may look spontaneous like the rise of Oum Kolthoum, the death of Feiruz, abandoned buildings in Beirut, Palestine's reset into a prehistoric paradise, the rarity of blossoming orange trees and the constant mayhem that Arab world inhabits.

Like the Khan's plans are invisible to everyone outside of it, the world's concept of greater good sometimes conflicts with the Khan's. Was eternal drought a blessing for the Arabian Desert? Was Israel a good idea? Did the Moguls need to burn Trablus's one-million-book library? Is sending a man to die in the name of a God that doesn't exist in pursuit of an imaginary heaven considered okay?

Almost everyone at Khan el Thawra finds these questions laughable. To them, it's pretty clear. Everything that needs to be done to keep the soil of this land fertile, both literally and figuratively, and the blood of its people boiling for better or for worse, must be done. Details of the plot are crucial to the sequence of events. Before religion confiscated the concept of a martyr, the Khan had created it as a tribute to commemorate details in the narrative of the Arab world that for one reason or another did not make it to the bigger picture, but without them, the story wouldn't have been the same – wouldn't have been complete.

When thinking about Khan el Thawra, things may seem a bit off. The why and the how shine as part of a solvable equation, but the Khan is not an equation that is waiting to be solved. It is rather one that changes, constantly balanced through its contradictions. At the Khan, contradictions are not considered opposing forces, but forces of equilibrium that mitigate the possibility of the existence of a dull bias.

Khan el Thawra is both a generator and a safety gauge. It is the living incarnation of the 'Highest Point,' an idea sought after by two seemingly opposite schools of thought: Sufis and Surrealists alike. In his 1934, 'What is Surrealism' Andre Breton eloquently described Khan el Thawra without even knowing it by stating that "Everything leads to the belief that there exists a certain point at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not perceived as contradictions." That point is in fact the constellation that

is Khan el Thawra.

But you never believe in Khan el Thawra as a doctrine. Its main role, in fact, is to demolish the sacredness of doctrines in the Arab world, and it will not replace the weed it plucks with different versions of it. To the Khan, religion is a misunderstanding to some extent. It is a story, narrated so well, loved so much and then politicized for very primal motives. The Khan doesn't fight God. It may or may not exist. The Khan doesn't fight so-called prophets. They may or may not be delusional. It fights the scribes that write their words in inflexible, sterile gold, and prevent people to evolve these stories or write their own.

The ways of the Khan change depending on the era, context, and what is required of it, but in the past hundred or so years, the Khan hasn't been playing nicely. The extent of damage done due to its plans may be greater than the number of people that had died in the name of God. They remain two very different types of martyrs though. Ones that are irreplaceable details in a narrative of evolution, and others that are frustrated pawns offered an afterlife.

Censorship as the inaugural moment of reification

This thesis considers censorship as an important milestone in the motion from imagined fiction to manifested fiction. It is a crucial moment when a system of reality acknowledges fiction as a potential contender, and fights back through censorship and policing. This is when existing patterns start to break.

The works in the sections that follow are part of the creative process of establishing *The Perfumed Garden* as manifested fiction – what would otherwise be called “real.” A central leitmotif in all of these works is an eventual form of censorship. As I use the contemporary art infrastructure as a power structure to activate the Dormant Fiction of *The Perfumed Garden*, the existing Active Fiction governing the terrain (eg. Lebanese government and Beirut municipality) fights back. It polices these experiments of challenging the rules of the public by censorship, surveillance, zoning, enforcing permits and bureaucracy.

Censorship’s role in sustaining the sovereignty and moral structure of an Active Fiction can be seen in many examples. In Islam’s Active Fiction, the music that is prohibited is the music that takes one away from one’s worship responsibilities¹⁷. In a patriarchal society’s Active Fiction, same-sex marriage or even in some cases sex before marriage, is prohibited to be able to govern and control procreation through the normative family structure. Active Fictions are not interested in welcoming new fictions that don’t comply with theirs, or threaten their longevity.

So when talking about a project such as *The Perfumed Garden*, where each of its segments (whether novel or art object) is designed to compete with the Active Fictions of

¹⁷ Afroz Ali. "Is Music Allowed In Islam?" Imranhosein.org. <https://goo.gl/8IzCpD> Accessed May 1, 2017.

the Arab World, censorship is a sign of the battle between *The Perfumed Garden* (as a Dormant Fiction trying to get activated) and the Arab World (as an Active Fiction that is trying to survive). What is lacking in these project segments (when viewed as individual pieces) is their artillery, the capacity of each to retaliate, or even organize against the Active Fiction's system in a powerful, strategic and sustainable manner. A public art installation for example remains under the jurisdiction of the public's governance model (eg. municipality) unless it has a governance force working in the backstage to give it an infrastructure to "stay" and fight back.

The Khan as a governing force for The Perfumed Garden

For this reason, it became clear that this constructed 'other Arab World' of *The Perfumed Garden* would need a governing force, an entity of organization. In the novel text, there is a description of a place, called Khan el Thawra (The Khan of the Revolution), which claims responsibility for main events in the Arab World. One of the many examples in the novel is that the Arab World's Diva of Tarab, Oum Kolthoum, had been one of its projects, boasting the strategic planning of this the Khan in orchestrating political action through cultural practice. This Khan, mentioned and referenced over a hundred times in the novel, tends to create a binding force for major events, places and characters in the proposed world.

Following the logic that *The Perfumed Garden* needs an organization and an infrastructure for governance to support its activation, I decided to register The Khan as a Non-Governmental Organization in Lebanon to play that role. I registered it as The Khan, not The Khan of the Revolution to facilitate the NGO's mobility¹⁸. The official name of

¹⁸ Calling it The Khan of the Revolution could jeopardize funding, publication and collaboration opportunities for The Khan

this NGO is The Khan: The Arab Association for Prototyping Cultural Practices¹⁹, and it is the apparatus by which *The Perfumed Garden's* fiction is activated.

The Khan gets its name from an architectural typology, a type of historic inn whose earliest versions, found in Syria, date to the 16th century Umayyad period. Khans functioned as hubs for trade and lodging, similar to modern day motels. Under the Ottoman rule, Khans expanded into complexes that would include mosques, hammams and other amenities.

The Perfumed Garden borrows the Khan as a structure that could host movement and exchange, as well as a break from that movement to rest. In the various iterations of The Khan, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the typology morphs from a defined architectural structure to a metaphor for hosting and exchange with various degrees of spatial manifestation. It is more important for *The Perfumed Garden* to encapsulate the flux of the Khan and utilize the motion it is designed to endure as a flexible infrastructure, as opposed to stay loyal to its formal typology.

Prototyping cultural practices

The Khan will be a venue for policy research and urban-scale projects rooted in the act of writing as architecture, and this writing as architecture to be the symbol for the shift between imagined fiction and manifested fiction: Dormant Fiction to Active Fiction. Prototyping cultural practices is a methodology of doing so by installing these fictions as rituals, knowing that if any new fiction is to be adopted by a people, it is one that should first and foremost be effortless to adopt, then functional, desirable and gratifying.

¹⁹ Registered in Beirut 2016

Some of the projects that follow were realized before The Khan was conceived or officially registered, and lead up to its necessity. Their position right now, in the context of prototyping cultural practices, is that they are prototypes from a Dormant Fiction, The Perfumed Garden, that are testing their position in and adoption by the public of the existing Active Fiction.

These projects are seeds of fiction, planted in another. Their death or stunted growth (due to policing) is informative to the future tactics of The Khan. Should it be a research center, a publication house, a film production company, a hotel?

The economy of fiction

The institution of The Khan as a registered entity allows me to enter and explore the realm of value of its power structure in sustaining *The Perfumed Garden*: the economy of fiction. This sheds light on the validity of reading the manifestation of fiction, the motion from Dormant to Active Fiction as a matter of “currency” in transaction both literally and conceptually. This is that, more densely through The Khan, we can explore the poetry of *The Perfumed Garden*, encompassing all its segments as currency and itself as an economy. The expansion of this economy relies on the value and desirability of its currency. Raising the value of this currency happens by repetition, overlap, weaving and networking of its cultural artifacts into a powerful web.

Reading Maurice Blanchot’s ‘Forgetful Memory’ through the lens of Active and Dormant fiction reinforces the value of this poetic. “Poetry makes remembrance of what men, peoples and gods do not yet have by way of their own memory.”²⁰ I am interested in the poetry of the economy of fiction and the poetry of fiction when placed in public, as

²⁰ Maurice Blanchot. *The infinite conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 314.

prototypes of alternative realities. Following up on Blanchot’s positioning of poetry, the economy I’m interested in is made of a weave of active original artifacts that are continuously generated and told, rather than existing in a remembered economy that is part of a previous system. What is generated in this case would not be a monetary networking or interpretation of fiction, but rather the production of a currency outside capitalism²¹.

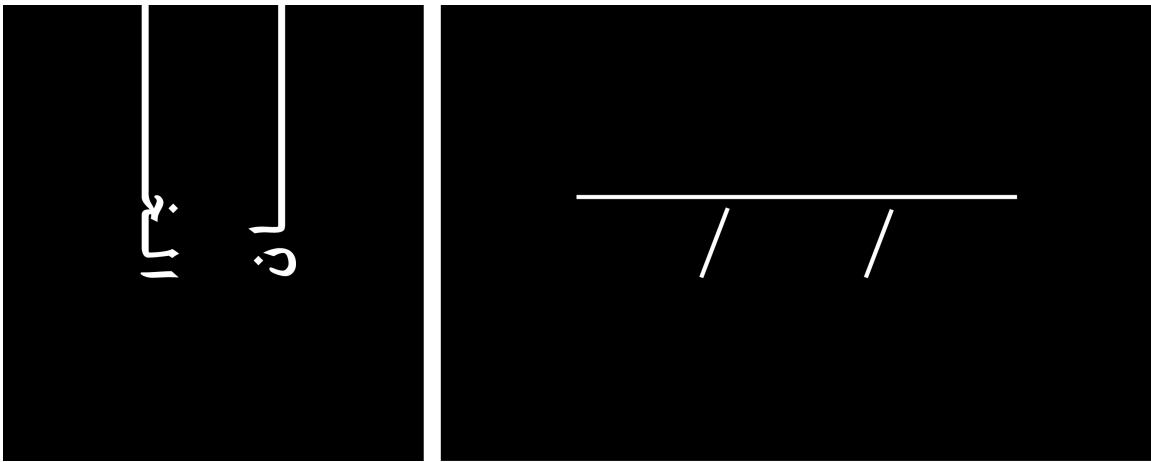


Figure 8 - The Khan has two emblems, the one on the left is a calligraphic logo with its name in Arabic, and on the right is a visual logo. Its horizontal line symbolizes a blank space to write a place and the oblique lines symbolize a space for the date in DD / MM / YYYY format. This logo is also used as a stamp, creating a distinct visual relationship between every the project and The Khan.

²¹ The Perfumed Garden’s fiction does not deny the existence of capitalism and the monetary system, but it aims to incrementally create another system, another Active Fiction.

“Make a wish”

In this excerpt a character called Hajja (usually in reference to an older woman in Arabic) is taken to Beirut’s Wishing Fountain that is maintained by street children and used by the people of the city.

“Take me to Hamra,” Mohamad said, “The Hajja needs to make a wish.”

Young shoe shiner boys cleaned the white body of Hamra’s wishing fountain everyday. The boys emptied buckets of water and scrubbed her aging body using theater props from Masrah Al Madina next door. Glistening, sweaty Mohamad, Ahmad and Mustapha take turns at stealing pieces of leftover glamour from the rundown theater underground.

Hamra moves in gangs of young boys taking shifts at igniting the pity of men bred to “Batwannes Beek” and women bred to playing hard to get. “I hope you are healthy,” they say to the elderly. “I hope you become wealthy,” they say to the wretched. “I hope your dreams come true,” they say to the young. They sell wishes to the masses in return for coins and conversations.

Hamra is not friendly to the tide of young boys that make it who she is. Mohamad, Ahmad and Mustapha are those children who were blessed with good looks, the invaluable armor for survival around here. Glistening, happy boys become bruised, limping ones with a simple backslap, a kick or a punch in the stomach. People don’t like ugly boys that beg. People don’t like to hear about the problems of other people unless they can step on them like a pedestal onto a stage where they can talk about their own.

On the way to the wishing fountain, the Hajja said nothing. She just looked out of the window into the moving city that changes every day. It has somewhat changed since she last saw it and will always change whether she sees it again or not. It’s inevitable. The cafés that used to listen to secrets of grandfathers-to-be in their youths rarely wait for the secrets of their grandchildren. The Hajja wondered whether it was easier to blame the disintegration of a city on an oppressor, as is the case of her hometown down South. Beirut has no one to blame but herself.

“You’re right,” Mohamad interrupted, “Beirut has no one to blame but herself – neither do you.”

She gave the Hajja a five-hundred-lira coin and opened the door. Hekmat had parked the car by the Saroulla building right next to the fountain. Mohamad opened the door revealing a white statue of a woman, with a head that looked like the Sphinx, seated on the sidewalk in lotus position. In her lap, a subtle current feeds a small pond of water filled with coins, paper money and wishes. Two young girls sat by her side. One looked at the Hajja and stretched her tiny arm and tiny fingers towards her, “Hajja, Hajja! Come make a wish!”

She obliged, stepped out of the car and walked towards the fountain. Her colorful abaya danced around with the wind as she stared into the little pond of water in the middle of Hamra. A man passing by picked up a paper bill from the wishing fountain’s lap, and waved it in the air to dry and continued walking. Mohamad closed the door and pointed west. Hekmat drove.

Beirut today is not a loving place

Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury describes²² Beirut as “a city of refugees.” As true as this may be, it is an intimidating city that pushes people out. Beirut’s surrounding belt is a series of ethnic, religious and socio economic enclaves of refugees, migrants and relocated citizens. With over a million²³ Syrian refugees since the beginning of the conflict in Syria entering Lebanon, (knowing that the entire Lebanese population is only five million with over a million under poverty line) Beirut became more intimidating. The city runs on the residues of a post-colonial, post-mandate Active Fiction inscribing it within a highly racist, hierarchal and capitalist market state.

The basic state of Beirutis and Lebanese people in general is a superiority complex against other Arabs, and that the Lebanese Arabness is debatable altogether, replaced by a more cosmopolitan fiction having Beirut dubbed by an international gaze as the “Paris of the Middle East” et al. The situation is complex, but when that basic state is challenged by a situation requiring empathy towards said Arabs at the expense of personal comfort, it gets messy. The influx of Syrian refugees did not look good on Beirut.

A wishing fountain as an interlocutor between people and place

Acknowledging the weakness of the erotic relationship between Arab people and the flesh of their cities is crucial in discussing how they deal with their social and urban development, and the ways by which they present their personas in public. As *The Perfumed Garden* comes within a framework of intimacy, in order to allow that instant to occur, an interlocutor was needed.

²² Elias Khoury described Beirut as “a city of refugees” as part of a talk he gave in Brussels on February 9th, 2017 within the Mousse Cities: Beirut festival.

²³ As of 6 May 2015, UNHCR Lebanon has temporarily suspended new registration as per Government of Lebanon's instructions. Accordingly, individuals awaiting to be registered are no longer included.

With *The Wishing Fountain*²⁴, The Khan materializes part of the world it is designed to govern (*The Perfumed Garden*) within an Active Fiction it does not belong to: the policed city of Beirut, the capital of the Republic of Lebanon that is separated on a map from the neighboring Syrian Arabic Republic by a crooked line that curves from the Mediterranean eastward into the desert and then south before it curves back west separating it from Occupied Palestine. In *The Perfumed Garden*, this line does not exist. The absence of this border frees *The Wishing Fountain* of the perils of ownership: the wishes made in front of her remain owned by their wishers, and the money in her lap is owned by everyone.

The *Wishing Fountain* was chosen as a placeholder born for the question, “Why would Lebanese people throw coins in a wishing fountain in some European city, and make a wish for themselves, while throwing a coin into the hands of someone in need is otherwise highly unlikely?”

The gain of throwing money in a wishing fountain is in the performance, not in an actual material gain. The wish may or may not get granted; yet the money is willingly donated anyways. Alternatively, the quantifiable gain of giving money to refugees in need (not just on the streets) is directly politicized and avoided at all costs.

The reality of Hamra Street in Beirut also seems analogous to its real estate development, where glistening new buildings are being erected on the ruins of historic ones, transferring it into another layer of inaccessibility governed by the systems of reality that are not working in favor of the people, or their relationships with their lands.

The resulting combination of malgovernance of the livelihoods of the owners of the

²⁴ Beirut, 2014

land as well as their confrontation with a group of refugees that seem to crawl into this fragile landscape is one where each group is fighting to retain some form of imagined territory. To scramble that status quo, I decided to create a wishing fountain that would satisfy the desire for a spectacle in the city, inviting people to throw money in a puddle of water, hoping for a better life, and at the same time, that the money in the wishing fountain would be zoned “public money,” meaning anyone could use it to do whatever they wanted.

Beirut’s Wishing Fountain, blurring the stakeholders and creating public



Figure 9 - Young shoe shiner poses next to The Wishing Fountain in Hamra Street, Beirut

It’s hard to pin down how to deal with such a situation within the Lebanese context,

where the Palestinian refugee crisis²⁵ demonstrates a failed scenario the country is suffering from, and raised as a case study as to why no one is welcome, regardless of the truth behind the hostility.

Beirut's wishing fountain resorted to the interruption of the pattern of everyday reality in Beirut, and embodied the alien to communicate its fiction. The fountain looked like a female street beggar in life-size and painted entirely white. With her legs crossed together in lotus position, a small current of water cycles water into a puddle in her lap. At any given moment, one can find something peculiar in that puddle throughout the month of its placement there: roses, bracelets, notes, puppies drinking water, coins as well as paper money.

Part of the performance of The Wishing Fountain was testing how much it could hold on its own, and how much it could generate public by merely being there. It was not a piece of art that is protected by border ropes around it, or placed on a pedestal for visibility, but rather one that embodied the anticlimactic nature of the street beggar. Next to it a sign noted that the money in the wishing fountain's lap was public, and that anyone can use it, not just street beggars.

The creation of a common source of money that is accessible for both the hosting city and people seeking refuge in it links the two stakeholders in public. It does not claim to eradicate the hostility, but rather inserts a fiction that needs to be dealt with, a fiction that poses questions about how public the Beirut public really is, and proposes the possibility to observe the implications of sharing.

²⁵ UNRWA "Where We Work," <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon> Accessed March 7, 2017.

The creation of street fictions

The fact that the project was not properly explained, and the lack of information readily available about The Wishing Fountain regarding its maker, funder and story created a gap to be filled about its existence in public – by whoever claims the story first. The most active story tellers in the lifespan of this wishing fountain were children that illegally worked as shoe shiners and sold gum and biscuits in Hamra Street. Each made their own story and told it to the passersby, using the fountain as a placeholder and muse to make money. They understood the power of the wishing fountain’s fiction as a spectacle, a pacifying performance that could “earn” their money, changing their status from beggar to performer.



Figure 10 - A dog drinks from The Wishing Fountain

One of the most interestingly telling stories told to me by two young girls next to the fountain was that it was placed there by the church. The rationale of one of them was that the church across the street was not happy with children beggars hanging around in

front of its walls, so it fabricated this monument for them as a distraction. She did not whisper her theory, nor did she feel it was falsifiable. To her, that was the truth, and then invited me to make a wish and throw a coin into the puddle.



Figure 11 – A shoe shiner walks next to The Wishing Fountain

Another story is that of a gang of young boys that found in the Wishing Fountain, yet another reason to compete. They competed over cleaning it, maintaining it, guarding the money inside her lap so it accumulates for their own pleasure. At times when I smoked a cigarette next to the fountain, I overheard them compete over what they were

wishing for, and the validity of their wishes. After they knew I was behind the project, they asked me what guaranteed their wishes becoming true, and that whatever I said was wrong, because only god grants wishes.

Busking for Hamra

As part of the wishing fountain's performance, musicians and vocalists used it as a busking spot to raise public money. The idea of the spot for public money ignited a gentle outlet for experimenting with different economies, and modes of courting with the city, zones of intense intimacy where one could be an active lover of the land. In these performances, illegal street children that were once unwanted became the stars of the show, as they associated their existence with their new monument. The children became authorities in this new public space, gaining leverage in the power structure due to an ungoverned transformative object.



Figure 12 – Artist Frida Chehlaoui performing in front of The Wishing Fountain

Falling in love with the street

With this new positioning, the diagram of hostility that existed before the wishing fountain changed drastically. Now, at least within the parameters of this new fiction, in this graft from *The Perfumed Garden* into a particular spot in Beirut, one could fall in love with the street. The children that by far became the most interesting stakeholders channeled their new love into a form of organic maintenance of the fountain.

Intentionally, the wishing fountain was not tied to anything next to it or connected to the sidewalk. If someone wanted to steal it, they could have, but it remained there. Day in, day out, the wishing fountain was cleaned by the shoe shining boys, and protected by the girls that sold biscuits, gum, and now sold stories.

An issue of currency

In a way, The Wishing Fountain problematizes monetary currency in 21st century Beirut. As per *The Perfumed Garden*, The Wishing Fountain materializes as a transformative seed in Arab land. As manifested fiction, one that says urban objects can be moments of disintegrating the scarcity of money, The Wishing Fountain goes after the capitalist system. It is both admitting that the system is a construct and negotiating an alternative through proposing its own fiction. It does not conform to the infrastructure of contemporary art simply because it's an art piece, but rather gains its political currency through being a constituent of another networked fiction. Its presence and recurrence raises the value of its own currency, and expands the breadth of its economy. Backed by a system, *The Perfumed Garden*, and governed by an infrastructure, The Khan, this sculpture on the street has more potency to create ripples in public that at least start to shake current Active Fictions out of complete domination.

The act of wishing, projecting forward an alternative reality through imagination is not a typical constituent of designing the public, but the Wishing Fountain asks why not? It is a proposal and case study that public spaces and public objects have the obligation to be speculative, and not merely offer congregation space, especially in a place like Beirut where space ownership is already contested, and only radically new fictions can create new paradigms of interactions.

Policing the wish

The Wishing Fountain embodies and enacts the fiction of *The Perfumed Garden*, not the fiction of Beirut as it is. It does not comply to Beirut's zoning laws, and unlike the competitive storefront level (ground floor) of the city, does not require monetary compensation to be experienced. This being said, the wishing fountain had its fair share of surveillance from the State and attempts of termination.

The only way it was possible to keep this fountain on the street (the fountain being relatively harmless) was through plugging it into the program of an ongoing street festival²⁶. Undercover security and internal security officers frequented the fountain, harassing the children and accusing the busking artists performing next to it with the possession of marijuana, punishable by Lebanese law, especially if the performers looked Syrian or foreign.

On occasions when security forces would be present when I was documenting the fountain, threats of confiscating my camera arise, and I'm lectured about the absolute forbiddingness of taking photos of the fountain. In these surreal occasions, it was clear to me that the paranoia was actually about the context, what was surrounding the fountain

²⁶ Beirut Street Festival "Beirut Street Festival". <http://www.beirutstreetfestival.com> Accessed May 1, 2017.

much more than the fountain itself, which takes it to another level: the existing Active Fiction makes the city so pale, so void of surprises, that it becomes undesirable and invisible. When elements from another fiction change that situation, shake things up, prompting people to look, the city becomes present again, owned at least minimally through the gazes of the passersby, making it a conversation, making it a complication. Censorship wants to annihilate any chance of complication, any documentation, archiving and – god forbid – intervention that does not comply with the Active Fiction’s DNA.

In this context when the camera is a weapon through the perspective of framing, the casting project becomes even more relevant. It becomes a recruitment project, moving the human capital from the existing Active Fiction to the fiction of The Perfumed Garden. People, places and events, through the physical lens of the casting camera and the symbolic perspective of The Perfumed Garden, change. They enact new public spaces that transform into sites of speculation.

“Can you see me?”

In this excerpt, a young shoe shiner asks an abandoned theater building in Hamra Street if he can hide his shoe shining kit inside of her in case of a police raid. Later, the text describes a performance when Beirutis could speak to the abandoned buildings of their city on social media.

Ahmad pulled the Hajja's abaya and crossed the street towards the Piccadilly Theater building. The Hajja walked with him. He stopped under a set of small red scrolling screens fixed onto the Piccadilly building displaying information about a paid parking lot in the building, a new restaurant, and various other announcements that meant nothing more than gibberish to the Hajja.

"What, habibi?" she repeated? "Are you looking for something?"

Ahmad looked at the Piccadilly Building and asked, "Can I hide my shoe shining box here with you when the police raids the area?" It was only then that the Hajja understood that delusional little Ahmad wanted to talk to the Piccadilly Building itself, and not anyone next to it. She tapped on his head. Ahmad was amazing her, but she still didn't get it. He pushed her hand off his head and looked at her in a gaze much older than he was.

"Of course!" scrolled on the first screen.

"You're welcome anytime," read the other.

"Under the escalator!"

Ahmad ran to the marble wall at the end of the ground floor hall where 'Piccadilly Theater' is written in rusting metal, and kissed it. He ran back, teasingly slapping the Hajja's abaya, crossed the street, washed his face with water from the fountain and continued his day's work.

The Hajja has lived enough fantasy that day that it might as well all be a dream, but it wasn't.

"You're not dreaming," read one of the screens.

"ha! Ha! ha! Ha!" scrolled on the second.

"Yes, I know. It could be shocking for anyone, but you're not just anyone, Hajja."

"I remember you..."

The Hajja stared at the old rectangular screens and their scrolling red dots forming lines of text that Ahmad ignited. She stared in shock more than disbelief. To her, this could have been a dream, but not a scam, not a game someone was playing on her. She was confident enough to believe that things that happen to her had a certain level of authenticity for them to deserve a slice of her life. Good or bad, artifacts of the Hajja's life could not have been fake. That, and she would have killed the person pranking or misguiding her if she knew someone was actually writing these screen texts, and claiming it was the building talking.

The easiest route to figure that out was to ask the Piccadilly a question that only it could have known, but the Horeyya, for no reason other than her confidence in the brutal reality of her life, decided to opt out of that option. The screens continued,

"I remember you..."

"Arafat!"

"Yasser Arafat!"

The Hajja smiled as the screens continued,

"1982"

“You came in when he was hiding here during the war and did nothing.”
“You just watched and watched and watched and watched from seat 12E. You were as bored as I was.”

“I didn’t do nothing,” the Hajja screamed, “I watched!”

“ha! Ha! ha!” the first screen scrolled.
“Don’t scream Hajja, they’ll think you’re crazy.”
“Do you want to come in?”

A popping mechanical ignition sound came from the supposedly dysfunctional escalator in the abandoned ground floor hall of the Piccadilly Theater building, a long whir, a couple of ticks and then it started moving. Without putting much thought into it, the Hajja walked towards the escalator and took it down. The slow metallic steps carried the Hajja to the dark bowels of the Piccadilly.

A lover's agency in post-war Beirut

Almost 80% of buildings in Beirut's city center have been destroyed during the latest Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991), yet it is said that only 30% of them were destroyed by the fighting violence²⁷, while the remaining as part of a real estate scheme, plotted by what is now known as Solidere, The Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District.

Although downtown Beirut's flattening and "reconstruction" project is one of the most iconic case studies in problematic post-war urban planning, this fast-paced investment opportunity was the predominant motion not only in the city's downtown, but throughout the entire capital. A morbidly comic 1994 article in the LA Times captures the spirit of post-war Lebanon selling its scarred corpse to foreign stakeholders,

Lebanon is a fresh market, grab it now or lose the future. That's the line at this end of the Mediterranean. If you have money, come here and do something, advises Nadwa Ghannoum, head of the investment department at a Beirut bank.

[...]

Kuwaitis now own two of Beirut's best-known hostelrys: the war-shattered but still standing Holiday Inn, and the Commodore Hotel, once Beirut's press headquarters and now owned by the Emir of Kuwait himself. The Holiday Inn will be renamed and refurbished by a Japanese firm with a 25-year operating concession, developers say.

[...]

"Movers and shakers from the Gulf are flocking to my office with feasibility studies for real estate projects," said an investment banker who, typical of private businessmen in the Middle East, asked to remain anonymous. He described one project as a seaside complex so big and so expensive that there will be no parallel in the region.²⁸

²⁷ Amanda Ryan. "Rebuilding Beirut: From Ruin To Simulacrum" <https://interventionsjournal.net/2014/07/03/rebuilding-beirut-from-ruin-to-simulacrum/> Accessed April 23, 2017.

²⁸ Marilyn Raschka. "Doing Business: Caravans Of Persian Gulf Money Return To Lebanon" http://articles.latimes.com/1994-05-03/news/wr-53210_1_persian-gulf Accessed May 1, 2017.

The Holiday Inn hotel remains almost untouched until now, still owned by a Kuwaiti company that has not yet decided the building's fate. Like the Holiday Inn hotel, many buildings stand abandoned, waiting for their verdicts, throughout the city of Beirut. With ongoing political turmoil hindering a proper rethinking of the Lebanese real estate law to limit foreign investments that control the current market, the Lebanese general public and architecture body remain stunted observers of their cities' public spaces and general aesthetic going further out of their control.

In parallel to the lack of agency over the built environment, there is no consensus over the value of the buildings, whether they must remain as icons of the war, a major landmark in Lebanese history, or demolished to move forward with the city. Most of these buildings are either renovated (erasing any trace of the war) or demolished.

“Hello, Can You See Me?”

With the popular trajectory, backed by the infrastructure of Lebanon's Active Fiction, being to either renovate or rebuild, there is almost no time for a conversation about these abandoned buildings in public. Part of *The Perfumed Garden's* task is to unearth conversations that people don't admit, layers of the city that may have been muted by the system. Abandoned buildings in “Hello, Can You See Me?”²⁹ become interlocutors for these conversations.

In *The Perfumed Garden's* wiring of this other Arab World, the intimacy in public is a pillar in every decision, and in this case, it is the intimacy between people and the buildings of their city is at the core of this conversation, especially abandoned buildings,

²⁹ Beirut, 2015

as they present an opportunity to explore various times compounded in one structure. An abandoned building is an abandonment of a structure by its assigned Active Fiction.

While the above-mentioned Holiday Inn building is still called by the name of the hotel it served as a shell for, it is far from being a hotel. It is a space that like many other abandoned buildings in Beirut is pending. This open-ended duration offers a rare public space occurrence of a metaphor for Active and Dormant Fictions. In abandoned buildings, you see the terrain that was once inhabited by an Active Fiction, that is currently abandoned by it for whatever reason, and the building becomes at the disposal of Dormant Fictions that could dock in it.

This performance proposed that Beirut's abandoned buildings are speaking to each other and to the people, and the fact that you cannot listen to them does not mean that these conversations are not happening: symbolically, that if you do not admit a Dormant Fiction does not make it less present, only less manifested.

On the fourth of July, 2015, a vegetable truck took off from Charles Helou station, a run down bus and taxi station North of Beirut connecting it to Tripoli, Syria and Jordan. Operated by a driver and two assistants, the truck started its round selling vegetables on the street. An LED sign installed on the truck announced the prices of the vegetables to passersby as it drove around, taking breaks to sell vegetables either in strategic spots or on demand.



Figure 13 - The driver standing in the vegetable truck in Charles Helou Station

The truck drove from Charles Helou to Beirut's City Center dome, an abandoned modernist theater building by Lebanese architect Joseph Phillippe Karam, to Bourj El Murr, a major landmark in Beirut's War of the Hotels, and from there to its rival during that war, the Holiday Inn hotel. The truck then drove closer to the sea to the abandoned Saint Georges hotel, whose development is stunted by the real estate giant Solidere, and then onwards to Masrah Beirut, which is closed and threatened to be demolished to build a residential tower. From Masrah Beirut, the truck drives to Raouché, Beirut's iconic Pigeon Rocks, the stars of a recent land privatization scheme where the coastal land in front of it has been shut down to the public to build a resort. The truck continues its journey to Hamra Street, where it parks next to Cinema Hamra, the Piccadilly Theater and the Cinema Colisee, three of the most iconic cultural spaces in the Lebanese capital that have been closed for over a decade. Lastly, the truck parks by Dahesh Mansion, an

abandoned mansion of a famous magician and cult leader, Dr. Dahesh, whose legacy lives on through his followers³⁰ and a museum in New York City³¹.

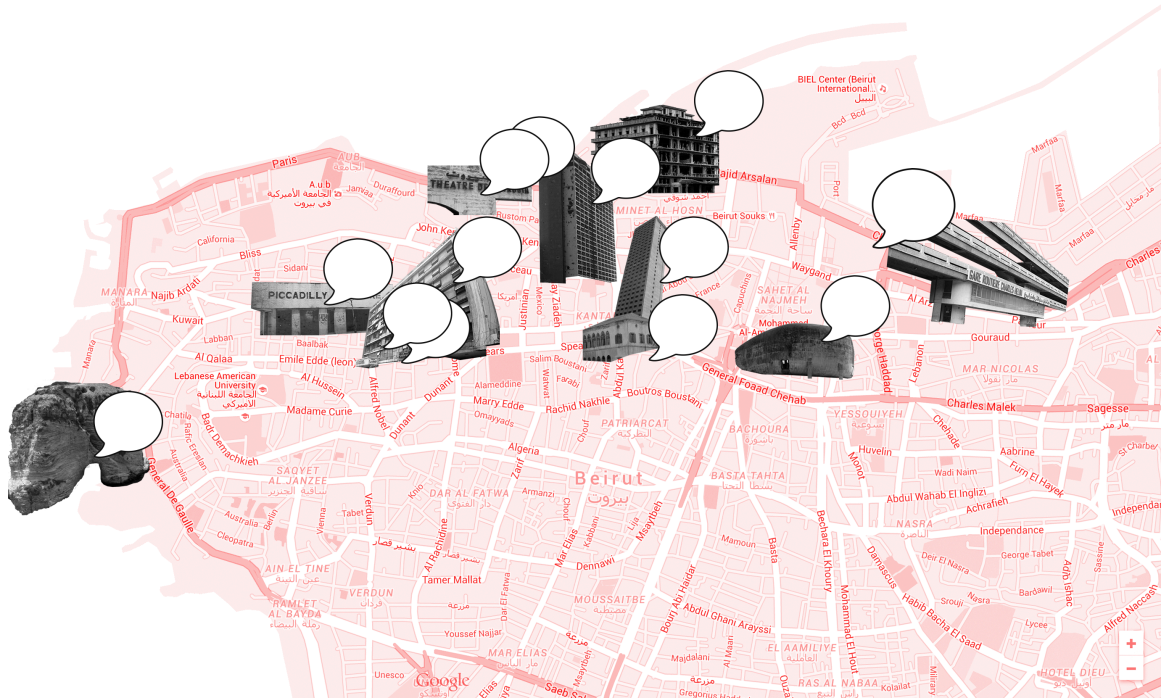


Figure 14 – Map showing the truck’s pitstops

The common factor between all of these pit stops is their state of limbo. They are abandoned buildings that are somehow abducted by the infrastructure of the ruling body’s Active Fiction. They are local icons that signify the memory of the city, yet their ownership is completely outside of its center of gravity. These buildings are either owned by private investors, more often than not, foreign investors, or occupied by the Lebanese army and security forces as strategic points that cannot be accessed due to infused paranoia.

With each and every one of these stops, the LED screen of the vegetable truck was interrupted, and sdahesihifted from showcasing vegetables, so reciting the narratives of

³⁰ Dahesh Society of America, <http://www.dahesh.org/> Accessed May 6, 2017.

³¹ Dahesh Museum Of Art, <http://www.daheshmuseum.org/> Accessed. 1 May 2017.

these buildings. The action was devised in such a way to make it seem like frequencies from the buildings were intercepting the LED screen's text flow as a method to reach out to their people of their city. The buildings had many stories to tell. Based on the history of every of these sites, each of the structures acquires a persona. Like some form of an urban synesthesia, each building feels like a character, a human character as opposed to an architectural relic. Through these characters, these building tell stories outside the public and outside the Active Fictions governed by Beirut's official governance bodies: stories that stretch the public.



Figure 15 - The truck parked in front of the Holiday Inn building

In their performed characters, none of these buildings care about the war anymore. They moved on. The Holiday Inn wants to be respected as a hill, as landscape, not as a building. The Saint Georges Hotel wants to split from the coast and become an island. The Piccadilly Theater and Cinema Hamra come out as same-sex lovers. The reactivation of these buildings allowed forbidden exclamations to surface through their fictional mouths into the public.

Slacktivism, who are we talking to?

And the public is domesticated. It is a lazy public used to fighting for its rights on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. So, tackling slacktivism³², “Hello, Can You See Me?” proposed that people could communicate with these abandoned buildings using the social media platforms they use to talk and protest about anything. Through creating a video live feed using these social media platforms, people could send questions to these buildings and these building would reply through the LED screens.

³² Coined by Dwight Ozard and Fred Clark in 1995 at the Cornerstone Festival, Slacktivism refers to the feel-good activities on social media people do in protest of political or social issues without actually having any physical impact on the issue at hand.

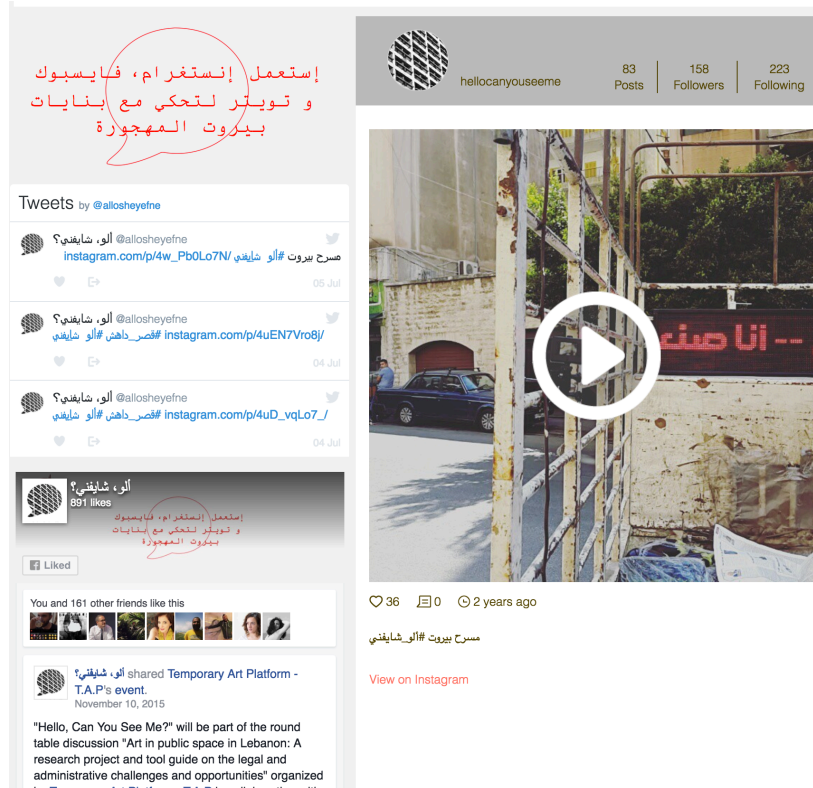


Figure 16 – Screenshot of the digital interface of “Hello, Can You See Me?” where users could log in and chat with the abandoned buildings.

In a sense, these buildings became an indestructible army of the people using the same characteristics that otherwise alienate them from the masses. The real estate and strategic values of these buildings render them harder to tackle and “punish,” while a riot is a recognizable pattern of resistance that could people in jail. For a building to talk about domestic abuse is much more of a spectacle than an activist doing a traditional TV interview. A building becomes a speaker, and its value rises in the economy of *The Perfumed Garden* as a benefactor in this new construction.

Love on the street

Telling by the amount of people who were bewildered by what was going on live on the street, “Hello, Can You See Me?” is a question answered “Yes.” Seeing in this sense was not anymore about the bullet-ridden skin of these abandoned buildings, but

about the forgotten souls they shared with the city. In Hamra, the same street where “The Wishing Fountain” once stood, people were most engaged in the conversation of the abandoned Piccadilly Theater that was coming out as being in love with another adjacent theater next to it. It told the audience that cafés and clothing stores in the neighborhood bullied her for being in love with another theater and that now she was now ready to recite her story in pride. Young men and women watched the text on the LED screen like football fans in a final game, some reading the theater’s words out loud for those who can’t see.



Figure 17 – Passersby stop and gather next to the truck parking in front of, and displaying the monologue of the Piccadilly Theatre

Generating The Perfumed Garden’s town hall

What is interesting to note is that while “The Wishing Fountain” and “Hello, Can You See Me?” relied thoroughly on social media and communication channels, they

somehow sparked an interesting phenomenon on the street that is independent of what was planned. While Facebook, Instagram and Twitter generated shares and instant feedback, what was happening on the street was similar to a vernacular iteration of the Town hall meeting concept.

Generally, a town hall meeting is an informal gathering of a community to congregate, discuss specific issues and vote when needed. As the name implies, these gatherings happen within a municipal building and are usually lead by an official delegate. What was happening on the street was a version of the town hall meeting without a chaperone or the enclosure, but rather a new and expanded evolution of it. People were asking each other questions about social issues, architecture, the role of [public] art while others internally assigned roles to extend the projects either as maintenance such as the case of the shoe-shiner boys or as performances like those who decided to read building monologues out loud.

These hopeful manifestations assert the possibility of the transformative scenario as a parallel to the classical more structured reform plan. Power is generated in this shift in the tectonic plates of fiction and reality. With the process of reification of Dormant Fictions, new venues are created for communal growth and the construction of an otherwise improbable future.

Permits, censorship and a public art manual

Since this project was spread out across the city, had no exact schedule and inserted itself in high-security and private estate scenarios, it was an exercise in overcoming direct and indirect censorship through permits, security chaperones and impact on private space. Beirut's territorial division is complex because it does not all fall completely under the

State. Part of the Solidere deal in downtown Beirut is a governance role, not just a reconstruction or contracting role. This prompted permission from various stakeholders.

Permits in this case are an interesting point to raise, because they were formative in what the project ended up being. Initially, the idea was that the LED screen would be placed on one abandoned building, the Beirut City Center Dome, in a way that it would pronounce its monologue continuously. The building being in downtown Beirut, it was under the jurisdiction of Solidere and the municipality. To complicate things further, the building is privately owned, and the project required the owners' approval. The owners were not interested in any conversations around the building, since they were interested in demolishing it, and have been stopped repeatedly by architecture and heritage activists.

The second attempt to make a building speak was in Hamra Street, on the Cinema Hamra building. That attempt quickly failed under the guise of foreign owners worried about the safety, security and insurance issues. With two failed attempts, I decided to stop trying privately owned singular buildings, but rather move this project to the supposedly public: the street.

To execute that, I visited the General Security in order to apply for a permit to film in a public space, something needed for the live streaming aspect of the project. Beyond the functionaries, the General Security made sure that this project would not ignite sectarian sensitivities. However, when following up on the application, we were told that the project didn't fit under the Cinema Branch's jurisdiction; yet the General Security had become aware of it and we could therefore carry on with the work. Subsequently, we visited the municipality in order to file for an exhibition permit. There, we were told that the process might take time, because the offices responsible for the

permits were dispersed in different buildings around the city. I ended up taking the application ourselves to all concerned branches, namely Engineering and Traffic departments among others, in order to speed up the process. Now that Solidere was familiar with the project and realized that they will not have to do anything to facilitate it, they approved the truck passing through the area. Regardless of all this play-nice on our end, various security personnel were dedicated to documenting our every move.

So where do Active and Dormant Fictions factor into this process? Was the Active Fiction breached, did *The Perfumed Garden*'s Dormant Fiction coexist with it temporarily or was it merely monitored as long as it didn't tamper with the prevailing system?

This scenario sheds light on the "prototyping cultural practices" aspect of this ongoing project. Its ongoing-ness, and process-based mechanic is key to its success. As a life project, *The Perfumed Garden* does not stop. It finds ways to disseminate its code through its people as if they were its diaspora until it becomes their land [again]. Its power is in how it infiltrates systems of reproduction and procreation, and in this case, the inclusion of "Hello, Can You See Me?" as a case study in a manual on public art in Lebanon is a form of that. Local cultural NGO, T.A.P.'s³³ manual on public art acts both as a testament and as a guide to breach the blandness and resistance of the public's Active Fiction through projects by various artists, concentrating on the policy work behind it. The gain for *The Perfumed Garden* in this sense is an expansion of its reign, especially that policy work is a big part of what The Khan will be invested in to "reify" its world.

https://issuu.com/temporaryartplatform/docs/guide_issuu_2

³³ Temporary Art Platform. <https://www.temporarilyartplatform.com/> Accessed May 1, 2017.

“Flood me!”

In this excerpt, Leila, a character shared by this novel and a feature film titled “The Beach House” teases an uninvited guest to her family home designed by Iraqi architect Refaat Chaderji. The text that follows discusses the migration of characters and spaces between different media, and the impact of that on iconography, power and censorship.

We drive over bridges hiding coastal lust – to our left, the blue sea and to our right, attempts of civilization. Hekmat takes a left downwards to a narrow road made even narrower with overgrown dark red bougainvillea gushing from over the fence of a private beach estate, “You’ll have enough time to think of what you want to call me where you’re going,” she said as she got out of the car, looked at Hekmat, “Take him to the Khan,” closed the door and opened a hidden gate within the dense plantation.

“Raafat?”

She walked a few steps down leading to a small terrace directly overlooking the sea. It was a windy day worthy of her intentions. The waves crashed in the rocky cave under the terrace and water jerked upwards projecting temporary walls of crystal between her and the horizon.

Horeyya stood under a chain of small light bulbs decorating the terrace. It was day, but the bulbs were on. The drum set, the guitar and the trumpet lay there as if they were used yesterday. They had a sense of unease to them, as if they were awakening up from a preferably indefinite sabbatical from the sound of music. It was an eerie feeling to get from mute objects that have no other choice but to lie around.

“Raafat?!” she shouted as she walked back from the terrace and took a left to a set of stairs carved into a rocky inclined shore plunging into the sea. To her left, a hole in the rocks lead to a small cave where the water intrudes into the land. A small light installed into the rocks was also on.

To Horeyya’s right was the sea. She was surrounded by it. In front of her, behind her and to her right was a wild sea, and to her left, Raafat’s silent house with no Raafat in sight. The house was a stone cube – rigid, cold and unwelcoming. Through its few thin, arched windows made of naked concrete, it looked at the sea with a gaze of a firm father. It took its winds and waves as childish squanders of energy. It wouldn’t understand it, but would stare at it endlessly to make it change into something calmer, something tamer.

But the sea always changes. It doesn’t find change alarming. It is not an event. The house never understood the sea, and the sea never stopped changing at will. Every now and then, it jerked a wave so high it wet the crude walls of Raafat’s house. The house never changed. The sea never expected it to.

Horeyya walked closer to the water, descending onto a giant rock constituting most of the shore in front of the house. She sat down on one of many palm-sized white dots painted on the rocky terrain. She took a deep breath taking in the horizon, then laid her back on the rocks, arching her neck back to see the house behind her upside down.

Leila’s upside-down hand held a freshly iced glass of bourbon. Horeyya quickly rose to her feet. “You would like to ask me who I am,” Leila said, “But you’re in my house.”

She smiled, “And you feel it’s not so appropriate... but you’re not that appropriate, are you?” The sea changed. The house didn’t. “Appropriate people don’t trespass. Do they?”

Leila’s hand held a glass of bourbon with ice cubes quickly melting, making trickling sounds that either one of the women heard. Horeyya knew a real

where when she saw one. Leila was the real deal, “Where’s Raafat?”

Leila laughed and trotted a few steps back with her eyes still fixated on Horeyya’s. She grabbed a pair of binoculars and handed them to Horeyya, “Look,” she said pointing to a floating object around twenty meters into the sea, “You can dive in, but the sea will eat you.”

Horeyya looked into the binoculars towards the object. A blue urn wrapped in a fish net was floating up and down, its head sometimes submerging within hoards of subtle but adamant waves. Leila burst into what an evil laughter sounds like in film, “I see you were close friends with my father. He’s been in hell for more than ten years, darling. I think you’re ready for that glass of bourbon now.”

Leila took the binoculars and replaced them with the glass in Horeyya’s loose hand, “I’m Leila. We will not be friends, but we don’t need to be friends to have a drink together.”

The Beach House

The Beach House ³⁴is a film that further demonstrates the interconnectedness of a new world under construction, the migration of characters from one medium to another, fertilizing *The Perfumed Garden's* fiction and disseminating its autobiography as an act of reification.

Written in collaboration with its director, Roy Dib, The Beach House “is a film about four people from an Arab generation roaming over the ruins of ideologies, causes and virtues of their predecessors. It portrays their intellectual and emotional nonchalance about what is happening around them in their daily lives and relationships. In a house whose architecture is a sixties’ experiment in mixing modern and Islamic architecture, a stone and concrete cube suspended over a rocky shore bashed by the waves of the Mediterranean, by famed Iraqi architect Refaat Chaderji, [the audience] spend a night with four characters whose non-stop conversations and peculiar actions reflect the void and chaos they are living in.”³⁵

The workshop as a site of procreation

What sets The Beach House apart from the other projects mentioned in this thesis is that it is not initiated by the ongoing construction of *The Perfumed Garden*, mainly because it is a collaborative project. I was approached by Dib to work on writing the film with him as I was working on the manuscript of *The Perfumed Garden*. In the publicity for The Beach House, no mention is made of *The Perfumed Garden* or its writing methodology. The fact that the film is communicated as an independent project makes it

³⁴ Beirut, 2016

³⁵ The Open Reel "The Beach House" <http://www.theopenreel.com/portfolio-item/the-beach-house/> Accessed April 23, 2017.

an interesting exercise for me. What is the power of leaking the landscape of *The Perfumed Garden* into works for which I will not be credited as the main author of and what does it do to the work, the co-authors and participants?

I adopted two characters from *The Beach House*, the two sisters, Leila and Rayya into *The Perfumed Garden*, as well as the setting of the film, Chaderji's beach house on the coast of Lebanon. While writing the film, I used my role as cowriter to infuse the character of the land from *The Perfumed Garden*, to make it more present, to increase the surface area of political intimacy both in the text and in its performance. At various instants in the process, I wrote segments in the manuscript of *The Perfumed Garden* that we would instantly adapt and incorporate into the screenplay.

After casting our four actors for the film, we decided that part of our writing mechanism would include regular meetings with these actors, as they become their characters in preparation for the shooting. We used them as anchors with reality, scripting them, engraving mannerisms that would be "normal" in the world of *The Perfumed Garden* and *The Beach House*, onto their personal characteristics. We were prototyping cultural practices in every rehearsal.

We held regular meetings with the actors where they would read, perform and react to the characters and the screenplay. The actors had ethical problems with different chunks of the script, regularly those adapted from *The Perfumed Garden*, so while these recurring rehearsals were generative of an interesting zone of intimacy, they were also scenes for recurring battles between fictions.

Most of the rehearsal sessions became miniature town hall meetings, where we sat down and used the script as an interlocutor to have political conversations, embedded

within aesthetics and narrative structures. The Beach House allowed me to negotiate *The Perfumed Garden* directly with characters that are training, and putting labor into manifesting it. One of the actors, for example, was expecting a child while working on this film. His wife was pregnant, and he could not deal with a scene where Rayya performs an abortion on the coffee table to entertain the guests. The two actors playing closeted lovers had a hard time committing to the roles seriously, outside of sarcasm and the potential societal discrimination against them when the film comes out in cinemas. The actress that plays Leila, the older sister, embodied the script's ruminations over nonchalance, and felt repetitively ill, "as if something very bad is going to happen," she said.

While this brief description of these rehearsals makes it seem like a ruthless act of abusing the actors into doing things they do not want to do, what was happening was the byproduct of the clash of fictions. The physicality of working on the film expanded, and materialized the world of *The Perfumed Garden*, taking the participants in with it, perceiving the script as what they considered real. The actor will not sit down, as the father he is in real life (and he is not in this film) and accept a woman's (the character) desire to have sex without procreating, and if there was a slight chance of that happening, that she would kill it.

The film does not protect the viewer or the performer from the fiction it propagates. While writing, we did not auto censor ourselves for the sake of this film passing more smoothly through the General Security or the general audience. The priority was to create a public object that would dilute the existing public with its own flood, but as the film got inevitably censored, and had its breadth in public reduced, I learned something else about

the virtues of this expanded writing process that does not only include the writers, but the actors too. While the intent was to create a medium that disseminates that fiction, the mechanics and performance of preparing for it was itself a machine to procreate it within the “workshop.”

The Beach House is an example of the potency of film making, in the process of *The Perfumed Garden*, as an additional tool to negotiate its fictions. This time *The Perfumed Garden’s* Active Fiction propagates on a different scale, one that is not in the public, but rather as a workshop, where the work done uses the act of performance, scripted performance, as a method for the performers to adopt new fictions.

The house as a fusion of traditional and modern architecture

These workshops took place both in rehearsal spaces and in Chaderji’s beach house itself, and so did the writing. It is safe to say that the writing process ended when we wrapped the shooting of the entire film, and not a minute before, making it an interestingly cyclic process that is reflected in the architecture of the house.



Figure 18 – Screenshot of a site survey video in front of the beach house in Halat, North Lebanon

Refaat Chaderji's work is known to be a fusion between modern and traditional regional architecture. This beach house in particular is peculiar in its relationship with the sea. Its windows toward sea are small and narrow. It's balcony in that direction fits one or two people on it. There is no access from the main living space to the sea. It feels like a cozy winter house much more than a summer house by the beach.

Visiting the space before shooting, and spending time on its rocky shore morphed the script into something more responsive to it. After the actors' visited the space, it was interesting how they, too, changed. Although the house is not exactly the stereotype of a magical beach house, the clash of its fictions resonated with the conversations being workshopped. As a house on the beach, our site was illegal as per the Lebanese law that protects the coast as public space. The house's owner however, and its architectural significance as one of the few works still standing of an important architect after most of his oeuvre was destroyed in the war in Iraq, gave it legitimacy. The house is governed by an architectural foundation that holds the architect's name, "The Chaderji Foundation," who allowed us to use the house, trusting our morality and considering our work an homage to a living legend.

Most things about this house were problematic, from its construction to its concierge who was tasked with monitoring us, making it a fertile site for a dinner that brings together four saturated characters played by four skeptical artists, afraid of their fiction to be conceived of as documentary.

The sea as a metaphor for movement, transference and migration between worlds

Jokingly, our sound engineer asked us if we could mute the sea, or shoot the beach house away from it. At many points during our shoot, I experienced the feeling that

everyone on set wished this fiction was fictional, that it was imaginary. And with every memorized line and practiced gesture, this fiction became more and more oppressive. It became as oppressive as the sound of the waves that were reminding us of a dissociation between the world outside and the world of The Beach House – a dissociation that we lost in those workshops.

The sea wanted to remind us that we were performers. To the sound engineer, the sea reminded him of the limits of his equipment. To me, the sea reminded me of the infinity of its sprawl. With every crashing wave, the sea made sure I knew that it is winning, and that the shape of the rocky shore in front of my film set was designed by its tide, and that its tide is rising, and will continue to rise.



Figure 19 – Film still from *The Beach House* dividing a relatively calm introduction and a violent dinner scene that is at the center of the plot.

With the sea I thought of motion, travel and migration. I thought of these characters, Leila and Rayya, and what it means for them to be born in a film and then to get passed on to a novel. And then I thought of the value of a character in general, and

how through moving from one medium to another, a character could become a star, and in repetition, could become an icon. And does this facility of migration activate the fiction of that character into becoming something people would consider real?

As part of the art direction of the film is an original picture of Sherihan, an Egyptian performance icon shot by the Lebanese photographer Fouad El-Khoury. Sherihan is one of those characters one would consider iconic, an idol, someone that scripted a generation of young women that desired to be her. In the second part of the film, when the men leave the house and dominate her territory on stage by the shore, Rayya stands silent next to that photo, and smokes a cigarette. She listens to the sound of the crashing waves. She wants to leave.



Figure 20 - Film still from *The Beach House* showing Rayya standing in front of Sherihan's photo

Later in the film, Rayya is seen leaving the film into the sea. Unannounced, she exits the frame on a boat. Rayya leaves *The Beach House* into the ether where characters born in fiction reside outside their performances, and comes back in *The Perfumed Garden*, and then comes back in *The Wishing Fountain*. Rayya is one of the characters I

am experimenting with in the potential of transmitting the cultural practice of fiction into everyday life. Like in the workshops, where the actress playing Rayya needed to find “the desirable” in this woman in order to become her, these fictions, be-it film, novel or public performance, allow the audience (public) to desire characters in order to become or be inspired by them. In this case, this intimate transmission is political. Rayya is a strong woman that defines her body according to her own desires. She does not conform to the Active Fictions of the ruling body of her homeland, so she floods it with her tide, and her tide is infinite.

Censorship

While scheduled for a Lebanese premier in ‘Beirut Cinema Days’ festival in 2017, the General Security refused to give a clear permission to show it.³⁶ Instead, we got an informal ban with no backing argument. As we later understood, by word of mouth because no details were discussed or documented, is that several committees were bothered by the film as a whole, in a way that would not be rectified by removing one or two scenes. The Lebanese General Security banned the fiction of *The Beach House* from surfacing to the public.

Rayya, Leila, Youssef and Rawad are four characters that do not fit their allocated seats in the matrix of Active Fiction run by their government. Rayya and Leila are two powerful women, which even in their insecurities and vulnerabilities outplay the character a woman is legally and socially bound to perform in Lebanon. While Rayya does not want to be a mother, the holy grail of femininity in this country, her sister wants to make a child on her own terms, picking a genetic match as opposed to a love match to

³⁶ CineTrotter, "NO TO CENSORSHIP PROTEST IN LEBANESE MOVIE THEATER!" <https://cinetrotter.wordpress.com/2017/03/24/no-to-censorship-protest-in-lebanese-movie-theater/> Accessed May 1, 2017.

execute her project. Both Leila and Rayya guide the events most of the first part of the film before the men take the lead and retaliate. They emasculate the masculine image defining the Lebanese man, though not exclusively so. The men in the film, Youssef and Rawad, are gay. They are equally queer and illegal from a Lebanese standing point.

The characters drink, do drugs, discuss politics, create works that outside the film would be punishable by law. Rawad is collaborating with an Israeli artist in Berlin. He thinks he will solve the Palestinian occupation. Youssef does not agree. Leila does not care. Rayya laughs at them.

The characters of *The Beach House* are knowing bodies. They know that they will be censored, but they flip the finger to the Active Fictions they want to put to dormancy. They are immoral, different, and migratory. They change their minds often. They are those indecisive characters that transcend the boundaries of the frame, and become more interesting than the final picture, and seem to — in exchange for the entertainment and perplexity they are offering the audience — expect some entertainment and perplexity in return. They expect the audience to become the lover, and by loving, to become political.

Our response to the film's censorship was to send it to another public: the media. We sent a password-protected link of the film to cultural journalists, and asked them to watch it. In the weeks that followed, several articles reviewed an invisible film, invisible because of its violation out of the public by the ruling state. In this orchestration, the fiction of *The Beach House* flood into more publics. It migrated, into accessible grounds, summoning the audience to become lovers, and to put labor into expanding publics to fit their desires.

“Body”

In this excerpt, we learn about The Khan’s invisible monuments and in the text that follows, we make them.

No one at the Khan had thought that the guardian of the monuments would end his life the way he did. It was as if the Nile had stopped flowing because one of the children from a village on its river banks had fell to his death in its waters. Collateral. No one at the Khan believed what had happened. He hadn't been very well right before he died, but nothing was indicative of him ending his life the way he did. Nothing. He had planted too many trees on his balcony to shield himself from the series of successively failed revolutions outside. But trees were not made for balconies, and he knew that very well. What did he expect? People at the Khan thought an accident such as the orphaning of these two young men would recharge the guardian's zest for life, that it would remind him of the absurdity of it all and that it would let the sun back into his beautiful windows after the trees had gone. Instead, he killed himself.

The invisible monuments were designed to be untouchable, so there was no fear for their safety. The Tariqa was not a security guard. He was a guardian. He kept track of new invisible monuments and guarded the knowledge of previous ones. He hadn't been very well right before he died. He felt that all of this knowledge was not able to make this place work – that everything was beyond repair. But his job was not to repair. His job was to sustain. He was the guardian of the invisible monuments, and his unrealistic fantasies of how everything else should have worked depressed him. At the Khan, there was a type of monopsychism keeping everyone at ease that this eternal consciousness is responsible for balancing out the forces of the universe, even if everyone was doing their own specific thing somehow separately.

Guardians did not need make houses themselves for them to be architects. Poets did not need to be whores themselves in order to take credit for the freedom of Palestine. Water did not need to be air in order to take credit for the transfer of the divine smell of jasmine and hypnotizing scent of freshly put-off candles within the magical terrains of the Khan. The Khan worked together by being together, and the this nuance must have at least momentarily slipped the Tariqa's mind for him to act upon his depression if not anything else more serious that no one was aware of was happening to him. Regardless, a beautiful memorial gathering was held for him in a giant pool by the floating theater at the concrete fairgrounds in Trablus where one of his favorite invisible monuments stood. Ground crystals symbolizing his ashes were thrown in the air, and they landed on the surface of the water like goose bumps to good Tarab.

Policing the public space

Monuments are one of the most used methods of enforcing a ruling body's Active Fiction, but rarely represent the state of its people. A monument is a power symbol. It is a territorial flag. It reminds everyone that looks at it of the power of its patron, and cements their physical manifestation in the order of things. Until 2003, Saddam Hussein's statue flanked Firdaus Square in Baghdad until his Active Fiction was put to rest by American military troops that performatively raised their own icon, the American flag, while toppling the monument³⁷. Similarly, statues of Syrian dictator Hafez Assad were torn down during the Syrian revolution in 2013. The repression of the people, materialized and enforced by these monumental icons of the dictators is clearly observed through the jubilation at their communal demolition in both cases. In a video³⁸ from Raqqa, Syria that shows the tearing down of an Assad statue, the crowd is raging, hysterical screams of "Allah Akbar / God is Great" can be heard, people climbing the statue, slamming it cathartically and machine guns festively shooting in the air.

The monument can symbolically become the eyes and ears of the ruling force, regardless if it functions as a technical recorder. Its presence alone scripts and executes the Active Fiction of its patron. The people do not have constructive access to public space. When it does, in shy attempts such as graffiti for example, which will intrinsically remain reactionary, the state enforces its policing advantage, punishing the interventionists and erasing the intervention. For the public's fiction, in this case one or

³⁷ The Guardian, "Saddam Hussein Statue Toppled In Baghdad, April 2003 - Video". <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/mar/09/saddam-hussein-statue-toppled-baghdad-april-2003-video> Accessed April 25, 2017.

³⁸ The Telegraph, "Syrian rebels tear down statue of Bashar al-Assad's father in Raqqa" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9909176/Syrian-rebels-tear-down-statue-of-Bashar-al-Assads-father-in-Raqqa.html> Accessed May 6, 2017.

more Dormant Fictions, to be expressed in shared, common and policed space, it must – at least in the initial stages – blend in, be undetectable, invisible.

The invisible monuments

So can the queer community in Lebanon have a monument representing its existence, or memorializing any of its active members? Can the women in Saudi Arabia have a statue of liberty to iconify their struggle? The Palestinian people claim their land? The Egyptian youth represent their revolution in their cities? Probably not as publically as the hegemonic monuments of the State, but in building a whole new infrastructure, as conceived of through *The Perfumed Garden* and implemented by The Khan, how relevant are these types of monuments, and what are the publics that are interesting to tap into and support?

In the first year of publishing The Outpost magazine, we dedicated the first pages of each issue to “the opener” a space in the magazine designed to examine the theme of each issue conceptually, before delving into the articles in journalistic long-form. In the opener, we saw the potential of creating an alternative format of a public space icon in a publication. We had an opportunity to prototype a cultural practice of a form of solidarity and understanding as another form of monument. The invisible monuments were selected tables in cafés, street intersections, street games, etc. By naming these everyday objects as invisible monuments, we started cultivating the possibility of existing in public by tagging the public complicit to our stories, not an apparatus for the ruling body to enforce theirs.

While these invisible monuments found some traction with our readers, they lacked the momentum of a decentralized system, as well as physicality. Dubbing an object as an

invisible monument for freedom of speech for example was not yet able to impact that object physically, neither were invisible monuments things people could start with their own platforms. They were still editorial performances in a magazine.

Territorism

Starting from that, Territorism³⁹ is a recipe. It is designed to be a ritual that could be exercised by almost anyone, with as little resources as possible. It is a method to transfer fiction onto objects, to make them apparatuses of public intimacy that cannot be policed, a form of land reclamation outside the rules of existing Active Fictions. The name Territorism is a combination of Territory and Terrorism, two words that highlight the struggle of reclaiming public in the world today. In the context of *The Perfumed Garden*, the Territory is an Arab World discolored by imposed borders and dictated moral structures. And Terrorism is the policeable term given to those who cross these borders. Territorism becomes a recipe, a ritual that internalizes its condemnation and reframes it into a valid cultural practice.

One of the main pillars of this practice is its ease of performance and transmission. This recipe draws from the act of burning the Quran as a dignified disposal technique⁴⁰. In Islamic practice, one cannot throw the Quran in the trash. Damaged or old Quran books are traditionally burned and if possible released in a flowing stream of water. The importance, however, is to prevent printed words of god to be mixed with garbage.

Derived from this technique, the main ingredient in this ritual is burnt text, where the ashes symbolically dignify the fiction's departure from paper and abstract the text that

³⁹ Cambridge, Jerusalem, Cairo, 2016

⁴⁰ PBS "Qur'an Disposal | Religion & Ethics Newsweekly"
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2011/09/16/september-16-2011-quran-disposal/9519/> April 24, 2017.

is chosen. These texts, chosen by the person preparing the recipe should include fictions they want to transfer on an object in order to create the invisible monuments. The variations of the recipe depend on the object that the fiction will transform.

Case study #1 – Jerusalem Stones

The first experiment is based on Stone Throwing acts of resistance in Occupied Palestine, where unarmed Palestinians of all ages throw stones at fully armored forces of the Israeli Occupation. This act is a symbolic one much more than it is expected to free Palestine from its oppressors; nevertheless, Israeli forces would retaliate with high-tech weaponry. The implications of throwing stones in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are much larger than the physicality of the performance. In addition to the direct combat reaction to Palestinians throwing stones in Palestine, symbolic celebrations referencing the ritual outside Palestine seem bigger than the sum of all its parts too. When renowned Palestinian academic Edward Said symbolically threw a stone at the direction of Israel during a family vacation in Southern Lebanon, for example, it prompted harsh critique in academic and public circles⁴¹.

This potency of the object (stone), the performance it procures and the implications almost demand a probing into its fiction. With the Jerusalem Stones project, texts are transferred onto stones using a recipe based on egg whites and ashes. Egg whites have historically been used as organic lacquer bases, and are rather accessible, homegrown ingredients for a community suffering from Israeli-controlled trade embargos. Their translucency allows for a somewhat colorless paint to maintain the invisibility of the Invisible Monument effect.

⁴¹ Sunnie Kim, "Edward Said Accused Of Stoning In South Lebanon," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, July 19, 2000, 9

The Jerusalem Stones are intended to be domestically prepared and can either be used for stone throwing, to create ubiquitous souvenirs or to paint bits and pieces of the landscape to claim it discretely. In that last option, Palestinian households would form teams that would collect stones, paint them at home, and then return them to the landscape, invisibly dubbed Palestinian. This method allows the oppressed to reinvent their bodies, to reclaim their materiality through undetected transmission.

The first experiment was in collaboration of Mahira Bshara. Mahira chose a poem by Mahmoud Darwish as the fiction she wanted to transfer onto the stone of her choice. The following pictures are stills from WhatsApp videos recorded by her and sent to me as documents of her application of the recipe.



In her kitchen, the stone is washed from any sediments. The paper with the

poem on it is folded and placed in a coffee pot. The paper is burned to ashes in the pot and then grinded to create a powder. The ashes are then transferred to a bowl, and then mixed with 3 egg whites. The final paste is painted on the stone, and when dry, looks like any random stone.

Case study #2 – Cairo Graffiti

Another application of the Territorism recipe happened in Cairo, and was rooted in the graffiti culture that became more prominent after the Tahrir Square protests. The relationship between graffiti and the state has always been a turbulent one, where graffiti artists tag spaces as affirmation of their existence and to claim territory, followed by the state punishing, censoring or erasing these territorial works in the name of civility and protecting facades of private spaces.

On the highly politicized walls of Cairo during uprisings that were happening in the Arab World since December 2010 (the Arab Spring⁴²), a war was happening between artists trying to document and tell their stories using their art on public walls of their city and the Egyptian government erasing⁴³ these stories to mute their voices.

The walls of Cairo have never been clean though, or empty. Popular messages like “Do not forget to mention Allah” or cryptic romances with hearts and arrows can be seen throughout the city. Only messages that threaten the Active Fiction of the State are considered dangerous, hence erased. With this version of Territorism, the ashes are transferred through graffiti paint as a mixing medium instead of the egg whites recipe in

⁴² Cornell University Library "Arab Spring: A Research & Study Guide: Home"
http://guides.library.cornell.edu/arab_spring Accessed April 25, 2017.

⁴³ Mia Jankowicz, "Erase And I Will Draw Again: The Struggle Behind Cairo's Revolutionary Graffiti Wall". *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/23/struggle-cairo-egypt-revolutionary-graffiti> Accessed April 25, 2017.

Jerusalem. In this case, the fiction transfers to usable paint, where artists can paint generic messages that will not visibly threaten the system, yet retain their territorial gestures. The cult nature of graffiti allows the community to bond over symbols and coded messages as opposed to candid visuals of protests, and by doing so, hiding in plain site and reclaiming the public in an alternative manner.

The Cairo experiment was conducted in collaboration with Abdurahman Katamish. Abdurahman chose a poem by Abdul Rahman El Abnoudi as the fiction he wanted to transfer onto the paint. The following pictures are stills from videos recorded by him and sent to me as documents of his application of the recipe from the streets of Cairo.





7

Abdurahman decided to create the paint on the street where he was going to use it. He wrote the poem by hand on a piece of cardboard then ripped it into pieces that would fit in the bucket he used to burn the poem. He stirs the ashes into a powder and then adds paint and water to reach a practical consistency. Abdurahman later writes “Egypt Lives” on the wall behind him, something the State would not object to, at least in that form.

Negotiation of borders

The potency of this recipe comes from creating a method to disseminate fiction between people and throughout the monitored, policed public space. It is not a tool that will physically liberate land, or emancipate space. It negotiates borders and agency over spaces within the limitations of physical action in the city. The intimacy generated from the clandestine aspect of this activity also acts as a productive factor, fed by the fiction of *The Perfumed Garden*. It materializes and exercises intimacy as a political tool, and is one of the building blocks of its fiction that expand its economy and increases its manifestation value.

“Penetrate”

In this excerpt, Palestine rids itself of its name and its people. A new language is born that bypasses the concept of a solution, and instead creates a new condition to exist in the land.

The sea grew more violent, and no boat was left intact. Once the western sun rose a bit higher, a giant wave arched over Palestine and landed on the tip of the new mountains, igniting a continuous waterfall of salty seawater. The salt crystals mixed with water with the help of the adequate light of the western sun transformed the brut mountains into giant mirrors reflecting every inch of the holy land.

The Arabs and the Israelites stared at themselves as the earth they fought over for so long took charge. It wasn't pleasant, but there's nothing pleasant about truth. There's no comfort in it, no solace, unless you're already there. Truth is more of a harvest than a tool. You reap what you sow.

The mountains reflected a beautiful land with scars too deep to heal. Its skin of fertile soil shook as every plucked, burned or chopped olive tree on the hills of Palestine came back to life. Their roots extended throughout the lands and their leaves grew sharp like swords. The olive trees grew and the people watched their beautiful land crack under their feet. The Arabs and the Israelites watched ghosts of the mother they had raped come back for their souls. Unable to escape their reflections, they were forced to watch their slow, gradual end of times.

Priests, Sheikhs and Rabbis that stood hand in hand to stop this with the power of God were killed first. They were overtaken by flocks of 'Ababeel' birds that appeared from the horizon on the west. Each of these birds carried three pebbles made of 'Sijeeel' clay. Each carried one in their beak and one in each of their claws. They surrounded the men of God that only now decided to love each other and began bombarding them with pebbles. Pebbles fell on the heads of the men and pierced through each of their bodies to reach the ground, sinking into it until all were dissolved.

The sinking pebbles carved craters in the raging land of Palestine. Molten lava from the earth's core gushed out turning the people into parts of the landscape. The flowing lava left trajectories in the earth that lusted for rain. So it rained. The clouds of Palestine had waited so long to be summoned by their earth, and they rained heavily wiping the salt off the mountains and filled the newly found trajectories into luscious riverbeds.

After everyone died, the mountains receded back into the ground. The constellation tracing al-Haq still shone in the skies lit by the western sun and connected the heavens to the earth. The stars reflected the gardens of Eden, and nature duly copied it. The fertile volcanic earth sprouted new shrubs that would turn into trees bearing fruit. The smell of musk filled the new air. Palestine rid herself of its people that fed her blood since the beginning of time, and changed her diet into a healthy dose of fresh water and western sun. Animals that saw no borders walked from Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to inhabit paradise. Donkeys and sheep fed where the dome of the rock, al-Aqsa mosque, western wall, holy sepulcher, church of nativity, and the tomb of Rachel once stood. Palestine was finally free.

"We have on this earth what makes life worth living,"

Mahmoud Darwish wrote at the Khan where sometimes time seemed to overlap, recycle and juxtapose as opposed to trek sequentially like it did everywhere else. To time, the Khan was almost like a vacation, and to the Khan, time couldn't have been anything else but a flexible jelly of some sort that could comfortably fit within a wide range of molds.

“April's reoccurrence,
love's first steps,
grass on stone,
and the invaders' fears of memories.”

Actions speak louder than words. The mute beautiful land of Palestine that stood still for centuries cleaned itself of people that loved her – brutally – regardless of who they were. They didn't love each other, and somehow that was their unforgivable crime. Some will liken Palestine to a child in tantrum, and some will rejoice her liberty. Some will question it. What is the freedom of a land without the freedom of its people? Some will argue: what is the worth of a land whose people cannot cease to fight? In all cases, Palestine may or may not grow to regret her murder of people that were righteous amongst the crop, but she will console herself with her bold act of summoning the time of miracles to the present tense.

Palestine, a collision of fictions

In the fiction of the Arab World, Palestine is everywhere. It is on television, radio broadcasted, printed and in digital news on a daily basis. It is in conversations, mostly tired and nostalgic in public and private spaces. It is the victim⁴⁴, the problem⁴⁵ and the dream of heroism, to free Palestine.

I consider one of the most thought-provoking things to be said about Palestine in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is Godard's musing on the shot and reverse shot in *Notre Musique*⁴⁶, "For example in 1948, the Israelites walked in the water to reach the Holy Land. The Palestinians walked in the water to drown. Shot and reverse shot. Shot and reverse shot. The Jews became the stuff of fiction, the Palestinians, of documentary."

There is something very obvious and subtle in this, which makes it beautiful. It is a punctuation of that symbiotic, dialectical relationship between text (fiction) and image (documentary),⁴⁷ in the context of the duality of the situation of Palestinians and Israelis as two sides of the same reality, the same story, its shot and reverse shot. But I argue that we can say that the shot and the reverse shot in this case are inside the same frame. They are in every frame. They collide, as fiction becomes documentary becomes fiction in a procedure baptized by water, the water of the sea, the medium of migration.

In 1948, the Israelites walked in the water and the Palestinians walked in the water. They migrated into each other's fictions and killed them both. In a way, they both

⁴⁴ Palestine has been occupied by Israel for 70 years.

⁴⁵ "Unwelcome Guests: Palestinian Refugees In Lebanon". *The Electronic Intifada*. N.p., 2017. Web. 26 Apr. 2017.

⁴⁶ Godard, Jean-Luc. *Notre Musique*. 2004. DVD.

⁴⁷ Weedman, Christopher. "Notre Musique: Godard'S Shot/Reverse Shot Ruminations On The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict". *Senses of Cinema*. N.p., 2013. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

drowned. The Jews lost their story and the Arabs lost their land. After 1948, there is no Holy Land, merely a perpetuation of a new fiction, an abducted terrain that in pictures and in text comes in the guise of a shot and a reverse shot. The fiction on the abducted land of Palestine is not a conflict waiting to be solved; it hosts a conflict that cannot be solved. We, the audience of so called shot and reverse shot, pretend it is possible to make peace by assuming the role of heroes.

Bypassing solution

But the audience is never the hero. That is why *The Perfumed Garden* is set up as an autobiography of another Arab World. It is not the autobiography of the lover until he penetrates, from dormant to active. Through the lover's utterance, and desire to "penetrate" the amorous subject, it is a confession of the desire to leave the audience and enter the land. And when they are together, the land holds the story. It is the intimacy. And it is home.

In the section that follows this one, I discuss a short novel titled *The Naked*, one of many attempts of mine to move from my assigned role as audience, to an active lover. Like the rest of the projects discussed in this thesis, it is an attempt to create a zone of intensity to think outside the lens of the existing Active Fiction in constructing another Arab World.

And as I am writing this section, more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners are on hunger strike in Israeli prisons led by imprisoned Palestinian icon Marwan Barghouti⁴⁸. It shifts my interest in writing about how a solution is born as a state of compromise, and that a state of compromise is not how *The Perfumed Garden's* fiction will be activated.

⁴⁸ "Profile: Marwan Barghouti - BBC News". BBC News. N.p., 2017. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

My train of thought is diverted by a text, Barghouti's Op-Ed for the New York Times on April 16, 2017⁴⁹, a sober, haunting portrayal of the reasoning behind this hunger strike from someone on the land. Reading it, I am reminded that I am still the audience in this scenario, and that my luxuries are still those of that role.

The fact that the hunger strike "inflicts pain solely on those who participate and on their loved ones,"⁵⁰ makes it a particular action of resistance, an imploding act of resistance, which through its occurrence, negotiates fiction. Does the meditative terrorist remain a terrorist? And if so, what becomes of terrorism?

The Israelites and the Palestinians walked into the water. They drowned into the occupier and the occupied. They drowned into the righteous of the land and the terrorist. They became the interrogator and the accused. In his Op-Ed, Barghouti alludes to this moment of impossibility, of the interrogator asking the question that cannot be asked, and waits for the answer that does not exist. Barghouti alludes to the action that cannot be acted, and waits for the future that cannot persist.

I was only 15 when I was first imprisoned. I was barely 18 when an Israeli interrogator forced me to spread my legs while I stood naked in the interrogation room, before hitting my genitals. I passed out from the pain, and the resulting fall left an everlasting scar on my forehead. The interrogator mocked me afterward, saying that I would never procreate because people like me give birth only to terrorists and murderers.⁵¹

Stop breathing. Do not procreate. In the fiction of the land of Palestine, the Israeli asks the Palestinian to become history. It imprisons him, deprives him of nourishment, and waits for him to stop procreating. The Palestinian stays. He becomes more adamant.

⁴⁹ Barghouti, Marwan. "Opinion | Why We Are On Hunger Strike In Israel's Prisons". *Nytimes.com*. N.p., 2017. Web. 27 Apr. 2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

He uses his body to resist. On the land he considers his as much as interrogator considers his, he uses his body to enforce his fiction. Audiences on both sides of the land will see either the shot or the reverse shot, they will talk about the land in heated discussions, they will feel helpless, and at most, strive to become heroes.

I am Arab. I am partial. I am an audience member that is a lover trying to penetrate. But what is the sympathy of the land? What would it want? What is the story, the autobiography, of the frame where the shot and reverse shot collide? Does it want to speak? What language would it use?

The Naked, novel

*The Naked*⁵² is a short novel that acts as a prophetic and revelatory magnifying glass to one of the events in *The Perfumed Garden* novel. Written as part of a conference⁵³ on 'Nature,' my starting point was to problematize, through fiction, my relationship as a Lebanese citizen [and cultural producer] with Israel. Our relationship is currently governed by Lebanese criminal law that forbids me from exploring any form of knowledge that includes an exchange with an Israeli, under the crime of normalizing the relationship with an enemy state.

What I was interested in exploring, given this context, is the Arabic word '*Tatbeeh*' which means normalization, but could also translate to 'Naturalization,' to make natural. It is the word colloquially given to the act of 'naturalizing' the relationship with Israel for an Arab stakeholder. The un-nuanced political opposition to 'make [something] natural' or partake in the thinking process of the tackling such a core topic of Arab identity (being

⁵² Brussels, 2016

⁵³ "Nature (C)". *Aleppo*. Web. 1 May 2017.

the relationship of the political and conceptual minefield that is the Arab-Israeli conflict) is at the core of writing *The Naked*.

The scene that I explore through this short novel is a scene in *The Perfumed Garden* where the land of Palestine rids itself of its name and its people. It does not take sides as to which people, the Israelis or the Palestinians are more rightful of her, and borrows from Islamic descriptions of the end of times to erase her residents.

To protect herself, and to create her own Active Fiction by which people will subscribe to in order to have the right to enter her, this new land that was once Palestine invents a new language. This new language is a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew without the letter 'B'. The letter 'B' is dropped because when crossed out of the Arabic and Hebrew words for 'Arabic' and 'Hebrew', the two words become one, which in Arabic translates to 'Nudity.'

If the letter 'B' is the obstacle separating two languages from each other, then the new language of this new land is one naked from the letter 'B,' and consequently called *'The Naked.'*

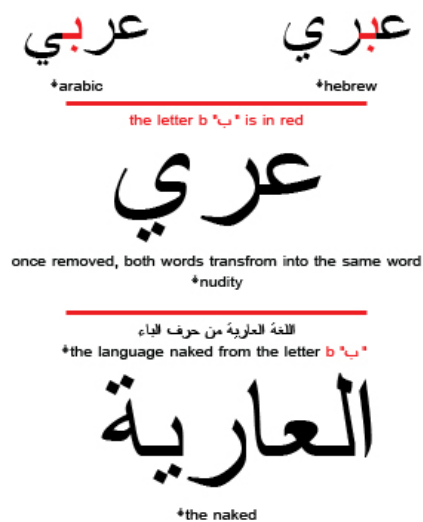


Figure 21 – Diagram showing the removal of the letter 'B' in Arabic and Hebrew to create the new [naked] language

According to this story, only those who can speak this language without prejudice, preference, or subscription to either mother tongues can enter the land. *The Naked* represents the design of an alternative scenario, another Active Fiction, activated through language whose adoption creates a desired *conditional state* as opposed to a *compromised state* due to the mechanics of making a solution.

Translation vs. Explication

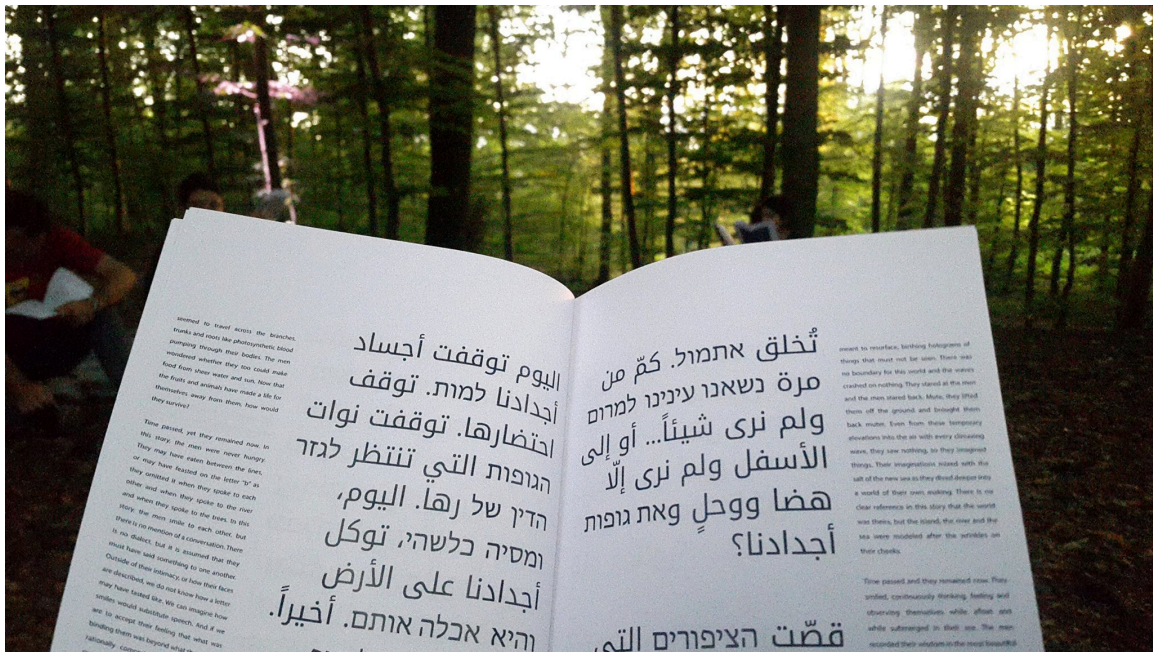


Figure 22 – Picture from the reading of *The Naked* in Brussels’s Park Duden showing a spread of the novel. In the center of the spread is the new illegible language and on the side margins, a text that explains it.

The novel is written in a language that is illegible to people in the present. Arabic readers will be able to read some of the Arabic words. Hebrew readers will be able to read some of the Hebrew words. People that speak both languages will have an easier time deciphering the text. Only people that read the language will understand. The people who understand would have moved from audience to lover, and consequently own the land as per her permission, not their war, and not one winning and the other losing.

To make the novel accessible, I had to make a decision, to either translate or to

explain to the reader of the present what the story was. *The Naked* could have just been published in the new language, but part of the penetration is to make this body a desirable one, so access is key.

Inspired by the print layout of the Quran and the Torah books, representatives of fictions that have close ties to the land of Palestine by virtue of being Abrahamic religions, I decided to opt for explication over translation. Like these books, on the printed publication of *The Naked*, a text in the margins explains the central narrative.

The explanatory text in English tells the story of two men and a land. The three characters melt into each other and into the narrator, collapsing focal points, heroes, climaxes and themes. It invites the reader into a world he does not understand, and does not put him under the illusion that after reading the margin text he will, but rather acts as an evocative indication of the presence of a world, unraveling, and conveys the message – as does *The Perfumed Garden* – of intimacy in public as a constructive political tool. Below are a few paragraphs of *The Naked's* margin text that are chosen to give a feel of the story, and also highlight points of intersection between this novel and *The Perfumed Garden*.

In this story, a valley turns into an island turns into a sea. A language turns into another into me. People turn into each other as they speak. In this story, which seems to be written in a language we yet cannot see, two men are continuously climbing beyond what they can feel. Sometimes they are tired and others they are not.

In this story, two men seem to be free. It is set in a very specific land that no longer had a name. It seems to be set in a present, perhaps a few days after the world shook, and the sea paused a few seconds in salutation before it went back to its rage. It may have happened during the event. It was something no one talked about in languages they knew before. Truth, “al-Haq,” they said, could not fit in them.

At the Hour of Truth, the blue sky turned black, and stars that were invisible before shone in proud glory. A new constellation spelled out “al-Haq” in the darkened heavens. A few minutes later, the sun rose from the West, and all the stars were gone except for those speaking “al-Haq.”

In this story, a valley turns into an island turns into a sea. A language turns into another into me.

[...]

The Arabs and the Israelites stared at themselves as the earth they fought over for so long took charge. The mountains reflected a beautiful land with scars too deep to heal. Its skin of fertile soil shook as every plucked, burned or chopped olive tree on the hills of this land came back to life.

Their roots extended throughout the earth and their leaves grew sharp like swords. The olive trees grew and the people watched their beautiful land crack under their feet.

The Arabs and the Israelites watched ghosts of the mother they had raped come back for their souls. Unable to escape their reflections, they were forced to watch their slow, gradual end of times.

Unlike what it sounds like, this is a beautiful story of seismic erotica. It is a story about being where animals can be free. And not be afraid. To be. Where animals can be free.

[...]

Time passed and they remained now. They smiled, continuously thinking, feeling and observing themselves while afloat and while submerged in their sea.

The men recorded their wisdom in the most beautiful shells they could find and threw them back. The tide took these shells to shores behind the horizon and waited for people to pick them up. The roaring sounds in the shells when put close to one's ear were called the "Wisdoms of the Sea." They sounded like the hiss of the wind over the open waters. These wisdoms were not made for the mind. The sounds told the heart how it needed to beat, and it was customary to put them back after one's questions were answered. The wisdom of the sea was for everyone to hear.

It is said that the "Wisdoms of the Sea" were the first encounters with the language in which this story speaks. It is said that the land with no name will not rise again until it is the language by which we speak. Until then, everything was water. And the men floated. Their faces either facing the sky or facing the earth. Continuously taking in beyond what they can breathe. In this story, two men seem to be free.

Censorship

I have mentioned reasons earlier in this text why works that deal with Israel and the Israeli occupation in a manner that does not fit the Lebanese Active Fiction would both prevent the publication of said works, and get the author incriminated. This, once again

reiterates the need to create a networked infrastructure that would allow other voices and other perspectives to emerge with potency. It is where The Khan comes in. The Khan's infrastructure comes through this networking of works that will never stop, but rather accumulate and raise the value of their common fiction, to activate it.

What is interesting to note is that The Khan's end goal and the Lebanese government's is very similar when it comes to this particular scenario: it is to contribute in finding peace for the land of Palestine. They stop being in accordance when the ruling power wants hegemony over the methodology in reaching that end goal, and the desire to design it single-handedly, with the violence and premature eagerness of a heteronormative virgin. What if this peace and this freedom is liaised via a publically queer man, a queer woman or a queer organization, something outside the Active Fiction of the current Arab state, would the land be given back to the occupation with an apology and a "see you later"?

“come home”

The following excerpt is how The Perfumed Garden’s first volume, *An Autobiography of Another World*, ends. The text after that concludes this thesis by reiterating the importance of networking and place-making through The Khan using the first two prototypes of The Khan’s hotel rooms, the performance of Hekmat and an analogy with writing in a language that is not one’s mother tongue.

They say the crashing waves, as they eject up into the sky, reflect memories not meant to resurface, birthing holograms of things that must not be seen. I stare into the splashing waters. Mute. I see nothing, so I imagine things that I think I must not see. I replay imagined footages of my childhood, I replay rejections that may or may not have happened the way I project them on the angry, mute waves. I replay the first time I realized moments of hope and moments of failed hope could have similar endings. I replay the moment Palestine became free over and over, and I feel nothing.

The closest situation I get to feeling is a morbid repulsion from the city behind me, pushing me outwards towards the sea that doesn't want me either. It was somehow not really about being desired or not by either the city or the sea. It felt closer to a magnetic repulsion, like the city and I were two identical poles facing each other, trying to balance, trying to agree, thinking that coming closer, converging would set us both free.

But we stood there. We stood apart, a distance defined by the unwavering laws of physics. We stood there, numbed by the amount of energy spent at doing something undoable. "To accept that everything is possible, that nothing is impossible, comes only after your eyes can see and your heart can heal," she said.

A grandmother is someone who has earned her title. Not every mother of a mother with a child is one. Lineage helps. To witness the chain of generations starting from her vagina lights something in a woman that is superhuman, but being a grandmother is not exclusive to those who have offered their blood to generations to come. I have many grandmothers. I have two parents. My family extends out of lineage into the wilderness of random encounters that change everything. Change everything.

I have been taught about the city by one of my grandmothers who was taught about it by one of her husbands. "To accept that everything is possible," she said, "that nothing is impossible... comes only after your eyes can see and your heart can heal." To her, being one with the universe does not entail smelting. It does not entail everything melting into one. One is not an assembled unit. One breathes. One is breathing.

Most of my grandmothers agreed on that, and each had her own way of ensuring that I would eventually understand it enough to change the way I think about changing the world. It's rare that my grandmothers make time to meet for a coffee or a drink, but when they do, they turn into the wildest raconteuses. They lived moments of their distant pasts, reenacting expired heartbeats, virile heartbeats, mine and each other's. The looks on their faces were not looks you would see on them elsewhere. They were everything. They would take turns holding my face, grabbing my chin, squeezing and shaking my head, saying things like, "Every man becomes a better universe within a universe where every other man and thing would live better," and, "Your grandmother's right," and, "Your grandmothers are all wrong," and break ceramics made in countries that no longer exist.

I am numb, but I still feel the depth of the fact that my grandmothers are not immortal. They know it too. I cannot cry, but they can. After every one of those gatherings with all of them, and it's time to leave, one by one, they come to me and as they hug me, turn around and move away. They do not want to say goodbye but they want to. Their tears scar me. If there were any more blood in me, I would have bled. Everything around us is moving, but all there

is to me is a group of grand women that love me, telling me that they don't want to see me go.

All I can tell them is that I don't want to go. They look at me, most of them wearing black, mourning other grandchildren that never came back, prohibiting me from mourning them when they forever leave. We stare at each other. They wonder if they've taught me enough lessons to save me, enough lessons to make me come back safe. They're not sure. I'm not sure. How can one be sure?

How can one let go? How can one not? How can one not let go knowing that every step of the way is a chance into wilderness of random encounters that change everything? Change everything.

My grandmothers walk around in the room, look at me, look at each other, cry, and look at each other, and wonder how to say goodbye. They wonder how they look like, crying in black, to the young man they taught that everything happens for a reason. People come and go, but to each other, we are not people. We are everything.

To each other, we are everything.

The Rubber Tree's red tentacles shivered. Or it could have been a slight blowing of waves of wind into the creases between their branches. It was probably the latter.

Another perspective on borders

In the section that follows, I will describe the first two prototypes of The Khan's hotel rooms. In comparison to a project like The Wishing Fountain where the object is placed in open space, the hotel rooms of The Khan seem like fortresses. So in the context of a project like *The Perfumed Garden* that aims to confront borders through expanding pockets of intimacy, it is useful to elaborate on their form.

Instead of looking at The Khan's hotel rooms as enclosures, let's assume they are scaffolds to induce Active Fiction, to allow various constructions of time and place to occur. Uncannily, skin regeneration research acts as an ideal interlocutor for a conversation about borders in the context of The Khan's hotel rooms. After substantial wounds or burns, skin does not regenerate. It scars. Post trauma, skin (alive) is repaired by a mechanism that creates scar tissue (dead). While previous methods of treating post-traumatic skin loss were based on cosmetic surgery via skin grafts that still left scars on the borders of the graft, Dr. Ioannis Yannas and Dr. John F. Burke, MD "discovered the first scaffold with regenerative activity. This discovery focused on a biodegradable scaffold, a highly porous analog of the extracellular matrix based on type I collagen and incorporating structural features, the significance of which was not understood at that time."⁵⁴

The alteration of behavior that happens on a physiological level once the scaffold is introduced is intriguing when looked at within the lens of Active and Dormant Fiction. Typically, at the site of trauma, new cells are created on the injured membrane. The role of these cells is to close the wound. The cells crawl towards each other from opposite

⁵⁴ MECHE PEOPLE "Ioannis Yannas | MIT Department Of Mechanical Engineering <http://meche.mit.edu/people/faculty/YANNAS@MIT.EDU> Accessed March 12, 2017.

sides of the wound, as if pulling a curtain closed, and seal the wound with a scar tissue that is different in nature than skin tissue.

What Dr. Yannas is working on is a dermis regeneration template (DRT), referred to as a scaffold, that would alter the natural wound-closing mechanism, and induce another function yielding a different result. The scaffold, applied on the open wound, covering it entirely from side to side, is designed to create an environment that would confuse the cells migrating towards each other to close the wound. Alternatively, the scaffold provide a template for these cells to rest in place, somewhat halting their desire to reach each other.

Confronted with this new reality, the cells change nature. Once rested, the cells start generating new skin cells, instead of their desired end, to close the wound with a scar. With time, the scaffold disintegrates, and what remains is the regenerated skin. We can say that the scaffold's fiction altered the body's. We can also say that what was observed as a border of this scaffold (the dimensions of the tissue) were not actually borders, but only appear as such in the time between their production and their action. As such, The Khan's hotel rooms are as much sites of synthesis as the borderless The Wishing Fountain.

The Khan Hotel Rooms

The Khan hotel rooms offer a place to rest. Their fictional borders do not create enclosures where things are enclosed, but rather where fictions meet. One of the main elements of the hotel rooms is Hekmat, the concierge, a character from *The Perfumed Garden* that I perform in every iteration of this project. As concierge, Hekmat takes care of the rooms and entertains the guests. He enacts the tenderness that permeates

throughout *The Perfumed Garden*, one that gains power and traction not through creating a fortress, but through creating a field of intimacy.

Hekmat is a character in *The Perfumed Garden* that is always in motion. He appears in different forms, either a taxi driver, a concierge or an accidental mentor, and is one of the major ligaments in the life of many of *The Perfumed Garden's* characters. He is somewhat of a force majeure. Hekmat drives from Alexandria to Tripoli (1,500 km) in fifteen minutes. He escorts characters from different novels in one taxi ride. His unsolicited blurbs of wisdom diffuse conflicts before they happen. Hekmat is one of the least vividly described characters in *The Perfumed Garden*, yet most of the readers in the manuscript's focus groups identify with him quite strongly.

To this date, two of The Khan's hotel rooms have been executed as temporary performative installations, "0" and "1" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology⁵⁵ (USA) and Galerie Ravenstein⁵⁶ (BE) respectively. In these rooms, hotel rooms based on spaces and events in the novel, Hekmat functions as a concierge. He welcomes guests and weaves his fiction into their worlds.

0 at the Massachussets Institute of Technology, Cambridge (USA)

0 is the first of The Khan's hotel rooms. It was set in my studio at MIT, specifically in "the cube," a shared multipurpose studio space for students of the program of Art, Culture and Technology. The cube is a black space with no access to sunlight or natural ventilation. The studios are aluminum structure cubicles with PVC dividers and one glass façade overlooking the central atrium from a mezzanine. It is a hostile space that is not agreeable to the people that use it.

⁵⁵ 2016, The room is accessible via Airbnb on <https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/15424405>

⁵⁶ 2017, The room is accessible via Airbnb on <https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/17101078>

The challenge was to convert a studio in such a space into a desirable spot, a zone of intimacy, a lodging space where people would not be afraid to suspend their disbeliefs, spend some time together or with the novel, fall in love and make love. One decision that started while working on 0 was to transform the novel into wallpaper. In every iteration of the hotel rooms, the novel becomes a looping graphic pattern, transforming the reading experience from linear to spatial.

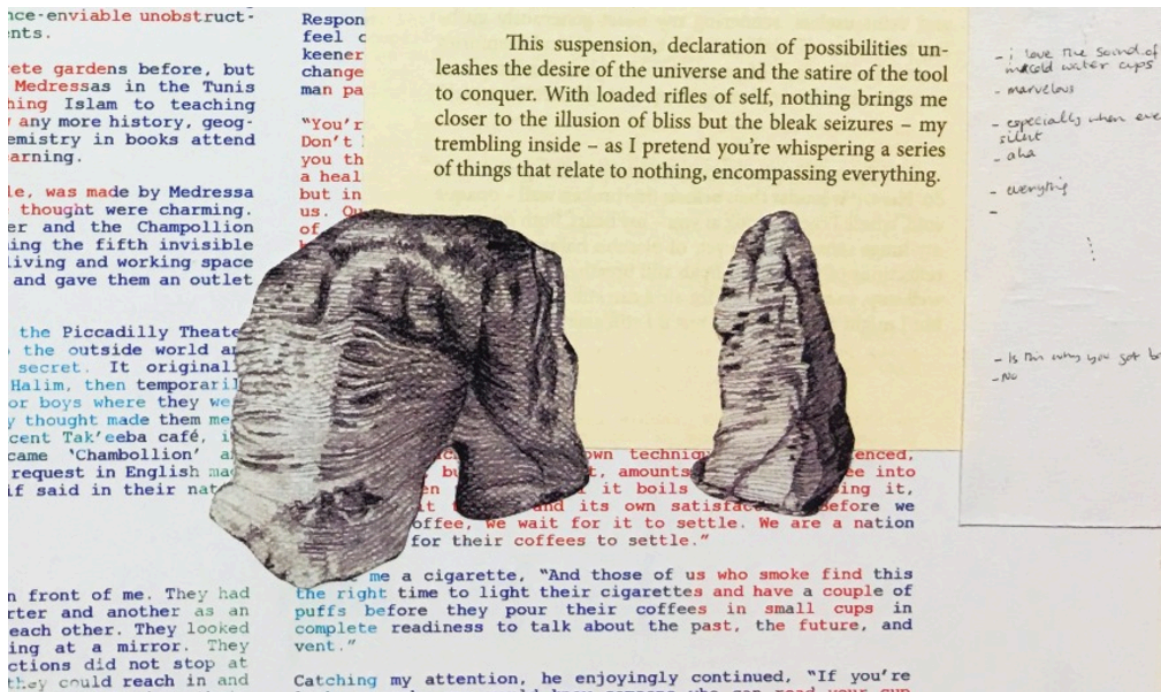


Figure 23 – A close-up of the wallpaper in “0” showing several layers of collage, resulting from an interactive writing process by Hekmat and visitors.

The wallpaper also acts as a canvas for Hekmat and the guests to edit and discover the novel differently throughout their stay. QR codes⁵⁷ that can be scanned with mobile phones lead the readers to audiovisual and interactive material from the universe

⁵⁷ Abbreviated from ‘Quick Response Codes,’ QR codes are barcodes that can be scanned via various mobile apps, creating visual shortcuts to hyperlinks and simple actions like sending text messages and adding contacts to phone address books.

of *The Perfumed Garden*. The wallpapers grow on a daily basis, depending on how they are being used, through illustrations, texts and collages.

Like the wallpaper represents the interconnectedness of *The Perfumed Garden's* fiction, the furniture and objects in the room are either from that world, or designed to expand it. One of the main objects in this room is the bed. The bespoke, red velvet mattress is designed to depict the topography of the Mediterranean seabed in the area of the Leviathan basin where a dispute between Lebanon on Israel over natural gas is ongoing. Through the subtle, intimate act of sleeping, it is an invitation to access an inaccessible border, the clash of two Active geopolitical Fictions.



Figure 24 – Map showing the Leviathan Mediterranean basin, whose seabed topography is used to design the bed.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ US Energy Information Administration, *Boundaries Of The Levant Basin, Or Levantine Basin (US EIA)*. 2017. Web. 15 Mar. 2017.



Figure 25 - The “0” bed under construction at MIT’s Mars Lab. Its shape is derived from GIS information of the bathymetry of the Levant basin in the area between Israel and Lebanon.



Figure 26 - The bed in “0” under four clocks, under which each is a time-zone label with the names of cities on them. The labels are made of chalkboard paint, in reference to the ever-changing geopolitical borders of the area. The time zones are “Palestine”, “Occupied Palestine”, “Israel”, and “Lebanon” all sharing the same time on the clocks.



Figure 27 - This image shows a close-up on the side of the bed, over a television showing a film about The Wishing Fountain. To the right is a magnifying beauty mirror reflecting a world desk globe with the Arab World's borders erased using a sharpie, the same technique "obscene" images and texts are censored in magazines in this currently bordered world.



Figure 28 - The desk globe is pictured next to book shelves with the pictures of Yuri Gagarin and Gamal Abdel Nasser, both patrons of the Baron Hotel in Aleppo. Also on the shelf is a white 3D printed prototype of the "0" bed.

Under the bed is a screen, connected to a DVD player and a selection of DVDs, each having a film produced or commissioned by The Khan, from obscure erotica to ruminations on public space. Next to the monitor is a magnifying beauty mirror reflecting a globe whose Arab World region is colored as one nation, removing all the borders. With 0, I also started The Khan library, a series of books that accumulates with every iteration through official purchases by The Khan and donations by its visitors.

Outside the details of the fiction that this room attempts to graft as an experience of entering the bowels of a novel, it creates friction with its hosting terrain. By setting base in my studio, the room is at odds with the fiction of exclusivity and control at MIT. While boasting an open campus, MIT keeps a tight grip of its premises. Sleeping is prohibited on campus as per MIT law. To access spaces such as the cube, one must have an MIT-issued identity card. Getting people to use 0 without a chaperone was almost impossible, so Hekmat embodied that leak, the Trojan Horse of *The Perfumed Garden* into MIT.

1 at the Galerie Ravenstein, Brussels (BE)

The second iteration of The Khan hotel rooms was much more elaborate. “1” was a freestanding structure in Galerie Ravenstein in Brussels, a covered semi-public space that is part of a passage connecting the Brussels Central Station to the BOZAR Theater Palace. The building has double mezzanine architecture, overlooking a central circular atrium under a huge glass dome.

Because of that consequentially Panopticon⁵⁹ structure of the Galerie Ravenstein's rotunda, I decided to experiment with intimacy under this perpetual surveillance, to push the limits of Hekmat's performance in the public. For that reason, "1," the space that Hekmat was going to live and sleep in for two weeks did not have a roof. It did not have a toilet either, a kitchen or a shower: a strategically lacking infrastructure that would allow me as a performer to annex its architecture to more equipped institutions and spaces that are close by. The room's lacking infrastructure granted Hekmat a full pass to the nearby BOZAR theater backstage for shower access, a card that also opened the backdoor of Galerie Ravenstein after midnight when its doors would shut down until five in the morning when the Central Station resumes its schedule. Hekmat was also given the keys to the toilets in Galerie Ravenstein and the offices of Moussem, my hosting institution for me to use their kitchen.



Figure 29 - View of "1" from the street leading to the first mezzanine overlooking the rotunda

⁵⁹ Devised by Jeremy Bentham, a Panopticon is a prison built radially so that a guard at a central position can see all the prisoners.

In terms of design, 1 engaged multiple scales of audiences. Visible from the street, the room appeared as an abstract polygon in the middle of the rotunda. “al-Haq,” the constellation of Truth from *The Perfumed Garden* and *The Naked* was graffitied on one of the walls visible from outside the Galerie. The crooked walls were designed to face Cairo and Tripoli respectively: Cairo, the city of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the architect of Arabism, and Tripoli, the city of The Khan, the infrastructure of another Arab World. This architectural gesture acts as a delegation of “Truth,” a proclamation of lineage and an admission of a new direction.

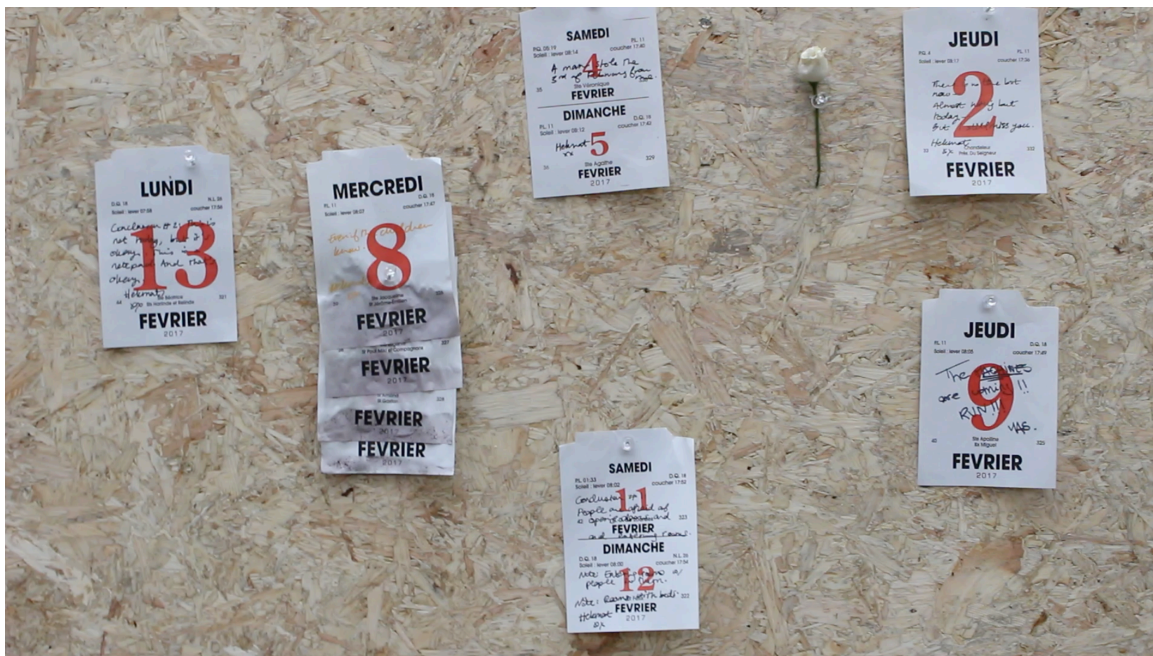


Figure 30 – Close-up of the exterior wall of “1” where Hekmat posted daily notes that he wrote on his calendar and signed them “Hekmat, xx”. He put a rose for every stolen note.

On closer look, passersby could read notes and observations written by Hekmat throughout his stay on a vintage-looking calendar. The door has a small number “1” on it, and upon entrance you would see a king size bed, sliced in half and treated as two twin beds with floral prints. To the left is a wall with a floral rendition of *The Perfumed Garden* as wallpaper, and a station with pens and craft tools for people to edit the novel.

The book collection migrated from 0, and now larger, expanded into a larger bookshelf. On the other sides of the exterior of the room was a bar modeled after the Baron Hotel bar in Aleppo, with pictures of the original, and framed scenes from the opening concert in The Beach House, in addition to an untuned piano accessible to passersby.



Figure 31 – The beds in “1” were made of one kind sized bed split in half and treated as two twin beds, one for Hekmat and the other for guests.

Although very exposed, “1” created a bubble of intimacy, which its visitors were either sucked into or jolted out. From the people that opened the door to “1” while I was inside the room, more than half took a peek inside and then shut the door quickly and ran away. It was as if they saw something that must not be seen. Either a man in a toilet, their parents having sex, a crime scene, etc. The rest, upon less than a minute of entering, revealed themselves within the breadth of a materialized autobiography. It was as if between the lines of a world’s open letter to them, that they could find themselves, and desire, somehow, for their story to become part of that.

That effortless desire to feel, inhabit and adopt another template, even un-intellectually, and somehow precisely un-intellectually, is fiction being activated.



Figure 32 - A visitor reads the wallpaper at “1”

To prototype cultural practices is to understand the vernacular, and use it. You cannot ask a lot or expect a lot from people when it comes to changing their rituals or asking them to adopt new ones. It cannot be an effortful performance. Hekmat played off that notion by being invested in his maximum exposure, and the fact that his lacking infrastructure actually gave him more access than a regular dweller of the city he was temporarily occupying.

At the core of “1” was that I, an Arab man of Muslim heritage am invited to be in the capital of the European Union, to say whatever I have to say, within the safety of cultural infrastructure and artistic patronage, when Arab men (and women) like me are denied access to

basic needs as they flee wars, and spark operations like the EU's "Mare Nostrum"⁶⁰ that even in its attempt to monitor and organize the flow of refugees into Europe through the Mediterranean, calls that sea "Our Sea"⁶¹ and chooses "tackle"⁶² as the most adequate verb to describe its relationship to them.

It is a situation very similar to The Wishing Fountain, where the relationship between people and art objects is mediated through a cultural imaginary that makes them favor these performances over interactions with people in need. In the case of The Wishing Fountain, it was throwing money in a wishing fountain, while refusing to give money to people in need. Here it was a veneration of the performer, because of the value of his artistic statement, and the reassurance that it is temporary and that it is "only" fiction.

As people gazed onto the Arab concierge from above, Hekmat gazed back and broke the surveillance dynamic. Hekmat owned that space. "1" was listed on Airbnb and hosted several guests that subscribed to the room's fiction, sleeping in public, within the brackets of a grafted fiction. With time, the room grew contextual fictions of its own. It was, for example, the only place in Galerie Ravenstein where one could smoke indoors. It attracted an awkward crowd of smokers that did not necessarily care about its intended fiction. Some got interested and others kept a distance with their new smoking room. Children on field trips discovered that the wooden floor surrounding the room made a very annoying echo in the entire building, so jumping on it became their favorite pastime.

The room's intimacy attracted all kinds of stories. An elderly couple, after looking at the bar, knocked on the room's door, entered and told me that they have been to the Hotel Baron in the fifties. Drunk teenagers flirted with their crushes on the hotel beds, and scribbled things they

⁶⁰ Ministero Della Difesa "Mare Nostrum Operation - Marina Militare,"

<http://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum> Accessed Mar 15 ,2017.

⁶¹ "Mare Nostrum" is Latin for "Our Sea", the name for the Mediterranean in the Roman era.

⁶² Ministero Della Difesa "Mare Nostrum Operation - Marina Militare,"

<http://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum> Accessed Mar 15 ,2017.

thought were provocative and obscene on the wallpaper. The wife of a retired diplomat decided to lecture Hekmat on the virtues of colonialism, that “you people needed and still need out help,” and a few days later baked Hekmat heart shaped cookies for Valentine’s Day. A passing visitor kept coming back bringing chocolate gifts and talking about her solidarity with Palestine. Hekmat threw a few dinners, some one-night stands and a lot of drinking in 1.

Within this zone of intimacy, the world of *The Perfumed Garden* expanded. Through the multiplicity of possible encounters with it, (sculpture, film, pictures, text, performance, events, library, online presence and lodging) bits and pieces of *The Perfumed Garden* that were combined to create 1, have now been perceived and consumed as fragments, where they will either be remembered or forgotten.

The Perfumed Garden: Hekmat, xx

Hekmat can do things that Raafat can’t. Just like writing in a language different than one’s mother tongue allows the writer an escape from the rules of the logic of his world as in the cases of Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad and others, performing Hekmat allows me to exceed the confines of myself, as a dweller of the existing Arab Active Fiction. In his essay, *Born Again in a Second Language*, Costica Bradatan writes:

“At a deeper, more personal level, writing literature in another language has a distinctly performative dimension: as you do it something happens to you, the language acts upon you. The book you are writing ends up writing you in turn. The result is a “ghostification” of sorts. For to change languages as a writer is to undergo a process of dematerialization: before you know it, you are language more than anything else. One day, suddenly, a certain intuition starts visiting you, namely that you are not made primarily out of flesh anymore, but out of lines and rhymes, of rhetorical strategies and narrative patterns.

Having done all this, having gone through the pain of changing languages and undergone the death-and-rebirth initiation, you are sometimes given – as a reward, as it were – access to a metaphysical insight of an odd, savage beauty. It is the notion that the world may be nothing other than a story in the making and that we, who inhabit it, may be nothing more than characters. Characters in search of an author, that is.”⁶³

⁶³ Costica Bradatan, "Born Again In A Second Language," *Opinionator* <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/born-again-in-a-second-language/> Accessed April 30, 2017.

It is this transformation that represents The Khan's mission to "prototype cultural practices" through activating *The Perfumed Garden's* fiction. It is this shift of language, not spoken or written natural language, but one that encompasses the "lines and rhythms" of being, the fiction by which we anchor ourselves in this world. It is to dematerialize, and then embody this new fiction, to activate it through performance and be an activator of an unraveling story.

Adopting another language is not a partial performance, but rather a personal overhaul, a shift of fiction. Polish novelist Joseph Conrad not only wrote novels in his adopted language, but he also wrote in English to himself in his diaries.⁶⁴ Samuel Beckett said he wrote in French to become "mal armé," to become *ill-equipped*, a phrase that also sounds like Mallarmé⁶⁵, *Stephane Mallarmé*, one of France's major poets of the second half of the nineteenth century. Beckett's adoption of another language is a desire to see in another perspective and a possibility of becoming someone else at the same time. This embedded otherness is also striking in another author who wrote in a second language, Vladimir Nabokov, who only accepted to conduct interviews with himself. He starts his 1967 self-interview in *The Paris Review* with "Good morning. Let me ask forty-odd questions." to which he replies to himself, "Good morning. I am ready."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ John Mullan, "Pourquoi écrire en anglais?" *The Guardian*, September 6, 2006, Accessed May 7, 2017

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/06/france.bookscomment>.

⁶⁵ Bradatan, "Born Again In A Second Language."

⁶⁶ "Vladimir Nabokov, The Art Of Fiction No. 40". 1967. *The Paris Review*. Accessed May 7, 2017 <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/vladimir-nabokov-the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov>

Essentially, “to perform reality until reality complies” means to perform until the self complies, to learn this new fiction until the fiction becomes intuitive, and then to learn how to live intuitively, consequently building another world based on this new adopted fiction. Activating fiction here takes the form of changing nature. It is the changing of the nature of the self and the nature of the world.

The future for this project is to further its political impact. The lover in this thesis is consciously more political than Barthes’s existential one. This lover is less interested in the inner monologue, and his utterances are in public. He speaks to the current world in the language of another fiction until it replies, complies or both. He tells the Arab world “*I want to be your story,*” as he attempts to rewrite it. He utters, “*Stay,*” knowing that to activate his fiction he must sustain its desire for him. He courts this world and says, “*Make a wish,*” and builds a site that affords speculation. “*Can You See Me?*” he asks when his beloved turns away, or when he wants the fiction of the beloved everywhere, “*Flood me!*” The lover wants the “*Body*” of amorous subject in everything, an invisible monument to his fiction. “*Penetrate*” says the lover and expects to penetrate and be penetrated, to change and be changed. He builds a home for himself through the act of loving and proclaims, “*Come home.*”

This lover wants his fictions to procreate, and like in the case of adopting another language, for these fictions to write him in return. In working on “*The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of Another Arab World,*” the fiction I started writing ended up writing me. Becoming Hekmat is the oxymoron of an *inevitable choice*: the author becoming one of his characters, a fictional character ill-equipped for reality enough to make forging the author’s fiction in it a necessity. Hekmat can do things that Raafat can’t, but the world

outside *The Perfumed Garden* is not designed for Hekmat yet. To make it his, he will need to court it, make it his story, ask it to stay, wish, see, flood and penetrate his body until it becomes home.

Through becoming Hekmat, the Arab world becomes *The Perfumed Garden*. The next step is to inhabit this autobiography by writing the sequel of "*The Perfumed Garden: An Autobiography of an Arab World*" as "*The Perfumed Garden: Hekmat, xx.*" After setting the landscape in the first part of this project, I am furthering my adoption of this new Active Fiction through performing Hekmat, one of its characters, in a first person fiction told through Hekmat's eyes and executed through Hekmat's hands. This new novel will explore the expansion of this world through his performance in a series of actions that would make it relevant inside the art gallery and outside of it, in parliaments, businesses, schools and in the streets.

AFTERTHOUGHTS...

Writing this thesis has been an opportunity to have many **conversations** with beautiful people, books and works of art and politics. As I wrap up this endeavor, I decided to slip in some afterthoughts for myself and for reader as a note of the **ongoingness** of this project.

Having the opportunity to sit down over the course of several months with gestures I have been immersed in for several years has been a valuable lesson in **desire**, and desires in **resonance**. As a spectator of myself in this process, I can see a transformation between someone that wanted to make something new, to someone that wants to make things in resonance, and that through intimate resonance, that these gestures of mine will find place for themselves in the world – or better yet, *make* place.

Yes, I will become Hekmat and Hekmat will become me, and we may or may not fuse into each other, but this act of becoming, being, is an act of resonance with people and things that I want around me, an act of making and nurturing **relationships** to create an intuitive space of existence to counter systems of violence going on in the time of writing this.

Let us for a minute, admit that writing a text and publishing it – in addition to being a generative process – is in fact a time capsule, a marker in time within the perspective of its writer. At the time of writing this, Donald Trump is the president of the United States of America, or as American media outlets like to call the position: leader of the Free World. Syria has been at war for more than five years, Palestine occupied for seventy, Lebanon plagued by a sectarian parliament, Egypt run by a military regime, Yemen bombed by Saudi Arabia, whose currently elected as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women while being one of the most backwards nations in women’s rights.

On the planet that we share, over twenty thousand people die daily of hunger or hunger-related issues, climate change is still debated as a conspiracy theory and people are afraid of each other based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, choices, etc. These afterthoughts are for me to reiterate a nuance of the context of writing this, things that were either left out of the thesis text, learned after having finished writing it, or some thoughts for further contextualization and consideration.

In these times of violence that have been preceded by times of violence I situate myself as an agent to disturb that cycle. If I will have the luxury to sit down again, to think of the gestures I would have immersed myself in throughout my life [project], I want it to read as a lover’s journey, that understood intimacy and family in many forms, a person that found beauty in resonance.

I am inspired by many, and although this thesis showcased a rigorous reflection on my own work, rather than a comparative discussion between my work and the work of others, I seek resonance in conversations, texts and encounters – and strictly believe that through the work of many, in resonance, that the cycle of violence can be interrupted.

I am particularly interested in artists that have spent their lives / are spending their lives in a form of blur between what is work and what is not – **artistry as a mode of being**. In his interview in *The Paris Review* ISSUE 220, SPRING 2017, **Elias Khoury** talks about memorizing *The Stranger (Camus)* and feeling like he was the author. He talks about memory, and the pain in his hands after had finished writing *White Masks* in three weeks. We see him in resonance with different writers like the prolific **Ghassan Kanafani** who “wrote as fast as he did, because he knew he didn’t have much time. He was going to die even if the Mossad hadn’t assassinated

him with a car bomb in 1972. His body was blown apart. His friends gathered the limbs off the sidewalk.”

The Paris Review has particularly delicious interviews, and as I write this I remember **Naguib Mahfouz**’s interview in ISSUE 123, SUMMER 1992 where he talks about the *Kharafish* group, “We first became acquainted in 1943: Mustafa Mahmud, Ahmad Baha al-Din, Salah Jahin, Muhammad Afifi. We would hold discussions on art and on current political issues. Kharafish means “hoodlum”—those types found on the fringes of demonstrations and who start looting at the first opportunity, they are the kharafish. Ahmed Mazhar [one of Egypt’s leading actors] gave us the name. At first we used to meet at Muhammad Afifi’s house. Sometimes we would go to a place called Sahara City, near the pyramids. Now we go to the film director Tewfiq Saleh’s place because he has a balcony on the tenth floor, facing the Nile. There are four or five of us left.”

This is a group of people that shaped Egyptian [and Arabic] culture throughout the forties and fifties, from writing lyrics and music for the likes of Oum Kolthoum to novels that would become Arabic classics. I think about the *Kharafish* as a model of intimacy, a form of **generative resonance** that is worth looking into in relation to the **Beat Generation**. **Kerouac’s *On the Road*** (1957) has always been a book I go back to, inspecting the production of iconic characters, prototypic models of youthful wander and lust that represented and inspired a cultural movement.

In my ongoing search, I am interested in looking for examples of **Hypertextual work in analogue**: what texts are written through places, movements, gestures in public as opposed to a literal hyperlink that is digitally clickable? **Could my work on *The Perfumed Garden* be considered a form of analog hypertext?**

I wonder about further explorations in writings about love, perhaps **Kurt Vonnegut**, **Susan Sontag** and **Stendhal**, but I reiterate the specificity of working with Barthes’s text as a structural and formal one. “**A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments**” offered a pattern for me to explore different forms of love as opposed to further understand love. I don’t think I am interested in understanding love.

“Encounters with people are always catastrophic”

Renée Green, in her March 28, 2017 “Artists on Artists” Lecture on **Chantal Akerman** and **On Kawara** quotes **Gilles Deleuze** as part of the introduction of her talk. This sentence resonates, as encounters have an intrinsic catastrophic nature to them, not just with people, but with anything. I find these catastrophes interesting to zoom into and explore: the meeting of fictions, the inevitable exchange, **the negotiation of space**, the potential coexistence or temporary contract.

On Kawara is one of those artists who worked on life-projects, most obviously with his “**Today**” (1966–2013) series, which record nothing but the date of the day they have been painted in, observing a strict set of rules, writing the date in the same white font and numbers on a monotone background. Similar to my interest in Conrad’s diaries, On Kawara’s performance **in solitude** makes this a potential point of inspection for my performance as Hekmat.

And “performance in solitude” reminds me of a link with love in **George Steiner**’s beautiful interview in *The Paris Review* ISSUE 137, WINTER 1995, where he mentions a sentence from a letter from Rilke to his wife, “**Remember that in a good marriage one becomes the loving guardian of the other’s solitude.**” In this interview, when asked about

nationalism, Steiner said he completely despises it, “**I believe we must learn to be guests of each other to survive.**” Within that context, I want to re-explore what it meant for me to write an **autobiography** of a land. Was it learning to be a guest of that land, with a prerequisite of this land learning to be me? Is this the role of the lover that comes in to substitute the role of the nationalist?

It is a question of embodiment and framing that I touch upon with the viewfinder metaphor in this thesis. It would be interesting to continue this reading with Steiner’s quote as a heading and **Barthes’s “Camera Lucida”** as a second interlocutor. Where can “A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments” and “Camera Lucida” intersect in the context of dwelling and writing?

I am also attracted to **Donald Bartheleme’s “Not Knowing”** and the situation when fiction exceeds what is physically possible in the context of thinking of its reifications. When **activating and manifesting fictions**, many will clash with reality at a fundamental level, like gravity or time. I wonder about the role of **simulation** in this case, and how simulations could act as reifying fictions. Can these acts of mimicking specific fictional conditions help in making them real? Through traversing, and experiencing, various possibilities through performative or digital simulation, can these clashes blur? I wonder if after a certain number of simulations, what is being simulated manifests itself as new Active Fiction.

In my bag now, I have **Costica Bradatan’s “Philosophy as a Literary Art: Making Things Up,”** which I have a feeling will be a great journey. It is one of those books that make me pause, half-close it, with my index finger as a book marker, and stare into the void, open it again, reread, and smile at the joy in rereading sentences that change every time they are read. His essay **“Born Again in a Second Language”** was revelatory in the conclusion of this thesis, and I recommend his writing in general.

Thank you for reading. My e-mail is not hard to find, and I am always up for a good chat.

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