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Winchester School of Art

WHO I AM, WHERE I COME FROM, AND WHERE I AM GOING

A Critical Study of Arab Diaspora as Creative Space

By

Aissa H. Deebi

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Abstract

This dissertation develops a critical examination of the Arab Diaspora culture as creative space in the field of the visual arts. Specifically, it examines the concept of diaspora as applied to the Arab experience, particularly its potential application as a creative space for Arab artists who live and work outside their countries of origin in Europe or America. It explores questions about the type of space for creation that is provided to an Arab immigrant artist within actual existing diaspora communities and the relation of that space to theoretical formulations of the diaspora position that postcolonial theorists developed in the 1990s. It also asks what the uses and limitations of these different models of diaspora might be for my own practice. To answer these questions, the dissertation takes a qualitative analytical approach meant to bring elements of cultural theory and criticism into interaction with my reflective practice as an artistic practitioner. It deploys a number of research methods including reviews of the existing literature, the use of interviews and questionnaires, a "study case" method, and the use of action research in the studio. As a result, the specificities of the history of Arab migration are highlighted. The sixty years of modern history in the Arab world and its Diaspora have produced a complex structure of Arab communities existing outside their place of origin. Two study cases of artists Hamdi Attia and Al Fadhil are used to represent "extreme cases" in which the Arab Diaspora position as a creative space is rejected outright. An analysis of the position and strategies of these artists demonstrates the conflicts inherent to conceptions of Diaspora culture as a model for individual artwork. Finally, the dissertation discusses specific artistic projects that I the researcher developed around the phenomenon of migration, and reflection upon their success and shortcomings as commentary on the reality of cultural displacement. All together, these cases suggest that Diaspora as a position (rather than a theory) does not provide a viable space for creative production for migrant artists.

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Aissa H.Deebi

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A critical study of Arab Diaspora as creative space

And the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

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3. where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
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6. where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. none of this work has been published before submission, **or** [delete as appropriate] parts of this work have been published as: [please list references]

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Aissa Deebi

New York

July 2011.

To Nasim Hanna Deebi

Who I Am, Where I Come From, and Where I Am Going

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Chapter I

Introduction

In the contemporary moment, art made by Arab artists and the notion of “diaspora,” or the geographic scattering of a formerly united population, seem to go hand in hand. A source no less authoritative than the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Timeline of Art History remarks,

Ongoing conflict and violence mark the twentieth-century history of many countries in the region,” with “exile and dislocation...common experiences among artists...Initially, many artists in the [resulting] diaspora considered their exile temporary and insisted they would return home once conditions were favorable. However, since the 1990s, artists have become less troubled by issues of locality and work freely between two and sometimes three cultures. Diaspora artists are setting the trend for contemporary art in the region; those whose work is acknowledged by Western art institutions are celebrated at home. Whether working in the diaspora or in their respective countries, artists are forging a new consciousness that is both universal and humane.¹

This dissertation is a critical examination of the concept of diaspora as applied to the Arab experience, particularly as a description of the creative practice of Arab artists who live and work outside their countries of origin in Europe or America. The concept has proven popular in critical writing, artist statements, and general journalistic surveys of art from the Arab region. Yet the historical and ideological bases of its application in a statement like “Diaspora artists are setting the trend for contemporary art in the region” have remained unexamined. Why has the concept of diaspora proven so amenable to the curatorial and collecting policies of Western art institutions? Why has the diaspora location been linked to a “universal and humane” consciousness? What are the implications of doing so? Because I am positioned among the group of migrant artists

¹ Salwa Mikdadi, “West Asia: Postmodernism, the Diaspora, and Women Artists” entry, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd_dias.htm#ixzz1TQv6VV67

who have left my geographic boundaries for another position elsewhere, my investigation of the question of the application of the diaspora concept is brought back to bear on my own practice and process through the techniques of “reflective practice.”²

1.2 Definition and Conception of Diaspora

This section provides an overview of the multiple definitions and different type of usages for the concept of diaspora. The purpose of this section is to articulate the conceptual grounding out of which I developed my research question and approach.

1.2.1 Traditional and New Definitions

The term diaspora derives from the Greek term for “dispersion,” or “to disperse.” The Oxford English Dictionary traces its first usages to the Bible, specifically John vii, 35, where it is used to identify the states of the Hellenistic Jews after the Dispersion, i.e. the whole body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after the Captivity.³ Over time, the concept’s application in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries expanded to include use to describe Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion.⁴ Brent Hayes Edwards has described the conditions for these three “classic” diasporas, i.e. the paradigmatic diaspora condition accorded to the Jewish, the Greek, and the Armenian diasporas only. As he suggests, these “classic” diasporas are all understood to have their origin in the scattering and uprooting of communities, a history of forced and therefore traumatic departure, and the sense of a still present relationship to a “homeland.”⁵ This relationship to the homeland is typically maintained and mediated through the dynamics of collective memory and the politics of “return.” Put another way, as the *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* suggests, in diaspora, a sense of difference in a new (or non-homeland) location is maintained because of the notion of dispersal, in which a population that ought to be whole and contiguous is actually dispersed across space.⁶ Hayes Edwards has observed that a condition of diaspora is also typically the production

² Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

³ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second edition, 1989; online version September 2011), s.v. “diaspora, n.” <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52085> (accessed November 12, 2011).

⁴ *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2009), s.v. “diaspora,” <http://www.credoreference.com/entry/routencsca/diaspora> (accessed November 13, 2011).

⁵ Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Uses of *Diaspora*” in *Diaspora Memory Place: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z*, edited by Salah M. Hassan and Cheryl Finley (Prestel, 2008), 86-87. Hayes Edwards draws his summary from the study of Kachig Tololyan, “Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*: Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1996).

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*.

of an orientation towards a real or imagined homeland, what some have termed a "diasporic consciousness." As will be discussed, this desire for a return, and the continual production of an imagined perfect and unfragmented homeland – what Stuart Hall has dubbed a "sacred homeland" – is a key component of the discourses of Arab Diaspora communities in the United States and Europe.

Over time, diaspora came to find application in a number of instances other than the Jewish, Greek, or Armenian diaspora communities, including the African diaspora living in the Americas and/or Britain. It was the African diaspora in Britain that, in the 1980s and 1990s, emerged as a particularly productive location for new approaches to cultural studies, particularly those interested in questions of identity that formed outside the bounds of traditional nation-states. Through the cultural studies of figures like Stuart Hall, diaspora was identified as a conceptual category that might allow researchers to analyze identity without the a dominant emphasis on ethnicity or minority/majority relations within nation-states. Instead, to speak of diaspora was to emphasize transnational connections, influences, histories, and imagined identities.⁷ Because a diaspora community takes a necessarily decentralized form, it forced the researcher to engage with decentered and transnational circuits as components in the complexity of culture.⁸ Or, as anthropologist James Clifford suggested in his influential 1994 review of models of diaspora, certain articulations of diasporism were conceived as "quests for nonexclusive practices of community, politics, and cultural difference."⁹ Exemplary of the trend was the launch of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in 1991, edited by Khachig Tololian, who wrote in the opening editorial that "diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment."¹⁰ Tololian announced that the term diaspora was to be understood as working with a larger semantic domain that included "words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community."¹¹ In this new sense of diaspora, it is movement between distinct communities that became most important. Different locations that are separated geographically were studied as single communities that the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information brought together.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Hayes Edwards observes this for the case of the "African diaspora." See "The Uses of *Diaspora*," 87.

⁹ James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (Aug. 1994), 302.

¹⁰ Tololian, "The Nation State and its Others: In Lieu of a Preface," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 4-5, quoted in *Ibid.*, 303.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Also relevant to different applications of the diaspora concept are the ways in which “cultural identity” has been conceived, and how it was reconceived in the 1990s through the studies of Stuart Hall and others. As Hall has noted, there are at least two ways to think about cultural identity. The first defines it in terms of “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’...which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.”¹² Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in the post-colonial struggles that have and are still reshaping the world; these struggles included an insistence on overthrowing the artificial ‘selves’ that had been imposed during colonialism in order to restore a true self. The second, related view is the more analytically useful one and the view that most post-colonial cultural criticism has sought to develop. This second view of cultural identity recognizes that within any apparent points of similarity, there are also ruptures and discontinuities. In this sense, cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” rather than of “being.” Rather than being grounded in a project to recover (or sustain) the past, one that is complete and simply waiting to be found, this conception of cultural identity understands identity as a name given to a way to position oneself in the past and the future. Stuart also makes an observation about culture as a way of becoming that proves useful for an investigation of diaspora culture as a creative space. In his writing about the African diaspora in the Caribbean in particular, Stuart describes how the slaves who, during the Imperial nineteenth century had been uprooted from their different countries, actually came from quite different tribal communities, villages, languages, and gods in Africa itself, and so arrived in the Caribbean as completely different from each other. Only once they came into the displayed space of the diaspora, were they unified and re-presented as black, as African, and as the rightful inheritors of an unchanging, authentic, culture – a culture that never existed within the bounds of the original African geography. As will be discussed below, a similar phenomenon, in which diaspora bestows a new coherence on previously divergent characteristics, may be observed in the case of Arab diaspora culture as well.

In the realm of the art world, after postcolonial theorists began to redefine diaspora as a keyword that signalled an indefinite or flux place, critics began to use the term diaspora to identify a position of artistic criticality.¹³ “Diaspora” signaled an important “between-ness” that stymied or criticized dominant cultural norms. Approaches

¹² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222.

¹³ As in the “West Asia: Postmodernism, the Diaspora, and Women Artists” entry, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, cited above. But also see Stuart Hall, “Black Diaspora Artists: Three ‘Moments’ in Post-war History,” *History Workshop Journal* 61 (Spring 2006): 1-24.

to diaspora that took it up as a liberating concept typically applied it to non-European artists – including Arab artists – living in Europe (or America) outside their countries of origin who were participating fully in the international art world. However, these attempts to deploy diaspora in a positive and antiessentialist manner have not always proven analytically successful. As the entry on diaspora in the *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* notes, "if diasporic populations do not necessarily share an orientation towards a common homeland, if they are defined first and foremost by their internal heterogeneity, hybridity and local specificities, what then holds them together, beyond an assertion of shared categorical difference?" As the entry concludes, to identify some kind of categorical difference without according that difference any substance becomes more essentialist than otherwise. Sometimes the "new diaspora" can prove as essentialist as the "old ethnicity."¹⁴

1.2.2 Conceptual distinction: Diaspora vs. diaspora

For the purposes of this dissertation, a distinction will be made between the application of the category of diaspora that emphasizes cultural communities and cultural positions on the one hand, and the more straightforwardly descriptive sense of diaspora as linked to geographic dispersal on the other. For the former, an uppercase 'D' will be used at the start of the term Diaspora, thus emphasizing the imagination of a unified identity. For the latter, whenever a concept of dispersal is addressed generally, the lowercase 'd' will be used.

1.2.3 Application of Arab Diaspora in Contemporary Art Discourse

It is the contemporary post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha who provided one of the most influential formulations of Diaspora as a location of culture, and he developed it as a liberating position meant to lead beyond the straitjacket of a single identity. In the introduction to his 1994 book *The Location of Culture*, he cites "diaspora" as one of the many new boundary locations that characterize the postmodern condition. These boundaries, in his words, are the "the place from which something begins its presencing."¹⁵ In Bhabha's study, Diaspora offers one among a number of positions that offer the possibility of a "Third Space," a place of enunciation from which the false "mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code" may be destroyed and a non-essentialist version of culture be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), introduction.

realized.¹⁶ He frames Diaspora as a third space because of the location of the figure who lives in Diaspora as neither positioned wholly in the home country nor in the host country. In this sense, Bhabha offers an analysis that is linked to classical post-colonial studies which have located Diaspora as an outcome of the power relationship between the colonial and the post-colonial.

Bhabha's ideas have found wide application in the art world because they outline an alternative to the mainstream, and versions of his positive view of Diaspora have become widely used in the interpretation of the work of innumerable migrant artists and artworks (as well as numerous theme exhibitions and their promotion). However, what has not been acknowledged sufficiently is the way in which a formulation like Bhabha's of Diaspora as a "Third Space" actually remains acceptable to the dominant cultural milieu and offers little viable critique of it. For example, that Bhabha's concept of Diaspora proves not only simplifying but also ideologically problematic in application to artists can be seen in the structure and organization of his analysis of the work of Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, particularly her video *Ramallah/New York*, a two-channel video installation that juxtaposes views of two Palestinian travel agencies, one in Ramallah and one in New York (Fig. 1-1). The figure and setting in each 'side' of the video resembles the other, suggesting a constant toggling between similar conditions of displacement and travel across borders. In a lecture that he gave at Berkeley in 2008, Bhabha introduced Jacir's work through an analysis of her position and politics as an artist, endorsing her because of her status as what he called a "non-nationalist Palestinian artist." He emphasized that although she is very committed to the Cause (he doesn't specify what cause, exactly it is), she is not an artist who clings to a false notion of authenticity or national chauvinism, and – crucially – therefore not threatening to an American audience. To support that point, he then introduced her as an exemplary Diasporic artist.¹⁷ Bhabha's discussion of Jacir came at the end of his talk, however. His strategy leading up to it was the following. He began by mentioning the series of paintings by Latin American artist Botero of Abu Ghraib prison (Fig. 1-3) as a way to suggest that humanist artists are engaged in projects about memory. Next, he segued into a discussion about the Jewish experience of the Holocaust which, as the center point of Bhabha's presentation, comes to serve as the normative experience of trauma

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, "On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture," talk presented on April 21, 2008, as part of the Townsend Center for the Humanities lecture series at Berkeley University, California. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4>

and to introduce Jewish history as a touchstone. Indeed, given that most dictionaries define the word Diaspora as "the Jewish communities outside Israel," and Judeo-Christian mythology remains the prevailing basis for an understanding of the process of "dispersal or scattering," there also remains a feeling in much liberal discourse that whenever the Palestinian tragedy is invoked, equal recognition must be paid to the Jewish tragedy in the interest of balance.¹⁸ Only at the end does Bhabha conclude with a discussion of Jacir, reminding the audience that he is certain that she is not a nationalist and instead framing her work within his understanding of Diasporic aesthetics. As a way to endorse her relevance to everyone (rather than just Palestinians), he shifts her to a new position, locating the artist in a cosmopolitan center, i.e. saying that she is "based in New York." Such a use of the category of "Diaspora" as a category of positive qualities within the dominant social system, however, does little to provide a meaningful context for understanding actual works of art and cultural production.

In its application as a curatorial concept applied in the organization of exhibitions, the term diaspora has not been maintained with any real commitment to specificity either. We can start from a particular example, the 2003 exhibition *Shatat: Arab Diaspora Women Artists*, curated by Salah Hassan and produced as part of the joint program of the Colorado Art Galleries and The Department of Fine Arts, Visiting Artist Program, University of Colorado at Boulder.¹⁹ The exhibition promised to present contemporary work by women artists within the Arab diaspora, then working in England, Switzerland, Germany and the United States, that explored the experience of Diaspora through visual art practice. The four artists were said to explore a dialogue of translating cultural difference, questions that have become pertinent within international and local debate around globalization and its apparent increased 'blurring' of geographical and cultural boundaries. As Arabs living elsewhere, the artists are described as thinking about "what is it to be an Arab in Germany, Switzerland, Britain or the United States? What is it to be an Arab woman? What are the complexities of witnessing the Intifada between New York and Ramallah?," etc. Finally, because the artists are also women, their work is highlighted because it picks up the discriminatory discourses of racism, gender identities, histories and contemporary political concerns for critical examination. In effect, the

¹⁸ Zahia Smail Salhi, "Introduction," *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, edited by Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Newton (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 2. Also see Nikos Papastergiadis's writings on Diaspora and the need to leave the Judeo-Christian basis behind.

¹⁹ SHATAT: Arab Diaspora Women Artists.

http://www.colorado.edu/cuartmuseum/ex_03.01.30_shatat.html. *Shatat* is the arabic term for dispersal.

approach taken by this exhibition and others that focus specifically on the issue of Diaspora, particularly those that link to the Arabic term *shatat* as meaning “diaspora” in the English sense, makes it a precondition that the artists included make work that can only speak about the experience of Diaspora. Thus, we see Salah Hassan’s introductory text conflates the category of the exotic, ethnic, and gendered, aligning all spaces outside the mainstream – from the “female” space to the “Diasporic” space – as if the same non-normative position. Ultimately, this strategy keeps Diaspora as the only space where an Arab artist who works ‘bi-culturally,’ or between multiple locations can be located. Moreover, curatorial discourses around Diaspora often seem to assume that movement between places – because it is undertaken by a hyphenated Arab subject (not a cosmopolitan European artist) – is inherently painful and therefore the only possible theme out of which their art can emerge.

A show at the Queens Museum of Art in 2007, titled Generation 1.5, offers a different, if nonetheless also imprecise and ultimately simplifying approach. It featured eight migrant artists who had immigrated to another country while in their teenage years, i.e. artists who had first gained experience in a foreign country as neither an adult immigrant, nor an American-born subject. Its curatorial texts advanced the premise that the relationship of these “1.5” artists to their adopted country is necessarily different than that of the one who migrated when much younger, or the one who migrated when much older. These ‘not entirely doubled’ artists were described as especially astute witnesses to the real conditions prevailing in both locations, intimate enough with a culture to understand it deeply but alienated enough to respond critically. However, such a celebration of the incomplete assimilation of these migrant artists ends up operating much like Bhabha when he suggested that Emily Jacir’s particular insight into the in-between quality of Palestinian Diaspora had significant non-national applicability. Here the Generation 1.5 concept plays up the Romantic notion of the artist as a detached observer whose inability to integrate or “pass” ensures the authenticity of his creation. Interestingly, this exhibition also included Emily Jacir, displaying a series of photographs she had taken of herself in German public squares using surveillance camera technology – documenting her process of inserting herself into a new criteria of visibility. What the approach to the exhibition has not accommodate, however, is the actual path of Jacir’s migration or the consequences of her migrant position in her approach to her work. In her case, she was born in Riyadh (though never says so), brought up for some time in Saudi Arabia, has a U.S. passport and therefore the ability to return to Palestine, and maintains studio space in Ramallah, New York, and Rome. Analysis suggests that the

particular positioning to which her work has been subjected does converge upon a cultural Diaspora as a new ethnicity. While her work does not resemble much of the work produced within Arab Diaspora discourse (discussed further in Chapter Three), because she has assimilated to the dominant aesthetics of the global contemporary art world, her body of work is – contrary to what Bhabha asserted to his audience of American academics – sufficiently Palestinian nationalist in character that her work is routinely included in the histories of contemporary Palestinian art that are produced within Palestine.²⁰ In other words, the conditions of her assimilation to settings outside her Palestinian homeland are complex and not straightforwardly either Diasporic or not, nor does the application of the category "Diaspora" carry a straightforwardly positive value.

This formulation of Diaspora as a unifying position continually produces a set of assumptions regarding cultural identity that positions the work of these artists outside of their own unique experience of migration and the conditions that prompted it. In the case of the 2003 Shatat exhibition, when Emily Jacir, a Palestinian artist who lives between three cosmopolitan cities and deals with the subject of Palestine, is placed together with the work of the German-Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna, in which she is dealing with issues of the indeterminacy of identity together, and together with Zenib Sedira, whose work is a direct production of her multiple migration experiences, then Diaspora loses its utility as a category to describe an artistic position. In each case, artistic production requires a careful, individual reading outside the clichés associated with the generic conception of "Diaspora."

1.3 Methods and Context

This section identifies points of positioning for the research conducted. It identifies the research questions posed as well as the nature and content of the sources used to identify the research questions. It also outlines the changes within the research question and approach that occurred as a result of the initial research process. Finally, it discusses and justifies the research methods deployed in order to address the research questions. This dissertation research at the outset involved a number of research methods and techniques for data collection and assessment, including reviews of the existing literature, the use of interviews and questionnaires, and a "study case" method. Concomitantly, it was pursued and expanded through the use of action research on the

²⁰ Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), and Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art, from 1850 to the Present* (London, San Francisco, Beirut: Saqi, 2009).

part of the researcher-practitioner, enacted over the series of new artworks discussed in Chapter Five. The role of the researcher as practitioner is described with a specific discussion of the place of tacit knowledge in the research process.

1.3.1 Research Question

When this research started, it was developed with my personal experience as an immigrant artist living in New York as a starting point, including in-field observations of the Arab-American identity as a creative space for producing new artwork. Throughout the 2000s, there were easily observable cases of artists of Arab descent who lived and worked in the United States receiving special recognition or promotion as "Diaspora artists," yet no consensus regarding what a Diaspora artist was, nor whether it was useful as a marker of either identity or aesthetic or market value. Moreover, the specific category of the Arab Diaspora did not seem to be well explored. Very few Arab immigrants in the United States, whether artists or not, seemed to declare themselves to be living or working in a diasporic situation. This gap in verifiable knowledge about the Arab Diaspora as an applicable creative space suggested that further research was necessary. Three related research questions were raised: What kind of space for creation is provided to an Arab immigrant artist within actual existing diaspora communities? Does this space differ from the diaspora position that postcolonial theories have identified? What are the uses and limitations of these different models of diaspora for my own practice?

1.3.2 Sources

This dissertation is designed around a qualitative (rather than quantitative) approach meant to bring cultural analysis and criticism into questions of artistic production and reception. The theoretical analysis offered by existing literature was used as a grounding basis for studio-based research with the purpose of identifying a starting context for experimentation leading to tacit knowledge about Diaspora. It will therefore be useful to briefly give an overview of the content of the findings from the initial literature review conducted around the terms "migration," "exile," and the notion of cultural displacement as dealt with by books and journal articles devoted to the study of existing Arab diaspora communities.

The specific category of the Arab Diaspora is not well explored, with no single definition yet in common use. There does already exist a full vocabulary of terms in Arabic to describe related conditions of dispersion and/or transit and movement from a

place of origin to a place of remove or migration which contribute to the cultural resonance of the Diaspora position. Technically, the Arabic word for diaspora is *shatat*. Shatat has the meaning of something that was complete, that has been dismantled into fragments as a result of a force. It has strong connotations with the Palestinian narrative, connotations established in popular media such as songs that sing the story of “shatat ahli,” the scattering of my people.²¹ That this concept tends to appear in songs and poems already suggests the broad cultural significance of Diaspora as a position. The other key notion related to Diaspora, is that of exile, or *manfa*. As Edward Said has formulated, exile is a position that is an outcome of a political, cultural, physical displacement in which the option of return is closed.²² The notion of exile also retains particularly strong links to the Palestinian case, and it carries a connotation of critical or even tragic poetics. As Said puts it, when “homecoming is out of question,” the pathos of exile is elicited, manifesting in the “loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth.”²³

There are also a set of immigrant conditions that Arabic-language studies of modern culture have sometimes described as a specifically Arab cultural Diaspora. Typically termed “*Mahjar*,” meaning ‘émigré location,’ this group goes back to the late nineteenth century and is historically recognized and framed through the work of Lebanese-American writer, philosopher, and poet Gibran Khalil Gibran and colleagues who wrote Arabic literature and created new drawings and paintings during their prolonged residence in North and South America.²⁴ Indeed, the Arabic term *mahjar* is frequently translated as “Arab diaspora” (thus confusing it with *Shatat*). However, the Arabic term *mahjar* is derived from *hijra*, which means migration, and thus as a term it connotes a sense of dynamic movement that differs from Diaspora in the contemporary sense described in *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. In the period of the 1960s, Arab intellectuals who began to highlight the concept of Nahda, or intellectual awakening, emphasized figures like Gibran and others considered part of the *al-mahjar al-thaqafi* (cultural migrancy/diaspora), because of their apparently privileged positions

²¹ For example, Syrian singer Sabah al-Fakhri singing “ya Ghazali,” which is a song about displacement, exile, and love using classical Arabic poetry as lyrics that, in the performance and its context, is transposed into a sad song for the post-1948 Arab nation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyriUHQiAwc>

²² Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁴ See the special “Arab American Literature” issue of *MELUS*, volume 31, number 4 (Winter, 2006). Especially Tanyss Ludesch, “From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature,” 93-114.

as figures who moved between the East and West. In other words, the Arabic term *mahjar* does have some relationship to the Arab Diaspora position in that it is also understood as a position outside the homeland. Yet its applicability should be recognized as specifically limited to nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and reformist culture in the context of Arab intellectual history.

Within the literary rather than political register, there has also been posited a traditional Arab philosophical interest in a conception of alienation, or *ghorba* in Arabic, which resembles in certain aspects qualities of Diaspora but is distinct from it. For example, the writings of the great poet Ibn Arabi (1165-1240 AD), who described his feelings of loneliness while traveling far from his homeland of Moorish Spain. Ultimately, however, he concludes that these feelings are not fully valid as an acknowledgement of actually estrangement and argues instead that the only real alienation, or *ghorba*, is the position of being cut off from God. For a Sufi like Ibn Arabi, being in Baghdad or in Cairo makes no significant difference, for he does not fear distance or separation. As described in an article on the poet's writings, Ibn Arabi "actually feels home [in these places] because he feels being one with the beloved. The beloved is God...it is obvious that exile is ultimately irrelevant to his well-being because the regions he calls his 'abode' are not even his land of birth or of his ancestors."²⁵ In this formulation, exile is not a geographical but rather a legal condition within an Islamic setting. It is estrangement with regard to the formalized discourse of ethics and religious law."²⁶ This definition of *ghorba* should be acknowledged because Muslim Arabs living in non-Islamic countries have sometimes cited it as an aspect of the Diaspora position. Other than the appeal of its poetics, however, it is not a dominant way that diaspora has been conceptualized.

Thus, the question of the composition of Arab Diaspora seems to remain undefined within the body of literature dealing with existing Arabic-language discourses around immigrant culture. The recent edited volume *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, attempts to distill Arab Diaspora into a relatively straightforward definition hinging upon the condition of geographic displacement alone. Its editor Zahia Smail Salhi suggests that as a term, Arab Diaspora "encapsulates all Arabs living permanently in countries other than their country of origin."²⁷ Such a broad definition is

²⁵ Walid El Khachab, "Sufis on exile and *Ghorba*: Conceptualizing Displacement and Modern Subjectivity," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 30 (November 2010), 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁷ Zahia Smail Salhi, "Introduction," *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, edited by Salhi and Ian Richard Newton (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 2. It must be noted that her text uses the capital 'D' diaspora, for reasons that are not specified in her text.

generally descriptive of a certain group of persons "of Arab origin," and so is in theory applicable to those Arab artists currently living and working in the United States or Europe. Yet Salhi goes on to extend this basic assessment of Arab Diaspora by assigning to it a set of cultural and emotional conditions, including her argument that subjects in the Diaspora "all keep an idealized image of home as a paradise that they are forced to flee, and never manage to entirely adopt their new dwellings," as well as the suggestion that persons in the Arab Diaspora share a psychological profile characterized by feelings of solitude, estrangement, loss, and longing.²⁸ Thus, it was possible to identify a pattern across studies of Arab Diaspora. Almost all studies engage the concept using the lens of culture rather than the lens of geography alone. Such descriptions ultimately provide purely qualitative rather than solidly analytical findings because they tend to take "feeling" as their basis rather than any verifiable factor. For example, because Salhi's assessment of the Arab Diaspora focuses on people and their mindsets, it does not articulate the distinctions between the different historical circumstances that produce and enforce the permanence of the Arab Diaspora condition she describes, nor the implications of that permanent position as "other" or "outside." These types of approaches to the Diaspora position, as glimpsed in the literature on Arab Diaspora, are consistent with my early hypothesis, based upon participatory observation, that immigrant Arab artists who encounter the Diaspora position are encountering a rhetorical space having to do with identity and dominant culture. The collected data began to suggest new paths for the direction for the research.

1.3.3 Research Methods

This research at the outset involved a number of research methods and techniques for data collection and assessment, beginning with reviews of the existing literature. In its early stages, it also utilized a questionnaire. Because of the dearth of publications that dealt with the issue of art-making and the Arab Diaspora, a set of immigrant artists working in the United States and elsewhere were contacted and asked to describe their experiences and self-identification with Diaspora culture (or lack thereof).²⁹ Each subject was asked to define his or her artistic practice, methods and concepts in his or her own words; asked whether or not they thought of themselves as an exilic artist; whether he or

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ Samia Halabi (Palestinian artist in New York); Walid Raad (Lebanese artist in New York); Yusef Lemonde (Egyptian artist in Basel); Hamdi Attia (Egyptian artist, multiple locations); Al Fadhil (non-citizen artist); Bashir Makhoul (Palestinian artist and professor in Winchester); Nasser Soumi (Palestinian artist in Paris); Zeina Khalil (Lebanese artist in New York); Doris Bitar (Lebanese artist in San Diego).

she could position themselves as part of the Arab American cultural scene (or other Diasporic scene, when relevant); and how their work was positioned in relation to September 11th. These initial questionnaires were then followed up upon in as interviews in person or over Skype. Interviewing is one of the key tools in qualitative research.³⁰ Interviews are considered to be complex and not entirely objective source, particularly because of their subjective nature. As Bryman and Cassell observe, the interview is not a static event, but an active, dynamic, process where both the interviewer and the interviewee are co-constructing meaning.³¹ The research method employed in this dissertation followed the recommendations of Roulston et. al. and used the interview not as a setting for contact with objective truth or reality, but rather as a site in which interviewers and interviewees co-construct data for research projects.³² No standard interview protocol was followed, rather individual testimonies were collected and then reviewed for general patterns of impressions that allowed the researcher to perform more focused searches in published literature.

The disparate experiences that each subject described, and the lack of consensus regarding the meaning of a position like "exilic" versus "migrant" demonstrated that it was necessary to narrow the focus of the dissertation. Thus, it was determined that the final report should follow a "study case" method. The present dissertation examines two instances of an immigrant artist's self-positioning upon arrival in a host country in addition to my own. In each case, that of myself, that of Egyptian artist Hamdi Attia, and that of non-citizen artist Al Fadhil (originally from Iraq), the artist under examination underwent his displacement by choice. Case study research has been recognized as a versatile approach to research in social and behavioral sciences.³³ Case studies consist of detailed inquiry into a bounded entity or unit – such as a company, or an individual – in which the researcher either examines a relevant issue or reveals phenomena through the process of examining the entity within its social and cultural context. The case study may be of particular benefit whenever the researcher wants to know how a particular program or approach works, or why it has been carried out in a particular way. Because this study is of an exploratory nature, conducted with

³⁰ Alan Bryman and Catherine Cassell, "The researcher interview: a reflexive perspective", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (2006), 41 – 55.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kathryn Roulston, Kathleen deMarrais, and Jamie B. Lewis, "Learning to Interview in the Social Sciences," *Qualitative Inquiry* 9 (2003), 645.

³³ Two different entries on "case study" in reference works about research methods were consulted: *Encyclopedia of Research Design* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2010); and *Key Concepts in Social Research* (London: Sage UK, 2004).

the intention of producing a qualitative and explanatory result, the case study is well suited. Here, each study case examines one instance of an immigrant artist rather than exilic artist and the implications of his conscious movement to a new location as an adult. Each one of these artists rejected Diaspora as a creative space, and each negotiated an individual understanding of Diaspora that saw it as a new mainstream and a hegemonic discourse at counter-purposes to good artwork.

It should also be noted that the issue of bounding the 'case' is of foremost concern in research design involving the case study.³⁴ For the purposes of this dissertation, the cases were bound in two ways. First, the cases were confined to single individuals: artist Hamdi Attia, and artist Al Fadhil. Secondly, these individuals were further bound as 'cases' by their selection from among a larger body of possible participants. In terms of the rationale for conducting the study in this way, Robert Stake has indicated three specific forms of rationale for size/type of case studies.³⁵ Case study researchers may choose to learn about a case because of their inherent interest in the case itself (an *intrinsic* case study), resulting in a case that is self-selected due to the inquirer's interest in the particular entity. A second type is an *instrumental* case, meaning one that lends itself to the understanding of an issue or phenomenon beyond the case itself. Finally, when the intent is to examine an issue in more than one setting, then the researcher would conduct a *collective* case study of the issue, rather than of a set of bounded entities. For the purposes of this dissertation research, a combination of intrinsic and instrumental rationales resulted in the identification of Hamdi Attia and Al Fadhil as cases. A desire to examine the suitability of the Diaspora position for migrant artists lead to the selection of these individual artists as cases, but with the intent of gaining a general understanding of the position's effects on artists and self-positioning in general. These case selections were made for further understanding of a larger issue that may be instrumental for informing other artists' career decisions and interpretations. In so doing, they follow the rationale that Robert Yin suggested in his work with case study research. Specifically, that one way to think about conducting a study of individual cases is to consider each case as a holistic examination of an entity that may demonstrate the tenets of a theory.³⁶ The case of Hamdi Attia and Al Fadhil – because of each artist's wholesale rejection of the Diaspora position as a creative space – represent what Yin terms an "extreme case." Each is highly unusual and as such warrants in-depth explanation. Following appropriate case study procedures, the findings drawn from these cases are not automatically generalized in order to produce theoretical findings. Rather,

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Robert Stake, *Art of case study research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1995).

³⁶ Robert Yin, *Case study research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

they are studied as *examples* in their own right and for their unique importance, not a *sample* of one. What is useful about the case study is not that it, as a single study, is capable of verifiably *proving* something. However, a single case can certainly *disprove* a general statement. In this dissertation, the cases of individual artists are used to disprove conventional wisdom about Diaspora and its applications in the Arab context.

1.3.4 Artist as Practitioner

This section includes a description of the role of the researcher as practitioner and a justification of the place of tacit knowledge – what has been described as the "pre-logical," or pre-verbalized phase of knowing – in the research process.³⁷ The findings obtained through the research methods outlined above – literature review, interviews and questionnaire, and the study case method – were also tested and expanded through practice-based experiment involving myself as a researcher and a participant artist as well as an immigrant Arab-American (specifically, a Palestinian who migrated to the U.S. and obtained an American passport). In other words, conscious use was made of research-based theories and techniques in order to identify a starting place for action involving tacit recognitions, judgements and skillful performances in the realm of artistic creation.³⁸

The practical part of this research, i.e. that carried out by myself as an artist practitioner, was supported by the use of cyclic processes of action and reflection – a process in which action and critical reflection take place in turn. "Reflection" refers to the act of reviewing the previous actions and planning the next one. This conjoined method of action- and reflection-based research as a method is most appropriate for problems involving people, tasks or procedures that seek to identify a solution through action.³⁹ It can be summarized as a process of "people finding solutions to problems" without specific recourse to scientific theory and technique (aspects of technological rationality most typically cited as "valid" bases for expertise). The particular advantage of reflective practice as a method is that, per Donald Schön's groundbreaking 1983 study of epistemologies other than the institutionally academic one, it allows for the researcher to reflect upon and then articulate the knowledge produced through the intuitive performance of actions.⁴⁰ Other sociologists who share Schön's conviction that practical knowledge is a full-fledged epistemology have argued that the realm of design is a key

³⁷ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

³⁸ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner, How Professionals Think in Action*, 50.

³⁹ Cohen, L, Manion, L, and Morrison, K, *Research Methods in Education*, 6th edition (London, Routledge, 2007).

⁴⁰ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 49.

site of knowing-in-action.⁴¹ For Alexander, good designers are able to recognize and correct the "bad fit" of a form to its context, but cannot usually describe the rules by which bad form is recognized, nor how a designer corrects it to become good.⁴² The same kind of tacit knowledge leading to specific action is deployed in the visual arts by practitioners such as myself. In these situations, the transition from the kind of knowing-in-action that is exercised in regular studio practice into reflecting-in-action is enacted whenever an intuitive performance of decisions yields to surprising results.⁴³ At that point, the practitioner reflects upon the assumptions and norms that underpin his approach. He might also "surface and criticize his initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description of it, and test the new description by an on-the-spot experiment."⁴⁴ As a result, when a practitioner reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. Rather than remaining dependent on the categories of established theory and technique in order to create knowledge, he constructs a new theory of the unique case.⁴⁵ Implementation is built into inquiry. Schön has persuasively argued that this kind of reflection-in-action may be rigorous in its own right, with the art of practicing design (for example) in an atmosphere of uncertainty and irreproducibility providing an equivalent to the scientists's art of research.⁴⁶ The final chapter of this dissertation endeavors to transform the results of the learning-in-action performed in the course of my own studio practice into explicit knowledge, translating what was a set of internal decisions into a text-based assessment of my process and findings. Because I am personally involved in generating the cyclic process of reflective practice, I will use the first person point of view rather than third person whenever I am articulating my own design practice. This allows me to avoid giving the impression of impartiality, and it better signals the subjective nature of the exploratory process.

1.3.5 Course of Development of the Research Questions

In this sub-section, the development of these research questions over the multi-year process of data collection for this dissertation is described. My artistic practice has explored the broad subject of cultural displacement and the interaction between interior space (such as that presented by an artwork) and exterior events (such as large-scale

⁴¹ Chris Alexander, *Notes Toward a Synthesis of Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁴² Schön summarizing Alexander in *The Reflective Practitioner*, 52.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

population displacement as a result of occupation) for over a decade. In 1999, I wrote an artist statement in which I summarized the complexity of my own position as a Palestinian born within the already established state of Israel as the following: "Aissa, male, Christian, Arab, Palestinian, Israeli."⁴⁷ At that time, I was engaging conceptually with what Edward Said terms the "exile within."⁴⁸ I was a citizen of a state with a dominant culture entirely alien to me, even though I had not physically left my homeland. I wanted to work with the concept of "exile" as a type of relation that linked local to global. My relationship to the kinds of links that might be forged between local and global at the point of immigration changed significantly once I myself had immigrated to the United States, however. This is evidenced in an art piece that I developed in 2004, titled *Killing Time* (discussed at greater length in Chapter Five), which set a new baseline for my dissertation research. The piece used photography and installation techniques to document the daily habits of the immigrant patrons of an Arab shisha cafe in Queens, New York, as a way to explore the concept of cultural displacement. The interior of the cafe located in a diaspora setting of an Arab neighborhood in the United States seemed to resemble the interior of a cafe located within the "homeland" setting of Cairo or Ramallah, and the men who attended used the space in order to construct a sense of familiarity denied them elsewhere in their American life. My realization of my own deep ambivalence about entering this kind of space prompted me to begin an academic investigation of these same problems of migration and dislocation.

My 2008 MPhil study entitled "Picturing Cultural Displacement and Migration: A Study of Displacement and Migration in Contemporary Arab-American Art" examined the process of migration as an individual act with wider implications in society from an academic standpoint. The process of that research, which worked through existing theoretical studies of the phenomenon of cultural displacement and attempted to apply it to individual artists such as Doris Bitar, revealed that the conditions of displacement that operate in the United States differ markedly from what was described by postcolonial theorists. The question was then raised regarding the disconnect between theory and actual manifestation. It seemed that the distorting factor might have been the focus on the United States alone. It was posited that an investigation of the experience of Arab artists living outside their countries of origin in countries other than the United States

⁴⁷ My 1999 artist statement has been reprinted in *home project*, edited by Patti Young Kim (Halifax: 106 Press, 2002), 21.

⁴⁸ Said, Edward, "Reflections on Exile" in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002 (173-186).

might provide more comprehensive insight into the relationship between an artist's experience of migration and his response to it within his artwork. The question shifted from the largely descriptive questions of cultural anthropology and ethnography, to a more conceptual exploration of migration as a phenomenon.

Over the same period of time, a major historical event with significant implications in the cultural discourses around the Arab Diaspora happened. That is the terror attack on New York that occurred September 11, 2001. Prior to this attack, which was attributed to Osama bin Laden and extremist Islamist thinking, it was possible to advance a very positive attitude about migration and globalization. One of the voices in this period that influenced my own early research about migration is the cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis. In his 2000 book, Papastergiadis suggested that migration had taken on a new and multi-directional form in the contemporary period that served as a metaphor for complex forces integral to the radical transformations of modernity. He wrote that the new migration system circulated people, resources and information along multiple, multi-directional paths in which destinations and origins were no longer clear.⁴⁹ At that time, it was possible to make claims like Papastergiadis that both modernity and identity had "multiple birthplaces," making everyone unmappable in any geographic sense. Authors like Samir Amin had already cautioned against the idea that migration was an open-ended process without identifiable beginning or end. As he reminded, the component that made the modern migratory phenomenon unique is its connection to the globalization of the capitalist economy.⁵⁰ Moreover, for him, migrations are not only the consequences of unequal development, but rather "migration" as a concept is also a part of unequal development in that it reproduces those conditions and even aggravates them. In other words, Amin cannot support the idea of a postcolonial condition in which there are no sides. But it was Stuart Hall's writings about the failure of postcolonial models of European cosmopolitanism that finally showed how necessary it would be to ground my own investigation of diaspora in carefully examined cultural contexts that include an economic and political dimension.⁵¹ For Hall, like Amin, the historical formation of migration cannot escape its context in the empire-building project. If migration is in some ways dynamic, its roots and patterns – past, present, and future – are far from that of Papastergiadis's "open voyage" model. The European failure to

⁴⁹ Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁵⁰ Samir Amin, "Migrations in Contemporary Africa: A Retrospective View," *The Migration Experience in Africa*, edited by Jonathan Baker and Tade Akin Aina (Nordic Africa Institute, 1995).

⁵¹ Stuart Hall essay, *Projekt Migration: Ausstellungskatalog* (Cologne: Kunstverein, 2006), 209.

accommodate Muslim migrants into its borders, and the links of that failure to the terror attacks of September 11 (as well as the July 7 London bombing) show the "us" versus "them" boundaries even in the contemporary globalized world. The methodological insights of Amin and Hall are significant inputs in the development of this dissertation after 2008.

1.4 Historical Remarks

A few more introductory details from the historical and political context of what has been termed the "Arab Diaspora" are required in order to guide the reader through the discussion of actually existing Diaspora cultural conditions that will follow. A united Arab cultural identity has, for much of the modern history of the Arabic countries, not only been imagined but also specifically pursued as a political objective. The nationalistic dream of pan-Arabism and the Arab *umma* in the 1950s, for example, outlined a single, culturally integrated nation from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. From the Arabist point of view, for example, to live in any Arab land (even if not the region in which one is born) is not Diaspora because it is not outside your natural border. This dream, however, also neglected the specific conditions of each component nation-state's experience. The problematic simplifications at its core became evident, for example, in the failure of Egypt and Syria to maintain the united republic they created as a single conjoined (but non-contiguous) nation, 1958-1961. It collapsed totally at the end of 1961, by a coup lead by embittered Syrian military officers. The flimsiness of these cultural claims, however, are thrown into relief when we consider the status of Palestinians within other Arab states, after the creation of the State of Israel and the ensuing war made Palestinians into refugees. On a practical level, Palestinians were completely treated as if outside the boundaries of their homeland. They were classified as 'guests' within other Arab countries until the conditions would be changed. No citizenship rights were extended to Palestinians because the Right of Return was demanded instead, and anything less (such as citizenship in another Arab country) would be a compromise. The logic of 'no compromises' was the intellectual justification, but politically and demographically the decision against integration was more complicated. For example, in the 1970s, the Lebanese gave all the Palestinian Christians passports but excluded Palestinian Muslims. The historical details of the plight of the Palestinians loom large in the narratives around Arab national identity, and they contribute to the construction of Diasporic culture. Nonetheless, it cannot be emphasized enough that the Palestinian

situation is predominantly an experience of exile, predicated on the impossibility of return and the foreclosure of choice regarding migration.

The actual composition of the Arab Diaspora living outside the Arab world, in the United States and Europe, is highly complex, and it needs to be read outside of the dominant nationalistic terms of “belonging.” The Arab world, since colonialism until today, has witnessed a group of historical events that were dominant in the formulation of migration patterns and led in many cases to the establishment of Arabic Diaspora and exiles. Yet any individual Arab country has its own entirely unique experience in that matter. Therefore, understandings of Diaspora which construe it as an outcome of a single, dispersed nation (*umma*) produces Diaspora as an unstable unity. We must question the perception of a common ground between the Diasporic experience of Iraqis, Yemenis, Saudis, Egyptians, Palestinians, Moroccans, Lebanese, and other nationalities. If we simply conclude that these very specific experiences of migration, refugees, exiles, displacement create a single community that is recognized as the Arabic cultural Diaspora, then we have linked Diaspora directly to the project of Arab nation building and presented it as the mainstream option for identity formation.

Additionally, to engage with Arab Diaspora also requires careful attention to the difference between the Diaspora population in Europe, and that in America (the latter is discussed further in Chapter Two). Each of these immigrant communities can be traced to different extenuating factors, which lead to related but distinctly different outcomes in terms of ideological and economic relations to the host country. In the American context, which has tended to prize the value of the “melting pot” and assimilation, Arab migration has lead to a certain extent to the realization of what Bhabha calls the “creation of hybrid identity.” For example, to refer to a “hyphenated identity,” such as the designation “Arab-American,” is to invoke the hybrid. The relative desirability of this kind of outcome is debatable and complex, but it is indisputably a dominant part of the Arab-American community’s discourse on identity and belonging. Separately to the American case, Arab migration to Europe lead to the establishment of Arab Diasporas with a different relationship to the notion of identity as well as a different relationship to their hosting society and their place of origin. For example, it is Europe where one finds the majority of Diasporic Arab intellectuals. They tended to move to Europe rather than the U.S. because they were Leftists, and had been participating in the Arab Left movement in their home countries, a very broad category composed of various elements of Communist parties, the Baath party, and Iraqi, Syrian and the Palestinian revolutionary groups. Having been involved in the Left made it difficult for Arab intellectuals to migrate

to America for two reasons. First, from the end of WWII onward, there were barriers against those who were members of the Communist party or were even just suspected as being such. Secondly, it was not ideologically possible for a member of the Arab Left to immigrate to the United States. The discourse of the international Left movement saw the United States as engaged in a project of Empire building and united its members in an anti-American, anti-Imperialism front. Thus, it was the European option that remained a real possibility, and even a comfortable one. Wherever Arabs went when they came to Europe, they tried to look for the local Left, so they had this space that was comfortable ideologically.

It is in Western Europe and England where Arabs started constructing a fully functioning Diaspora culture. The intellectuals who migrated there (as opposed to the United States) positioned themselves in Diaspora because they always maintained and even actively produced the option of return. Not only did they begin to build up a Diaspora culture, but they purposefully promoted it and themselves (this phenomenon in the Iraqi case is discussed further in Chapter Three). Their particular paths of intellectual migration then intersected with the larger streams of migration from the Arab world that are more directly linked to the economy of each Arab state. Both these communities, what can be defined as the Diaspora intellectuals, and what is understood as the general economically constituted migrant community, ultimately participate in the creation of the cultural Diaspora. Both groups of immigrants become integrated into the Diaspora economy and culture, even when they shared very little common ground in their countries of origin. The resulting cultural community is made through a process of recreating the homeland into a café culture, specialty super markets, cultural centres, mosques, and other settings that are evident of a obvious act of displacement into the forging space. Therefore, Arab Diaspora culture comes to exist as a project combining religion, culture, art, and ethnic grocery stores and it operates, as if a complete project sufficient unto itself, outside the dynamic progress of cultural life in the native space. For example, in the type of art events that comprise the cultural life of the Arab Diasporas, the public will be offered a plate of hummus as an accompaniment to a visual art exhibition that celebrates their cultural identity. These gatherings are also characterized by outpourings of emotion about a lost culture. Massive numbers of Arab immigrants also come together in celebrations of the loss of the past, as in their attendance of a concert by *Fairouz*, a Lebanese singer who managed beautifully and strongly to evoke the nationalist feeling of the Diaspora's community with the song of "I love you, oh Lebanon my homeland". These gatherings typically end with tears. Such events form

part of a Diaspora practice, a shared celebration of identity that offers a grounding of a mainstream Diaspora culture that is steeped in nostalgic discourse and folklore which does not allow for cultural production that investigates topics other than identity-based themes. In other words, none of the characteristics of actually materialized cultural Diaspora seem to offer a supportive space for artistic production of a non-nationalist character.

1.5 Chapter Overview

In the chapters that follow, a critical analysis of the complexities of Diaspora is presented and the relevance of those complexities to an understanding of art by migrant artists is assessed. Specifically, Chapter Two provides a historical overview of the Arab-American migration experience, an experience in which I am implicated by my personal position as an artist and researcher. The notion of myself and my position is engaged again in Chapter Five, in which I analyze my own practice and its relationship to my migration experience. The two intervening chapters, Three and Four, present two "extreme case" studies of artists Al Fadhil and Hamdi Attia respectively. These provide two cases in which it is exceptionally clear that the positioning of Diaspora culture offers no ground from which to grasp the intention or meaning of their practice. Each chapter thus pursues the research questions through a range of methods. An intent is to develop more meaningful terms for understanding the work of migrant Arab artists without proposing false commonalities based on vague notions of otherness and difference, or civilization and shared culture.

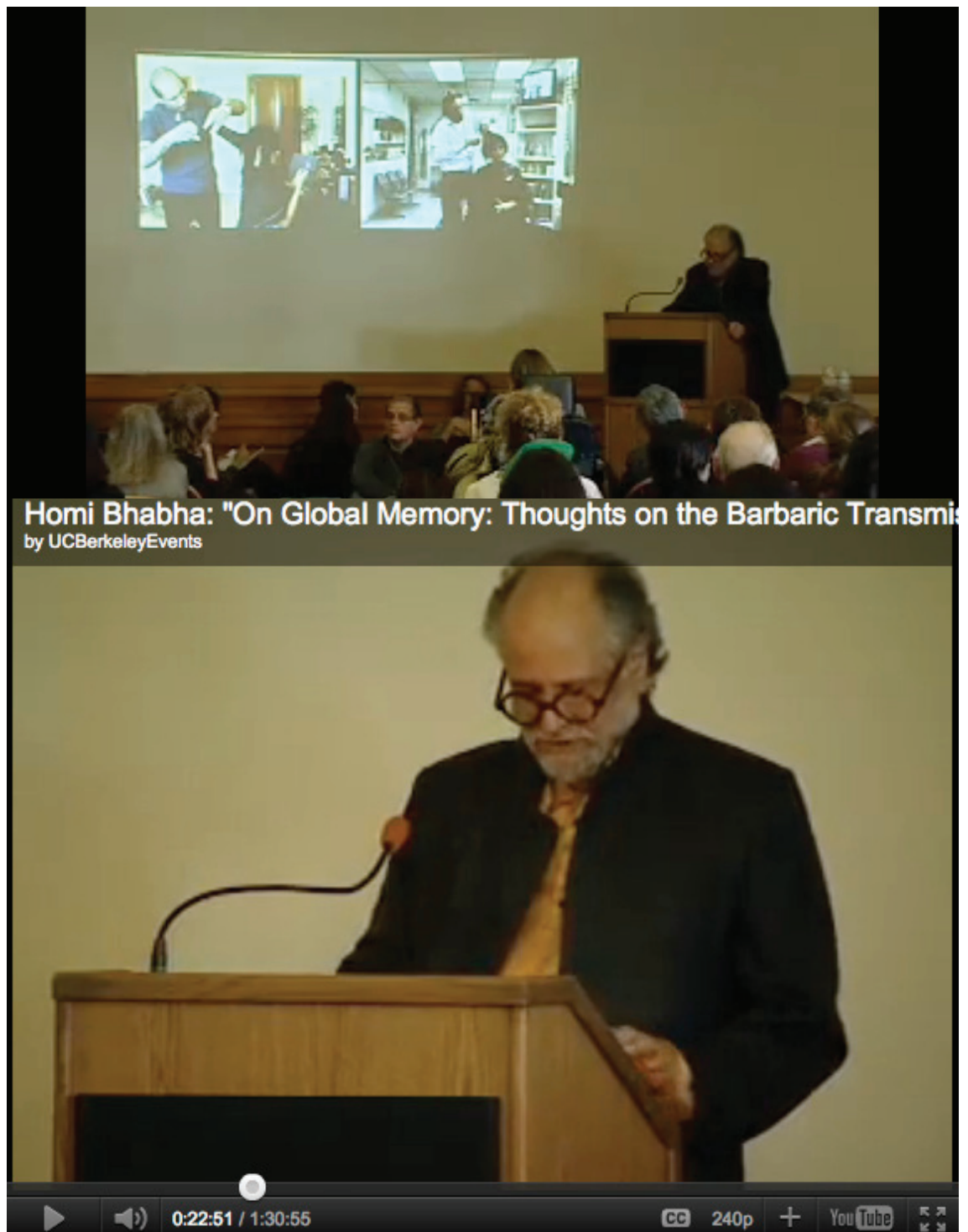


Figure 1-1 Youtube screen capture: Homi K. Bahba Lecture. Open Sorce image, google, You Tube.



Figure 1-1a Emily Jacir, New York/Ramallah
Courtesy of the artist

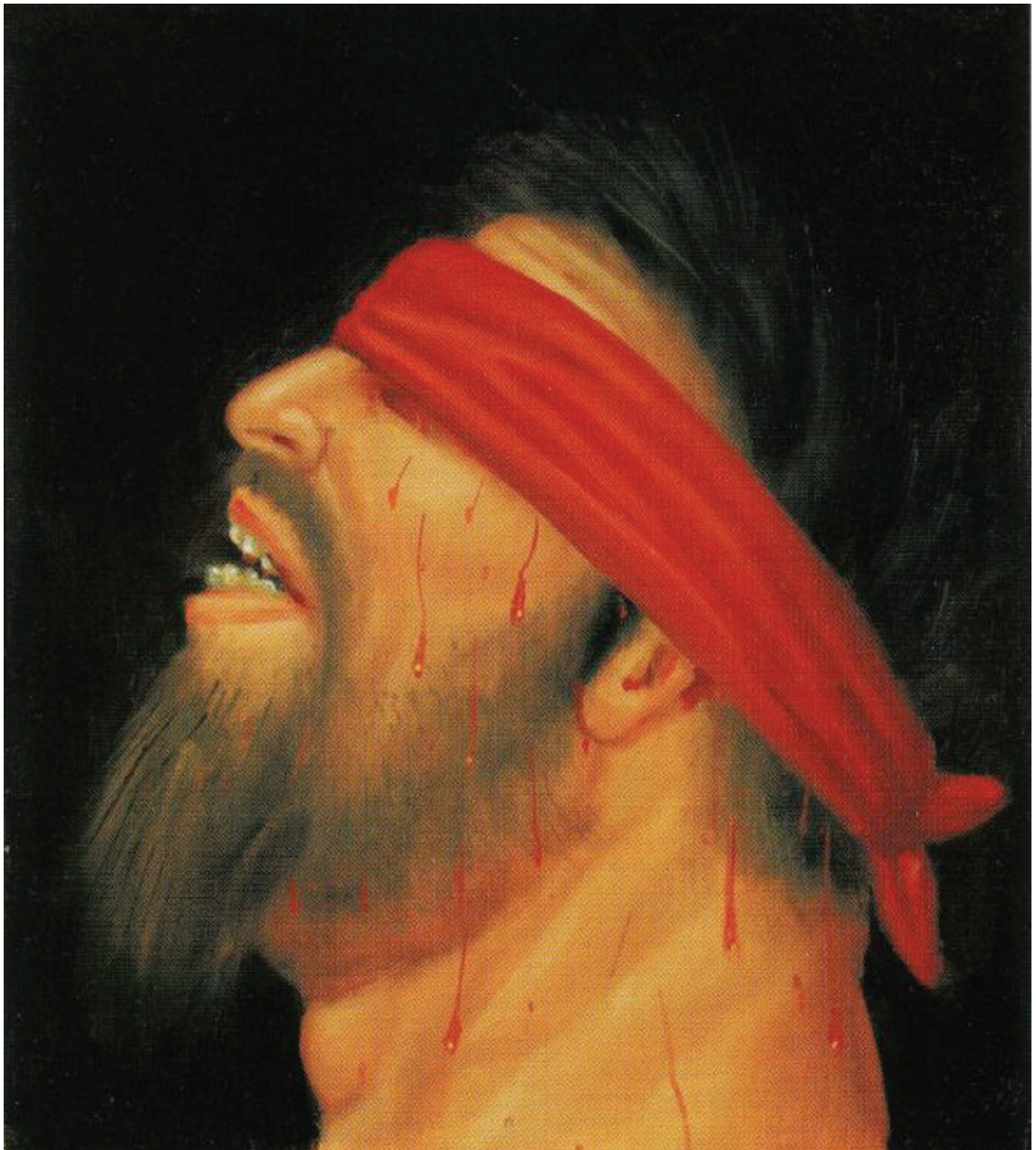


Figure 1-2 Fernando Botero, Abu Ghraib Prison. Open source image, Google.

Chapter II

The Arab-American experience, migration identity and culture

According to a recent census, there were 1.2 million people of Arab origin living in the United States in 2000.⁵² The category "Arab-American" was first identified as a distinct element of the American population only in 1990. Although Arab-Americans make up only .5% of the American population, there is a sense that the group is growing quickly. Between 1990 and 2000, immigrants of Egyptian origin were the fastest growing of the group. Those of Lebanese origins are still the largest group overall.

This chapter provides an overview of the Arab migration experience to America and the resulting formation of the Arab-American identity. It conducts this overview through the institution of the Arab American National Museum in Detroit, Michigan, which provided the first materialization of the ethnic Arab-American identity and now acts as the exponent of that group's self-positioning. The museum's website introduces itself in the following way:

*The Arab American National Museum is the first museum in the world devoted to Arab American history and culture. Arab Americans have enriched the economic, political and cultural landscape of American life. By bringing the voices and faces of Arab Americans to mainstream audiences, we continue our commitment to dispel misconceptions about Arab Americans and other minorities. The Museum brings to light the shared experiences of immigrants and ethnic groups, paying tribute to the diversity of our nation.*⁵³

One purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the above passage's language like "enrichment," "cultural landscape of American life," and "diversity of our nation" is an outcome of the longer history of the migration experience. The chapter details several of the strands of migration from different Arab countries that comprise the larger project of the Great Migration of the nineteenth century. It then examines the strategies pursued by the resulting Arab-American committee, including multiple and sometimes competing discourses, in order to self-position its community as either a Diasporic community within a larger Arab diaspora or as an ethnic community within the diversity of the American cultural landscape. The chapter contends that the dominant discourse has become the

⁵² *The Arab Americans*, ed. Rodney P. Carlisle (Multicultural America/Golson Books, 2011), 143.

⁵³ <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/>

side advocating the ethnic identity, as glimpsed within the museumization of it in the foundation of the Arab American National Museum in 2005. Finally, the chapter introduces work by Arab-American artists. Here, the focus is on the group of three Arab-American artists who were selected to represent the United States in the 2010 Cairo Biennale in Egypt.

2.1 Historical Overview:

The immigration of an Arab population to America dates back to the seventeenth-century, when Spanish colonialists reached America with Afro-Arab slaves from North Africa. In this sense, to understand Arab American history, culture and politics, one must always accord a central place to European colonialism and the hegemony of its norms. The first period of a significant volume of Arab immigration to the United States occurred during the Great Migration, the period between 1880-1924 when more than twenty million new immigrants arrived and settled in the United States. During that time, more than ninety-five thousand Arabs came from Greater Syria to the United States (what was then known as Greater Syria includes present-day Syria, Palestine/Israel, and Lebanon).⁵⁴ A smaller number of immigrants gathered from other parts of the Arab world. According to the Arab-American historian Alexia Naff, by 1924 the number of Arab immigrants living in the United States totalled two hundred thousand.⁵⁵

In terms of numbers, the Syrians and Lebanese were the largest group of Arab migrants to come to the US during the Great Migration and constituted almost eighty percent of Arab immigrants.⁵⁶ Most of them immigrated to the United States for economic reasons. The majority of this group came from an under-established agricultural farm economy and the growing textile industry in Lebanon and Syria and, according to Naff, were largely uneducated. Once arriving in the US, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants were mostly engaged in retail trades. A smaller group of Syrians and Lebanese worked in industry. But as word spread throughout Syria and Lebanon of the success these immigrants had at making money in the US, more followed.

Immigration patterns among the Arab immigrants took a variety of shapes. One strategy, almost exclusively adopted by males, was to work and return to the homeland as soon as enough money was saved to improve living conditions there. Other groups

⁵⁴ Naff, A. *ARAB-AMERICANS: THE PEOPLES OF NORTH AMERICA*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Arab-American Encyclopedia

migrated with their families with plans to permanently live in the United States. The Palestinians, who were the second largest group of Arab immigrants during the Great Migration, and comprised about ten percent of the Arab population, frequently came with their families. By contrast, the Yemenis were a smaller group and predominantly males who came singly from a country that shares a long coastline with the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. These men arrived by ship in search of economic opportunities working on farms or in factories. Yemeni immigrants were most commonly found working as farm labourers in California and other parts of the US. Interestingly, this group of emigres – commonly called the *mahjar* (translated into English as diaspora) – was in 1999 mobilized in a neonationalist effort by the Yemeni government to harness their wealth and influence toward national ends in development and common wealth (and taxes).⁵⁷ After the period of migration to the U.S. in the early part of the 20th century, Yemeni migrants had in the 1970s migrated en masse to the Gulf oil-producing countries. The cycle of emigration resulted in entire villages becoming dependent on remittances from abroad, i.e. from the emigrated component of their community. As Engseng Ho reported in 1999, however, the sense that Yemeni immigrants to the United States and elsewhere necessarily intended to return home had proven false. He writes that the benefits of migration have not necessarily proven durable for home countries, as “successful emigres generally do not return home, and after a few generations they are lost to Yemen.”⁵⁸

2.2 The Anti-Arab Sentiment, Pre- and Post-9/11

As the total number of new immigrants grew during the Great Migration, xenophobia and anti-immigration attitudes among the first generation of white European settlers in America and the second generation Americans born in the United States rose as well. Groups of anti-immigration activists working to end immigration to the United States claimed that immigrants from the Arab world were ‘Anti-American’; were importing cultures that could be in confrontation, if not in direct conflict, with American values; and were more likely to be criminals, poor, or both. Therefore, the argument went, they would be unable to comprehend, let alone be assimilated into, the American political system. The representation of the identity of ‘Arabs in America’ remains problematic within the United States. For example, in 1988, the combative talk show host Morton Downey Jr.,

⁵⁷ Engseng Ho, “Yemenis on Mars: The End of *Mahjar* (Diaspora)?” *Middle East Report* (Summer 1999), 29-31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

could still announce that the influx of Arab immigrants in Michigan were responsible for riots in Detroit:

*Our major cities are turning into war zones, with all the violence in the streets that we see. We're in Detroit this week, and this great city is being torn apart by violence. Many people here are accustomed to the daily sound of gunshots ringing out, firebombs being launched, cars being torched. Why? I'll tell you, pal. Because the largest community of Arabs outside of the Middle East lives right here in Detroit...*⁵⁹

This hostility toward Arabs in the American media obviously extends back to before the anti-Arab sentiment of the post-September 11 world and long before the war in Iraq, to the days of the Great Migration. Back then, negative images of Arabs, Muslims, Iranians and Turks permeated American mass media, including the mainstream film and comic books industries. The American media and the Hollywood industry in particular conjure up a hostile and stereotypical image of the Arabs in the United States, one not too dissimilar to the ones applied to Native Americans, Blacks and Jews. In fact, the Arabs were portrayed in much similar ways to the Jews in pre-World War II in Europe.⁶⁰

2.3 The Emergence of an Arab-American heritage

Arab-American culture now occupies a flux position, some where between white and non-white. Arab-Americans can be seen to shift their own self-representation as a kind of identity tactic. Simultaneously, there is talk about home cultures and about total hybridity. The Arab-American identity status has not been well developed as a minority or an ethnic culture, with even a single individual finding coding as Muslim American; Arab-American when it is comfortable to them culturally or politically; Palestinian American for the purposes of activist causes; or simply American when positioned in New York and its cosmopolitan flows.

In fact, the Arab-American community has been engaging in an ongoing debate regarding how to position the community. The debate gained in prominence after September 11th. One side argues that Arabs in America have shaped a new culture that links to the history of migration overall and its remarkably diverse outcomes in hybrid US culture. It promulgates a new concept of 'Arab Diaspora' that is understood as unique to the American experience, offering the concept of a new dynamic identity that has roots

⁵⁹ *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, edited by Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

and links to Arab heritage without giving up its status as part of the American contemporary identity as a “nation of immigrants.” This side’s vision encompasses third and fourth generations of Arab immigrants, those who speak no Arabic and those who speak no English, people who identify with the ‘Arab’ side of their dual subjectivity and people who identify primarily with the ‘American’ one. The other perspective is that Arab-American identity is rooted in Arab heritage and cultural values and argues for the need to preserve its relationship to Middle East politics, art and broader culture. Its position is to announce, “we are the ambassadors for the Arab world; we are the link,” as if at any moment the immigrant population could return to the homeland without disjunction. In effect, it holds the view that the Arab-American identity is in essence a transplanted Arab subjectivity, under the service of preserving the Arab culture by means of maintaining the Arab language, involvement in Middle Eastern politics, and the fostering of a primary relationship to and with the Arab World.

Anan Ameri, director of the Arab American National Museum, may be seen as a high-profile exponent of the first position, the one privileging hybridity as a valued end in itself. She has described how the modern history of American immigration/migration has shaped the Arab-American minority community.⁶¹ The community includes people who identify themselves primarily with the ‘Arab’ end of their double, hyphenated identity and those who equate themselves more with the ‘American’ one, she acknowledges. She states that this diversity (also an asymmetry) indeed complicates all further attempts to come up with a unified assessment of what constitutes ‘Arab-American’ identity. Nonetheless, her writings as a scholar, and museum administrator, emphasize that Arab-American identity is intrinsically American and should be understood in relation to the American context and American emphasis on assimilation and multiculturalism.

In 2001, Ameri asserted the following about the Arab-American culture, arguing for its rightful place as an “ethnic minority” amid all the others composing the American polity:

Similar to other ethnic minorities in the United States, Arab-Americans try to preserve their culture and pass it on from one generation to another. Arab-Americans also try to maintain contact with their extended family and members of their towns of origin who may be dispersed throughout the world. Family and town reunions, community banquets, conventions and festivals all allow Arab-Americans to preserve and celebrate the culture of their birthplace and to keep ties with those still living in their home countries. For many Arab immigrants (Arab-Americans) and their

⁶¹ Arab American Encyclopedia

*descendants, it is often difficult to find a balance between adapting to a new culture while still retaining their traditional ethnic ties and origins.*⁶²

She goes on to detail that many Arab-American immigrants retain their language, dress, food, beliefs, and social-moral values even after living in the United States “for generations.” She even suggests that the assimilation process remains incomplete when it comes to gender roles, with some Arab-Americans, “especially Muslims from rural areas,” requiring the family group to dress modestly, limiting socializing with the opposite sex, and showing respect for elders. The encyclopedia text even goes so far as to emphasize folk traditions as evidence of legitimate ethnicity, saying “Arab Americans celebrate many religious and cultural holidays. Most Americans celebrate some of the religious holidays, like Christmas; only Muslims celebrate others, such as Eid al-Fitr,” even while Arab-Americans are said to have embraced American holidays, enjoying such events as “Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July by, amongst others, eating both traditional Arab and American food.”

Narratives like Anani's fit into what Salah D. Hassan and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman observe in their introduction to a 2006 special issue of *MELUS*. The story of immigration to the US has been tactically deployed as a unifying story that produced a shared and enriched Arab-American subjectivity. Thus, a critical understanding of Arabs in America must “move beyond the unifying story of migration, and the concomitant stories of assimilation and acculturation, which place so much emphasis on cultural particularism and neglect the determinations of Arabs both in terms of US domestic racial policies and foreign affairs.”⁶³

2.4 The Arab-American Artist Today

For the 12th International Cairo Biennale, held in Egypt from December 12 until February 12, 2011, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) selected the Arab American National Museum (AANM) to organize the United States' representation of American artists.⁶⁴ The AANM selected the work of artists Annabel Daou, Dahlia Elsayed, Rheim Alkadhi and Nadia Ayari, each one considered an “contemporary Arab American artist,” and each one currently residing in

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Salah D. Hassan and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman, “Introduction,” *MELUS* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2006), 5.

⁶⁴ AANM Press Release, “ARAB AMERICAN NAT'L MUSEUM, U.S. STATE DEPT. COLLABORATE TO PRESENT ARAB AMERICAN ARTISTS AT 12th INTERNATIONAL CAIRO BIENNALE.”

the United States. The show was titled *Orienteering*. I personally observed and analyzed the exhibition and its display in Cairo and include it as data for this dissertation's investigation of the uses of different models of Diaspora positioning in the Arab context.

Museum Director Dr. Anan Ameri described the museum's outlook in their curatorial project for the international forum of the Cairo Biennale, as a way to "foster an important new dialogue between Arab American, Arab and international artists," as well as a demonstration of the sympathetic setting provided for Arab migrants within America. She noted that the exhibition would "demonstrate America's support for and pride in its Arab American artists and citizens." Inline with the themes typically associated with hyphenated identities, the selected artists exhibited work that examined issues of time, place, and identity.

Daou created a paper installation piece specifically for the Biennale setting entitled *from where to where*. Elsayed exhibited conceptual maps, and text-based paintings that explored representations of identity, both internal/psychological and external. Alkadhi made an installation of two components entitled *Domestic Floor Covering* and *Conference of Flies*. Ayari showed paintings depicting surrealist characters in non-specific landscapes. These artists can be taken as the representatives of Arab-American identity and rhetoric abroad. If the awards distributed by the Biennale jury are a reliable indication, the identity was well received. Annabel Daou was awarded a prize for her piece. I will quickly discuss it and its stakes here. The piece was comprised as an installation work combined with a sound element, both concretizing the same idea in different media. The wall piece was a presentation of the repetition of the same question and answer, "where are you now," with the response being "I am here," written over sheets of paper using a craft-like aesthetic and combining English and Arabic. The sound piece was a recording of the artist walking through the streets of New York and Beirut, asking people "where are you coming from?" and "where are you going?" both in English and in Arabic. The work provides a highly legible statement regarding the multiple identities produced through dislocation. In its use of two languages, and the repetition of questions having to do with movement and location, it underscores the idea of the hyphen. As such, it offers a snapshot of Arab-American culture that conforms to the type produced by the discourses that emerged from the Arab community within the United States after September 11, 2001.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the specificities of the history of Arab migration to the United States and the composition of the Arab-American population as an ethnic community within the larger national narrative of the American dream. I discussed the Arab-American National Museum and its mission to “enhance knowledge and understanding about Arab Americans and their presence in this country” as a representative institution of the hyphenated identity and the valorization of the assimilation melting pot ideal. This ideal contrasts starkly with the attitudes toward the Arab Diaspora in Europe, as discussed further in Chapter Four. Finally, a quick overview was given of the AANM’s recent approach to the exhibition of this kind of strategy abroad, in the American contribution to the Cairo Biennale in 2011.

Chapter III

Al Fadhil : the outsider within

This chapter will introduce the complexity of the Iraqi experience of Diaspora culture by examining its basis, formation, and its inability to accommodate the “outsider within.” In this case study, I focus on the practices of artist Al Fadhil as an “outsider within” Iraqi Diaspora culture as part of the broader Arab Diasporic experience. My purpose is to elucidate the inability of these cultural Diaspora settings to accommodate the creative practices of Al Fadhil as an artist, activist, and immigrant. This chapter highlights Al Fadhil’s position within and against the Diaspora cultural project, so as to locate his distinctiveness from it. In addition, an overview of the characteristics of the Iraqi cultural Diaspora, the historical Iraqi modern art movement, and the history of modern Iraqi history and its direct influence on the making of Iraqi cultural Diaspora is provided.

The chapter examines in particular the considerable shift in Al Fadhil’s career that occurred in 2003 when he declared his new position as an activist that would devote his artistic practice to forms of resistance to the occupation of Iraq. In doing so, he cut any ties to his past interest in purely visual art as a minimalist painter in the context of European and American painting and its trajectories. It also elucidates the significance of Al Fadhil’s statement that Diaspora culture and the politics within the Iraqi homeland “two sides of the same coin.” It analyzes his ideological refusal to be considered part of the Diaspora, and details how his practice enacts that refusal even while retaining the subject of Iraq and its history at the center of his artistic practice. This major shift in his practice positioned him one more time in conflict with the Iraqi cultural and political Diaspora, which he claims assumed a position in the centre of the mainstream cultural politics of Iraq, both inside the country’s geographic boundaries and outside them.

In what follows, I outline the different stages of his practice from the early days of his career to the present. This allows us to examine his practice within the context of Diaspora culture by adopting his argument and his critical position against Diaspora as a platform to understand his practice and position.

3.1 Al Fadhil : the artist, the activist, the immigrant

Al Fadhil was born in the Iraqi city of Basra in 1955. In the 1970s, he enrolled as an art student at the Baghdad Academy of Fine Arts. There, he studied under many of the pioneers of the of Arab Art Modernist movement in Iraq of the 1950’s. In 1976, he

went to Italy to attend language school in preparation for furthering his art studies. He then enrolled in the Florence Art Academy, studied painting, and graduated with a diploma in painting. Immediately upon finishing his studies, he decided to remain in Italy as an immigrant. Ten years after that decision, he obtained European citizenship. He then moved to Switzerland and made it the country of his residence. Currently, he lives between Lugarno (Switzerland), and Berlin (Germany).

Al Fhadil left Iraq as a student in a time when the space for freedom of expression was reduced to impossible under the *Baath* regime. These same conditions were leading to a significant migration of intellectuals, some of whom left Iraq voluntarily and some of whom were forced into exile. Among these intellectuals were a group of artists that became very active in establishing the modern Iraqi cultural Diaspora and establishing Diaspora culture as a space for creative practices. Part of this creation of Diaspora culture included their political ambitions for a better future in Iraq, and possible return one day when conditions are changed. The Diaspora space gradually became the space for manifesting the Iraqi modern art project that had begun in Iraq in the 1950s. In 1951, at today's Tahrir Square in Baghdad, Iraqi artist and art professor Jawad Salim read a statement that announced the emergence of a new group of artists called the Iraqi Modern Art Group (Jama'at al-Fann al-Hadith al-'Iraqiyya, henceforth referred to as IMAG). In his manifesto, he advocated for the need for freedom of expression and an understanding the artistic experience as individual practice, linking the modern art in Iraq to the roots of Iraqi civilization:

*Art in Mesopotamia has always been like its people, who have been the product of the land and climate. They have reached decadence and never achieved perfection; for them perfection of craftsmanship has been a limitation on their self-expression. Their work has been crude but inventive, has had a vigour and boldness, which would not have been possible with a more refined technique. The artist has always been free to express himself, even amid the state art of Assyria, where the true artist speaks through the drama of the wounded beast.*⁶⁵

In the same speech, he also reserved the right for artists to draw on the techniques of international style. The manifesto at that time was supported by a group exhibition of the artists that belonged to the IMAG. The exhibition was criticized by the mainstream press,

⁶⁵ Excerpted in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (Baghdad: Addar al-Arabiah, 1983), 3.

in which the artists were declared the enemies of the people.⁶⁶ Additionally, their work was framed into the context of “art for art’s sake,” in that their practice did not reflect the current situation in Iraq nor the needs of the people to celebrate the nation. In response to this critique, the IMAG published three additional manifesto texts that paradoxically changed its position from art as individual practice to an understanding of art that made it part of the collective experience. This collective experience was to be found as material culturally embodied in the Iraqi heritage and history. The historical moment that shifted Salim’s vision from an individual one to an embodiment of Iraqi state art was the 1958 military coup that toppled the monarchy and established the Iraqi Republic. Salim was commissioned by the newly established Republic to make a monument in bronze that would celebrate Iraqi history and the fight for independence. The Monument of Liberty, which he designed and installed in its dedicated space in Tahrir Square in Baghdad, was huge and dominated its space in the center of the capital.⁶⁷ It extended into fourteen different groups of relief figures over an 8-meter-high and 50-meter-long frieze can therefore be considered the first public art project. In acknowledgement of the occasion and the public mission, it introduced a vision that was deeply influenced by ancient Iraqi heritage. At the same time, we must acknowledge that Jawad Salim’s approach to decisions about scale and design drew on an ideological urbanism that was the foundation of the Soviet monument art, as well as – to some extent – the German and Italian nationalist monuments. For example, the Soviet monument Worker and Kolkhoz Woman in Moscow that rises more than 60 meters tall in the heart of the city, which celebrates the glory of the Soviet Union, offers an epitome of the use of formal tactics (like scale) for consolidating a population into a national citizenry.

The IMAG experienced an intellectual crisis as a group of artists upon the death of Jawad Salim in 1961, which almost lead to the dismantling of the group and many unsuccessful attempts by Salim’s wife and his colleagues to reconstruct it and resurrect its mission. But because the death of Salim left a complete leadership void, the reformation of the IMAG was almost impossible to realize. It was not the only group dedicated to the practice of a modern art in Iraq. There were two other major art groups in Iraq in the 1950s, each led by a painter: the Impressionists led by Hafidh Duroubi and the *Societe primitive* led by Fayek Hassan. These groups had longer continuous lives. To some extent, they remained active in Iraq and also the Iraqi Diaspora until the 1980s. However, it was Jawad Salim’s vision, as expressed in the IMAG Manifesto, that – after

⁶⁶ Encyclopedia of Iraqi Art

⁶⁷ Ibid., 22. The translation of the Arabic “Nisb al-Huriyya” into “Monument of Liberty” is Jabra’s.

the flight of intellectuals beginning in the late 1970s – would return as a touchstone for Iraqi art discourse in the modern Iraqi Diaspora.

To discuss and understand Al Fadhil's art practice, the modern history of Iraq must also be taken into account. As noted above, he migrated from Iraq to Europe during a period of major intellectual migration. The second Baath party coup led by Saddam Hussein in 1963 led to the reduction of any space for dissent, leading intellectuals to flee the country and re-establish themselves and their form of national identity outside Iraq. This was particularly the case for anyone opposed to the Baath party, as the Baathists systematically murdered untold numbers of Iraq's educated elite whom it saw in opposition to its agenda. Taking the long view of things, their migration is just one effect of a longer and distinctly tragic modern history extending from colonialism and dictatorship to a present occupation and civil war. All these historical events must be considered primary factors in the shaping of the Iraqi art and culture.⁶⁸ This dissertation focuses in particular on how political events dispersed Iraqis and, eventually, produced an Iraqi Diaspora culture as a creative space. The bloody events that followed the 1963 coup marked a fundamental turning point for Iraqi art, because they most directly lead to large numbers of exiled intellectuals. This constituted a cultural Diaspora that was dominantly linked to the Iraqi leftist movement and the Communist party. Because of that Diaspora culture's relationship to political developments in Iraq, it must be considered an unfinished project.

3.2 From Baghdad to Lugarno

Against the grounding of this history, the implications of Al Fadhil's move to Italy as a postgraduate student become clearer. Although he also left Iraq in the 1970s, Al Fadhil refuses to align himself with Iraqi Diaspora culture. He sees "Diaspora" is a link between two pieces of the same dominating mainstream cultural rhetoric, one the origin and one the displaced. He sees himself as having purposefully escaped that link by voluntarily emigrating and systematically cutting any ties with Iraqi and its Diaspora. For more than twenty years he worked as a painter. He lived in Europe by choice, never proclaiming himself an exilic/diasporic artist. Rather, he worked in the mode of a multinational artist, locating himself within the European values of multiculturalism. This refusal of any direct link to Iraqi Diaspora art and its emphasis on national values was translated into his painterly practice at that time; he was pursuing the Western methods of formalist minimalism, devoted to exploiting only elements of color, shape and form.

⁶⁸ Shabout, N. *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*

(fig 3-1, 3-2, 3-3) Over this twenty-year period, his work resembles minimalist paintings such as those painted by American artist Frank Stella in the 1960s. In the late 1990s, Al Fadhil began to introduce a conceptual approach into his practice, shifting from painting to video and performance.

The critical shift in Al Fadhil's practice was directly enacted, however, by current events in Iraq – the 2003 American invasion and occupation of Baghdad and the fall of the Baath regime. As Al Fadhil stated in an April 2011 lecture at the Arab Cultural Centre in Berlin, Germany:

On the day when Iraq was invaded by the American army, I turned my back on modernist esthetics and devoted my practice to the movement of resistance in order to tell the story of my homeland.⁶⁹

In other words, this single historical moment became the primary motivator for his practice, leading to the change of his position from a visual practitioner to a visual activist. Even with the shift in which he pursues an activist course of action, he sees both himself and his practice as outside the Iraqi Diaspora. Not only does he continue to reject Diaspora culture as a nostalgic project, but he also rejects Diaspora because its foremost exponents are overwhelmingly aligned with political parties and movements that have joined the post-2003 occupation government. Thus, the Diaspora cultural space that once claimed to represent opposition and a commitment to a space for creation have now assumed the position of oppressors and occupation. To substantiate his argument, he cites the 2011 Iraqi pavilion and the 54th Venice Biennale as evidence. The movements and power replacements enacted by the occupation have led to some perhaps unpredicted political compositions within Iraq itself. At present, Iraqis who were formerly associated with the Iraqi Left, a movement that was dominated by the Communist party of Iraq and other small Socialist groups, as well as other oppositional groups such as the Kurdish movement, now serve on official commissions that, among other tasks, provided the patronage for the Iraqi pavilion as a symbol of the new Iraq. This pavilion, curated by Mary Angela Schroth, identifies the completely apolitical theme of water – titled “Wounded Water / Acqua Ferita” – as its organizational rubric.⁷⁰ Schroth explained in a newspaper interview, “I want people to see the work of these artists and

⁶⁹ Al Fadhil, in public lecture at the Berlin Arab center, April 16th, 2011.

⁷⁰ “The Pavilion of Iraq has been produced thanks to Shwan Ibrahim Taha and Reem Shather-Kubba/Patrons Committee, corporate and individual contributors including Rabee Securities, North Bank, Total, Atconz Group, Nisreen & Ali Al Husry, Hussain Ali Al-Hariri, and Nemir & Nada Kirdar; Embassy of the Republic of Iraq, the Iraqi Representation to the UN Agencies in Rome, and a generous grant from the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. Honorary Patron is the architect Zaha Hadid.”

see that there are some untold stories. And I want people to see Iraq not as a thirty-year conflict zone, but like any other country. We have deliberately got away from the war – we want to give it an identity, an identity that it has lost since the Saddam dictatorship.”⁷¹ The celebratory texts that have been issued around the Iraqi pavilion all announce its arrival as a kind of victory over adversity (a project said to be in the making since 2004).

The artists selected for the show in the Pavilion are all Diaspora artists in the model that Al Fadhil rejects. They are not announced as such in the promotional texts, which tend to say merely “experimental contemporary artists.” But one can simply consult artist’s websites to see a strong trace of the Diaspora narrative. For example, artist Ali Assaf – now living in Rome, and one of the key figures behind the organization of the pavilion – provides a biography that describes his trajectory from al Basrah to Baghdad art school in the early 1970s and the intellectual clashes “between existentialists and Marxists, anarchists and nationalists, the political clash between democrats and totalitarians, and cultural clash between modernists and traditionalists.” The website then describes his long residence in Italy as a kind of forced exile complete with refugee status, writing: “At the end of 1973 he moved to Rome, (where is still lives), to continue his studies of art at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he graduated in 1977 with a diploma in painting. When he refused to play along with the apparatus of the right-wing regime, which seized power in 1979, his passport was withdrawn and his citizenship removed, and he has never been able to return to his country of origin. In 1989 he obtained Italian citizenship after years of living in Italy as a refugee under the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.”⁷² That the Diaspora has become not only a necessary position for artists, but has actually come to represent official Iraqi art is something that Iraq’s own representatives give voice to. As Hassan Janabi, Iraq’s ambassador to the U.N. agencies in Rome stated: “Getting Iraqi artists [who live in Iraq] is not an easy job. It could be tedious and possibly create friction. Instead, they sought out artists living on the outside who could truly reflect what constitutes an Iraqi artist.”⁷³ As a result, we can observe that some of the included artists descend directly from the Baghdad art school environment of the 1970s. Others who do not, still produce work that is obviously indebted to it, such as Ahmed Alsoudani’s partially abstracted paintings of fractured bodies and arabesque motifs that would not be

⁷¹ Charlotte Higgins, “Venice Biennale Gives Voice to Iraqi Diaspora and Struggling Younger Artists,” *guardian.co.uk* (2 June 2011).

⁷² <http://www.mashrabiagallery.org/viewArt.aspx?ArtID=2>

⁷³ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704893604576200652720598940.html#ixzz1QMzaEHgU>

out of place in the Baghdad art shows of the early 1970s. What Al Fadhil has concluded, is that in order to truly oppose the American occupation, he must also explicitly oppose the Iraqi Diaspora culture because of its direct link to the current occupation government in Iraq and its rule over official narratives regarding his homeland.

When Al Fadhil speaks of the dramatic shift in his career, he emphasizes that the shift does not under any circumstance position him as an Iraqi Diaspora artist. For Al Fadhil, Diaspora is a space of static, mainstream culture that an activist artist is obligated to oppose. In fact, Al Fadhil argues strongly that the ideological complexity of Diaspora as creative space has led to its failure to respond to contemporary issues in art. It has also failed to enter the contemporary. He adds, “my practice is against the notion of nostalgia,” arguing that “if our starting point is nostalgia practice,” then “we assume that the past, the old, is beautiful and the present does not offer us any hope.” By proceeding in this way, we fall into the romantic image of home, and create a fantasy of purely imagined reality. Diaspora remains a practice of the past, a mainstream conservatism in which nostalgia sustains a traumatic experience and gains sympathy from international audiences. Refusing the mainstream, and refusing nostalgia that fails dramatically to correspond to the present, Al Fadhil proclaims “My art work is about now and here, it’s about me, and me is the present the now and here. I strongly refuse to romanticize my life in Iraq before migration. In the same time, Iraq is the main concern in my practice.”⁷⁴

If history is scrutinized, it is surely the case that modern Iraq does not represent a paradise. Unlike the claims made by the curator of the Iraqi pavilion, it is not valid to read the work of Iraqi artists as if they have no relation to a thirty-year conflict zone, or as if Iraq is “like any other country.” Moreover, it cannot validly be said that Iraq lost its identity as a result of the Saddam regime. In fact, as Al Fadhil observes, it is the migration of artists out of the regime and their subsequent establishment of Diaspora that has invented an Iraqi identity, the very identity now put on display at the Venice Biennale. In an interview, he said “the Iraqi Diaspora is a complete project of imagined homeland that has its own engineers, lawyers, doctors, business men, families, children, wives, mothers and husbands, but it has no grounding.”⁷⁵

3.3 “I’m the Iraqi Pavilion at Venice Biennale”

⁷⁴ Author’s skype interview with Al Fadhil, conducted July 3, 2011.

⁷⁵ Ibid. In this case, Al Fadhil is referencing the composition of the recent wave of migration after 2003. The statistics held by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reveal that the refugees include large numbers of the professional class such as doctors, academics and other professionals. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a16b6a16.html>

After the 2003 invasion, Al Fadhil began to develop a new body of work that engages and critiques the absence of Iraq from international art events as well as the willful forgetting of Iraqi history under the guise of Iraqi Diaspora culture.

At the opening of the 51st Venice Biennale in 2003 (fig 3-4), Al Fadhil came to the opening with a group of friends wearing a yellow T-shirt with the printed statement saying “Where is the Iraqi Pavilion in Venice Biennale?” The following Biennale, he did the same thing by changing the statement to “I am Iraqi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.” The following Biennale, he came to the opening with a new T-shirt saying “The Question is Relevant. I am the Iraqi Pavilion in the Venice Biennale.” In the current 54th Biennale, he came back with a T-shirt that criticized the newly curated Iraqi Pavilion, the first mounted since 1976, saying “Free the Iraqi Pavilion.” (fig 3-5) Each time, the shirts served to ask the public a simple question about the absence of his country of birth, Iraq, from the cultural and political space of the Venice Biennale.

By repeating the same activity on a bi-yearly basis, he maintains the question’s relevance. The version of the question posed in 2011, which asks the public to Free the Pavilion, registers his opposition to the political platform out of which the commissioning of the physical Iraqi Pavilion in the 54th Venice Biennale arose. The question regarding the status of Iraq in the Venice Biennale remained pertinent even in a year in which an Iraqi Pavilion was erected because, Al Fadhil argued, of the current link between the Iraqi Diaspora and the current Iraqi government. The 2011 pavilion represents the Iraqi Diaspora culture that Al Fadhil has rejected for the entirety of his career as an artist because of its invalidity as a basis for artwork but now, after the formation of the current Iraqi government (2011) as a coalition between the Diaspora political groups and the American occupation forces, he also resists politically. In light of the ongoing civil war and occupation in Iraq, he and his piece oppose the motivation behind such a Pavilion, oppose its role in maintaining the most typical and simplified version of Iraqi Diaspora culture, and oppose the politically-motivated denial of the current events in Iraq that is enacted by the designation of a cultural interest in “water.”

In parallel body of work produced after 2003, Al Fadhil is faithful to his statement that he wants to tell the story of his homeland. This oeuvre deals with his personal experience and family narratives, and does so using family artifacts and photographs. It does not, however, fit into the standard narrative of Arab Diaspora aesthetics with its “idealized image of home as a paradise” that outside forces forced immigrants to

abandon, and/or acute feelings of estrangement.⁷⁶ Instead, he uses his self and family as a reflection of historical circumstances that complicate dominant narratives about Iraqi modern history, introducing personal detail rather than claiming loss of memory and trauma. For example, in the piece *Home Sweet Home* (2005) (fig. 3-7) he worked together with his brother Ahmed – whom he had never met in person (because Ahmed was born after Al Fadhil had left Iraq) – on a series of photographs and story that tells the very specific story of his physical house in Iraq. The house had been gifted to the family in return for the loss of his first brother in the Iran-Iraq War, and so Al Fadhil used it as a object through which to tell the story of his family's implication within the modern history of Iraq and its necessarily ambivalent relationship to the hegemonic narratives of Iraq, both that of the former regime and that of the current Iraqi Diaspora culture. Al Fadhil asked Ahmed to photograph the house from all directions and to describe it on an audio track. The piece would make a traumatic shift, however. During the final editing of the original piece, Al Fadhil learned that his brother Ahmed had died in a suicide bombing in Iraq. This personal event completely changed Al Fadhil's relationship to the work. The project became a requiem for his brother Ahmed.

Al Fadhil used some of the same material he had gathered during his collaboration with his brother for *Home Sweet Home* to produce *My Dreams Have Destroyed My Life*, which he showed in Berlin in 2011. The piece takes its title from a letter that his brother Ahmed had sent before his death that described his life in Iraq. Ahmed says that he had a dream in which Bill Gates had hired him and he replaced Bill Gates as the head of Microsoft. The phrase was an assessment of the gap between the ambition expressed in the dream, and the actually entirely limited setting of Iraq under the occupation. For the piece as shown in Berlin, Al Fadhil worked with a photograph of a historical meeting between his father, brother Mashreq, and Saddam Hussein (fig 3-9) on the occasion of rewarding his family for the martyrdom of his first brother in the Iran-Iraq war. Al Fadhil scaled up the photograph by 500% scale and created a wallpaper that corresponded with the former dictator's billboard aesthetics, a transposition from personal to political that paralleled the official Iraqi discourse of national collectivity into which he invited the viewer. On the same wall, he placed a video monitor in which he edited the photograph and created a narrative story based on a statement that his brother Mashreq had written, at Al Fadhil's request, about the occasion of the photograph. On the opposite wall, he painted a field of blue – a color that dominated Iraqi painting for many years – and placed on top of it a statement written in neon: *My*

⁷⁶ Salhi's summary of Diaspora emotions, Introduction," *The Arab Diaspora*, 3.

Dreams Have Destroyed My Life. (fig 3-8) By doing so, he is offering a new perspective on visual practice that deals with political material that is personal and public. Al Fadhil's practice demonstrates that it is possible to tell a genuine story about Iraq outside of the Diaspora aesthetics and its stereotypical formulas. This is evident in every project that Al Fadhil created as a visual activist. By doing so, he is challenging the notion of Diaspora aesthetics and its ability to correspond, explain, and introduce a meaningful narrative. In using his family's artifacts, he compresses the usual roles of "hero" and "villain" and details the complicated nuances of a history experienced by humans, a history in which his father's relationship to the Baath party became internalized into the family's history in ways that made it impossible to wholly reject.

Finally, Al Fadhil has also created pieces that question the notion of collective memory and its relationship to Iraqi heritage. For example, the piece *Good Morning Babylon* (2010) (fig 3-6) explores questions of the production of memory. For example, is it possible to destroy memory by removing historical artifacts, and, "Is it possible to survive without memory?" Working from his base in Berlin, Al Fadhil decided to commemorate the anniversary of the American entry into Iraq on April 9, 2003 by invading the space of the Pergamon museum, a public art museum in the city that held the monumental façade of the Ishtar Gate, a piece of antiquity from ancient Babylon (in present-day Iraq). Declaring himself a cosmopolitan artist, he designated himself as a kind of security force for a disputed piece of historical property. The Gate had been expropriated from Iraqi lands in the 19th century by German archaeologists. During Saddam Hussein's rule, he had a reconstruction of the Gate completed that included bricks that claimed the gate as part of his glory as the head of the present-day Iraqi nation. Al Fadhil wrote letters to the head of the museum to request access to the Gate for a performance he would stage there. He would take a public action in which he would stand in front of the Gate in the museum space with his feet in one place and his hands crossed on his chest. The act would be minimal and simple, practically banal, and yet full of meaning and pathos. The museum never replied, but Al Fadhil nevertheless staged the performance. The piece raises questions about ownership, who owns Iraq and who has been given permission to determine whether to accord it space. What is most striking about this particular piece, when viewed in comparison with the Venice Biennale project as well as the pieces using family artifacts is the great difference in scale between Al Fadhil's body and claims about selfhood and the monumental pieces of Iraqi heritage that he takes as symbols of his homeland. In the Venice Biennale pieces, he uses his body as a platform to pose a question and to bring it before an audience. In the

pieces working with items from his family's past, he does not present his body at all but rather uses his family unit as a platform for elaborating a historical narrative. In this case, his body appears as a single individual that has taken upon itself the impossible task of guarding an entire culture and protecting it from harm.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the notion of Diaspora in the context of the Iraqi experience and its inability to accommodate the "outsider within." The formulation of cultural Diaspora that postcolonial theory has developed cannot accommodate the purposefully oppositional practice of Al Fadhil, a mobile artist who produces work from a political position that he locates as neither fully integrated nor Diasporic.

The phrase "outsider within" is used here to indicate that the artist's position could easily have been fitted into Diaspora if the artist himself had not sought to oppose that narrative. For example, when he arrived from Iraq to Europe in the 1970s, he encountered a readymade cultural Diaspora that could have given shape to his experience as a foreign artist in Italy. However, as discussed above, he consistently rejected it for artistic, cultural, and eventually political reasons. In many interviews conducted over the course of this research project, he insisted on his understanding of the Iraqi Diaspora as a discourse located completely within Iraqi mainstream culture, a culture that has produced a hegemonic nationalist consensus within Iraq and outside. This chapter reviewed the specifics of his rejection as evidenced in his practice and particularly his shift in his position in 2003 in which he became simultaneously an artist, activist, and immigrant. For example, Al Fadhil completed multiple projects including the ongoing Venice Biennale performance, initiated in 2003, in which the artist argued the relevance of his political question "Where is the Iraqi Pavilion in Venice Biennale" as well as Good Morning Babylon at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and his new project at the ArtLab, which explore his own position to Iraq. The last two do so by examining his relationship to his own family and its narratives.

What this dramatic shift in Al Fadhil's approach to his own practice demonstrates is the way that Diaspora doubly fails to accommodate his position. From the 1970s until 2003, the artist positioned himself and his artwork outside a Diasporic culture that was primarily characterized by its false nostalgia and hollow sense of history. After 2003, Al Fadhil's rejection of Diaspora as a cultural project became politicized, and he more explicitly rejects it on ideological grounds because of its capacity to produce political consensus. As an artist who claims a critical position, against mainstream values and

hegemonies, Al Fadhil has forged a practice that again exits from Diaspora as a viable context for creative production.



Figure 3-1 Al Fadhil, Labrinito
 Figure 3-2 Al Fadhil, For Dreams, Not for Sleep
 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3-3 Al Fadhil, Spiral
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3-4 Al Fadhl, Venice Biennale 2005
 Figure 3-4a Al Fadhl, Venice Biennale 2005
 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3-5 Al Fadhil, Free Iraq Pavillion 2010
 Figure 3-6 Al Fadhil, Good Morning Babylon
 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3-7 Al Fadhil, Home Sweet Home
Courtesy of the artist

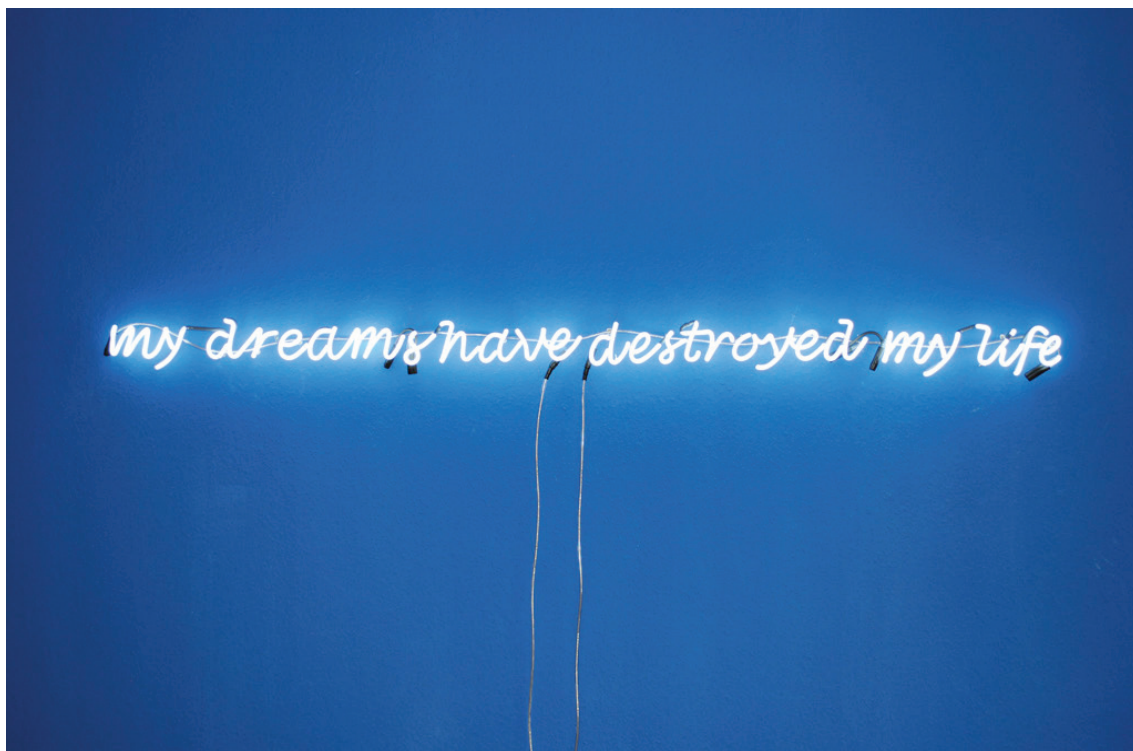


Figure 3-8 Al Fadhil, My Dreams Have Destroyed My Life

Figure 3-9 Al Fadhil, Installation Detail

Courtesy of the artist

Chapter IV

Hamdi Attia— the parallel local and the myth of Diaspora

In an interview I conducted with Egyptian artist Hamdi Attia, he gave the following explanation for his insistence on positioning himself outside the cultural Diaspora, “Diaspora for me is a cultural frame that is created by market needs, as well some individual artists’ needs to be positioned culturally.”⁷⁷ In other words, Attia rightly recognizes the category of “Diaspora” as a selling tool, a way to promote certain artists or groups of artists as purveyors of aesthetics of cultural otherness outside the mainstream and therefore exotic, critical, or otherwise appealing. This chapter examines the strategies that Attia has developed in order to avoid what he considers a hollow use of a Diaspora identity as a promotional device. The alternative that Attia has pursued is to establish himself as a local artist for each of the settings to which he has access, seeking to make work that resonates with local interests. Importantly, although he is currently based in Chicago in the United States, he makes frequent trips back to Egypt in order to perpetually reposition himself there as an Egyptian artist. At the same time, he is continually making work within the conceptual parameters of the U.S. group show museum scene that directly conflicts with the parameters of the local Egyptian conditions. Here, the alternative strategies that he employs so as to establish and apply his own selling tools that do not rely on a positioning within Diaspora are identified and discussed. Attia can be seen literally making different projects, following different conceptual approaches, for different locations. After an overview of Attia’s background and personal narrative of migration, three recent examples of his parallel localism are reviewed in relation to their application in three different local settings.

4.1 Before Departure: The Egyptian Experience

Hamdi Attia was born in Assiut, Egypt in 1964. He was trained in the Egyptian national system, studying at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo and then pursuing advanced studies in painting and sculpture at the Egyptian Academy of Fine Arts in Rome (having been awarded a bourse). Attia represented Egypt at the Venice Biennial in 1995, taking the top pavilion prize with Akram Al-Magdoub. (fig 4-1) The prize recognition was a huge boost for Hamdi’s career locally, in a setting characterized by a hierarchical system of access to the state’s monopoly on patronage. He was also selected for the Cairo Biennial in 1997. Hamdi immigrated from Egypt in 1997 to the

⁷⁷ Interview with author. October 2010. Cairo, Egypt.

United States for personal reasons. He entered the art system there through a site of education, the MFA program at the University of Pennsylvania. In 2002, he completed his MFA in sculpture. Subsequently, he showed in the Canaries Biennial in 2006. His work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in Cairo, New York, Paris, Rome, Sao Paulo, Detroit, Copenhagen, Zanzibar, and Philadelphia. Some of his most recent entries in the “international” circuit include pieces in the Tarjama/Translation exhibition at the Queens Art Museum, and the show Sentences on the Banks, curated by Abdallah Karoum for Darat al-Funun in Amman. Attia has also completed public work commissions in Egypt, Italy, and the U.S. Recently, during his one-year residency in Cairo, he participated in the 16th Aswan International Sculpture Symposium, in which he was introduced as a homecoming artist, an artist “in return.”

4.2 Cairo – Chicago, One Home, two Locations

In terms of his self-representation, Attia typically says that he “currently lives and works between Cairo and Chicago.” In interviews, he spoke strongly of his privileged location as a US-based Egyptian artist. His narrative about his immigration centers on personal reasons, rather than some conception of “necessity” or pain. He does hold dual citizenship, and so has an official standing in two nation-states and access to a full ‘hyphenated identity.’ Yet he consistently rejects the Diaspora artist position as a relevant site for producing work. In a sense, Attia’s approach to his career displays a need to be a cosmopolitan artist who deals with contemporary issues in art, an artist who works outside the identity-laden model that makes Diaspora into a template.

4.3 Egyptian Migration and Diaspora Characteristics

While the notion of any national art movement is rapidly changing (as reflected in all cosmopolitan cities across the world, with artists migrating south, west, east as based on a very personal needs or opportunities, living in multiple cities at once), issues of home, Diaspora, and loss can remain very relevant to many artists globally. However, in the case of Attia, these themes cannot be linked to a specific experience of Egyptian Diaspora. That is because, as suggested by both the complete dearth of published literature mentioning any form of “Egyptian Diaspora,” an Egyptian Diaspora is not a locational option for an Egyptian artist. No sub-field of Egyptian Diaspora has formed that can offer a creative space. The primary characteristic of Egyptian migration to Europe and America has been economic rather than ‘exilic,’ with the only instance of a recognizable group of intellectual Diasporic figures materializing in the 1950s. This was a

very specific case when a cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood chose exile as a political space, because of a violent political conflict with former President Gamal Abdul Nasser that led to the “exile” of many leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. At that time, the United States, citing freedom of religion, welcomed them as a persecuted community. As soon as these conditions changed during Sadat’s rule, political Diaspora returned to the local, or lost its position as a Diaspora opposition.

Together with this type of politically motivated migration, millions of Egyptians migrated from Egypt to the Arab Gulf States and Libya for work in manual labor and service positions. While this kind of movement displaced large numbers of Egyptians, it does not count as Diaspora because it is an intra-Arab state migration in which a certain familiarity with culture, language, and religion is maintained. It is important to recognize that these conditions of specifically Egyptian migration served to prevent the creation of Egyptian Diaspora culture overall, and particularly to prevent the creation of a Diaspora culture with any real potential to act as an accommodating space for an artist like Attia. Moreover, because of the specific composition of the Egyptian Diasporic communities in the United States – predominantly Coptic Christians who left Egypt because of religious persecution, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood who left when they became targets for the Egyptian government – to cultivate a communal base of patronage within these communities would be to harm his career in Egypt itself. It is not a politically astute move for an artist who seeks to maintain acceptance in the Egyptian mainstream artistic cultural discourses to consort with communities that are understood to be opposed to the Egyptian mainstream. Finally, the impossibility of the Diaspora as an accommodating space will always be more pronounced for a migrant artist who works in the United States versus the one who lives in Egypt. As discussed in the preceding chapters, the American version of the phenomenon of immigration is one in which American society acts as an adopting society.⁷⁸ This formulation is very different from that in the European context, which is a “hosting society.” The option of cultural assimilation makes for a very complex position for an Egyptian artist residing in the United States. Ultimately, perhaps it is best to say that his relationship to Diaspora and Diaspora’s relationship to him, particularly his social and political make-up as an artist with an open-minded approach to ethical and cultural questions and a liberal attitude regarding social practice, results in irreconcilable differences.

⁷⁸ For example, the curatorial texts for the Generation 1.5 exhibition described in Chapter One consistently use the phrase “adopted country” rather than “host country” to describe the new location of the migrant artists that it features.

4.4 Complexity of Contemporary Egyptian Art

Instead, to add concrete analytical detail to our reading of Attia's work and relationship to Diaspora (and his refusal to put himself into a Diaspora), we can start with Jessica Winegar's chapter "Freedom of talk" in her book about the contemporary Egyptian art scene *Creative Reckonings*.⁷⁹ The chapter analyzes the complexity of contemporary Egypt within its local context of the politics of art and culture. She argues that to understand contemporary Egyptian art, we must understand three interlinked processes: how the state came to occupy such a central role in the artist's life and imagination by the mid-1990s (the decade when Attia first emerged as a recognized artist in Egypt); how and why the artist in between different generations views the state as responsible for supporting the arts and holds it accountable for perceived failures in that regard; and how art policy became a key part of President Hosni Mubarak's government's goals of privatization and democratization. Understanding and keeping Winegar's perspective on the context of Egyptian contemporary art is important in establishing a basic grounding for Attia's present practice, particularly the relationship between his American and Egyptian experiences. It is also key to understanding the dimensions of what emerges as a defining gap between those experiences, between the art he makes for each setting. We will see that he retains a very personal need to communicate and position himself within the contemporary Egyptian art system, and this in spite of the fact that he lives in the United States and has accepted its citizenship. Accepting a citizenship does not guarantee entry to a new practice fully positioned in a global art market, nor does it guarantee that such a practice will replace an old, more nationally rooted practice. In the case of Attia, these practices are now pursued in parallel. Opposed to typical Diaspora models of an artist's standing and production, we do not find that he or his working methods give any value to a notion of hybridity.

4.5 The Dialogue and its Conditions

I have been following Attia's work for about five years, a period over which he was based in New York and then later moved between the American cities of Philadelphia and Chicago. We conducted many interviews in person and via social networks that established a fascinating artistic dialogue around his practice, ideas, and motivation. This process of dialogue culminated in my experience in 2010-2011, when both he and I both lived in Cairo. He had moved back for a one year with his family. This gave me a great opportunity to establish a solid analysis of his relationship to Diaspora,

⁷⁹ Winegar, J. *Creative Reckonings*

particularly because it allowed me to scrutinize Attia's work within the context of Egyptian culture and arts. That context was itself thrown into relief because it witnessed a major historical event that led to the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime and end put end to thirty years of dictatorship. The 25 January 2011 Revolution, or what the political scientist like to call the "uprising of January 25," is still changing Egypt's cultural politics and most probably will spark ever greater change in the culture and arts. In the meantime, the Revolution has created a different atmosphere in the cultural sphere as artists are becoming more expressive politically as well as more active organizationally. They are fully engaged in reforming the artist union and cultural ministry. In the popular cultural side, there an enormous change in the production of popular culture, music, crafts, and literature that is reflected across disciplines, from a simple handmade sticker or T-shirt design that celebrates the revolution in Tahrir Square to literature, music videos, and cinematic features. In the same time, there is a noticeable emergence of a new movement of street art (fig 4-2) that works within the styles of graffiti design and street illustration.⁸⁰ Together with all these popular changes, official state image production has also shifted, moving from posters of the former president into a nation building advertising campaign. This campaign calls upon Egyptians to be fully involved in rebuilding the new Egypt and celebrates the revolution. (fig 4-3)

4.6 The Egyptian Art Post 25 January 2010

Finally, a major change in the international representation of Egyptian contemporary art also resulted. This year, for the first time in the history of Egypt's participation at the Venice Biennale, the government accepted the proposal of a young Egyptian artist Shady Elnoshokaty to curate the Egyptian pavilion rather than curate the pavilion itself under the direct supervision of the cultural minister. Elnoshokaty exhibited the work of new media and sound artist Ahmed Bassiouni, giving him a solo exhibition at the national pavilion of Egypt in Venice. The Egyptian pavilion (fig 4-4) at this, the 54th Venice Biennale, attracted enormous attention from the international media. Visitors were waiting in line to review the work before the installation was completed. The huge success of the new approach to the Egyptian pavilion this year will most probably bring a great attention to the contemporary art movement in Egypt in the post-January 25 revolution context. Thus, it seems likely that Hamdi's self-professed position as an

⁸⁰ The public space seems currently to be open for experiments. Walls and different locations are covered with graffiti. The technique has mainly been stenciling and very little freestyle. At one point, these expressions seemed to provoke the military and its role in post-revolution Egypt. Graffiti artist Ganzir was arrested, then and released after a few days.

“Egyptian artist” may radically change over the next few years, and the tactics he adopts to locate a means of address to the local scene will shift as well.

4.7 Attia's and Egyptian Mainstream Art

Let us examine Attia's ongoing dialogue with the mainstream Egyptian art scene as it manifested in October of 2010. As noted above, Attia began his career fully within the Egyptian art system, earning a degree in its art academy and excelling there to the point in which he won a scholarship for advanced study in Rome. He retains a full understanding of the complexities of the Egyptian art movement, and can personally critique its shortcomings and closed-mindedness. At the same time, he exhibits a very personal need to maintain some kind of continuity with his early days in Egypt as sculptor and painter. When I asked him about his return to Egypt for the 2010-11 year and his approach to his practice within that context, he told me that it was important to him to reclaim the forms and processes he had been using when he was at the pinnacle of his success, when he won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale in 1995. One platform for this return is Attia's Cairo gallery, Al Masar. The gallery sees itself as a platform for promoting Egyptian artists' blending of poetic memory and the vibrant art movement that results and promotes its artists using aesthetic terms familiar from the local context (such as poetics, vibrancy, etc.).⁸¹ Attia installed a solo exhibition there, *Re-Presentation* (October –November, 2010), which I saw. The exhibition consisted of two groups of large-format paintings (Fig. 4-5) on wood panels, both pursuing a process of abstraction of the figure that results in formal experimentation with fields of color and shapes. The artist describes these paintings as an outcome of an intensive visual research of contemporary photojournalism. Put simply, he identifies the source material for each canvas as an image culled from google images searches for contemporary news stories. This practice, he suggests, allows the content of his paintings to exceed mere esthetics. He explains that: “Photojournalists take hundreds of photographs while on site in Haiti, Pakistan, Gaza, or any other media-grabbing location. Only ten of them serve the purpose of documenting the news--the rest represent exploration.” However, it is only Attia's explanation of his concepts, i.e. a background research process that related to current events and photojournalistic practice, that enacts a change in the appearance of the artwork. The actual canvases on display still resemble the craft-based multiple media assemblages that Attia had been making prior to his migration to the United States. It should be emphasized here that the conceptual complexities of Attia's

⁸¹ <http://www.almasargallery.com/AboutGallery.aspx>

explanation of his paintings are effectively suppressed from the physical and aesthetic attributes of the paintings. This suppression seems to be a requirement of the setting, a commercial gallery that sells only traditional forms of painting and sculpture.

By the process of this kind of suppression, we can observe how Attia has succeeded in making himself a very clever painter with a solid knowledge of the medium and process. Here, he has painted abstract shapes colors and text that are an outcome of visual research conducted via Internet searches for specific images based on a list of keywords that he developed meant to selectively search for images dealing natural disasters and conflicts. Later these images become the starting points for his painting, in which he manipulates, reconstructs, and ultimately produces an abstraction of the image. The results remind us of early American abstract painting, which was heavily located in the abstraction of reality. The work may also be linked to German painting practices in late 1960's Cold War culture.

4.8 The Conceptual Artist

Parallel to this process and its exhibition in Egypt, Attia continues to produce very elaborated conceptual work that he locates firmly in issues familiar to the American contemporary art scene. For example, his work dealing with translation, location and culture was exhibited at the Queens Museum in New York as part of the *Tarjama/Translation* exhibition produced by ArteEast and curated by Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi, and Reem Fadda. To this exhibition, Hamdi Attia contributed a video installation entitled *Two Performances.ram* (Fig 4-6). The piece is a 2-channel video installation that juxtaposed Amr Khaled (a popular Islamic televangelist in Egypt) and Thomas Friedman (a popular exponent of neoliberalism in America) in a way that suggested that authoritative figures in all societies labor in the same way. They all simplify concepts and ideas for the public, packaging them in ways that targeted audiences can easily consume. As the artist suggested in an interview, he was interested in analyzing how "Islam is translated to Muslims by the preacher, and how globalization is translated to Americans by the New York Times columnist," particularly how "Amr Khaled presents Islam as a universal concept as a vehicle to promote a rather non-universal Islamic nationalism. Likewise, we find that Thomas Friedman uses globalization as a universal platform to promote a narrow American nationalism."⁸² In this work, Attia seems to use his unique position as an Egyptian-born artist who migrated to

⁸² Interview with Kirsten Scheid, "Intervening in Translation," <http://arteeast.org/pages/generate?id=120>.

the United States as an adult to highlight the hitherto unrecognized similarities between contexts otherwise seen as disparate (see arguments advanced by the Queens curator in the 2003 show 1.5, discussed in Chapter One). The selection of these two stars may also offer an indirect representation of his hyphenated identity as American-Egyptian artist. His reading of such identity is not a simple one, for in bringing together a visual narrative from recognizable and mainstream cultural politics (within two separate “mainstream” spheres), he has strongly edited, cut, and worked to translate it. Notably, the work is also structurally identical to Emily Jacir’s piece Ramallah/New York, which also purports to ‘surprise’ the viewer by revealing the identical quality of different locations as a basic condition of living outside one’s homeland. For these reasons, this particular piece from Attia’s oeuvre fits comfortably into the category of “Diaspora aesthetics,” as well as into the premise of the larger Queens Museum show – with its interest in highlighting the problems of translation and the difficulty of moving between cultures. The strategies of display may be critiqued accordingly.

However, to wage that particular critique is not the purpose of this Chapter. That is because Hamdi’s *Two Performances* is one of the few pieces that he has produced over his career working in both Egypt and America that remotely fits into Diaspora aesthetics. The majority of his work, I argue, takes quite the opposite approach. Rather than enacting a refusal to assimilate, the artist approaches his artistic production as a process of assimilating to local conditions. For this reason, I propose to call him a parallel local artist. Much of this parallelism seems motivated by the same concerns that motivate most working artists: his approach to his career is obviously driven by a need to be positioned in specific contexts of material and conceptual support. The complexities of such an incomplete, or doubled, cultural migration must be tracked as they are reflected in his particular pieces.

4.9 Political Art Under Mubarak Regime

In addition to this project, Attia is engaged in another project that is a series of conceptual maps, or contemporary cartography, in which he deconstructs political maps and communities and nations into fragments of imagined space. In 2011, in Amman, Jordan, at the Darat al-Funun, he exhibited a large map titled *Archipelago – a World Map II* (2009-2010) that is a fragmentation of the political map of the occupied West Bank in which he reconstructed the map in the shape of the continents of the globe. The artwork itself is made from laser cut metal sheets that are installed in a vertical plane in space (Fig. 4-7). The map deals with the complexity of the Palestinian political geography. If we

consider how the work would have related to the Egyptian politics of the pre-Revolution moment, then understand the specificities of its placement in Jordan offers a new perspective on Attia's work.

In Attia's case, the map piece was developed and exhibited during his stay in Egypt in 2010-2011. So it would seem that the choice to exhibit the work in Jordan was not only merely a personal one, but rather one conditioned by local politics and geography. Most probably in Egypt under Mubarak, to directly address the problem of Palestine would not be permitted. To attempt it would be to create a challenge to the artist's ability to show and gain patronage in a culturally dominant police state. These indications should not be taken to suggest that circumstances in the Jordanian political system tolerate politically transgressive work. Rather the piece may be framed as very mainstream issue in Jordan, because of its national geography (contiguous with Palestine, but across the river bank – as the title of the exhibition itself alluded to) and because of its mixed Palestinian-Jordanian population. In Jordan, the country with the second largest number of Palestinian refugees in the world, mainstream political discourse is in fact obsessed with the Palestinian issue. Any work that would be produced about Palestine in the United States would be problematic politically (as well as commercially) because of the Zionist lobby, relations with Egypt, and the dominance of a Judeo-Christian conception of origins as it clashes with militant Palestinian nationalism. Equally, it would be difficult in Egypt, as explicit opposition to Israel or expression of critiques of it was disallowed. In Jordan, the work has its own political complexities, but the setting is accommodating of work that says the name "Palestine." The work is easily digested and understood.

Discussing Hamdi's practice as a parallel process that operates separately in different local cultures helps to show the complexity of his position in regards to a standard notion of identity. Diaspora as a conceptual framework would not be able to accommodate his work. The fact that he comes from Egypt and moved to the United States is not sufficient to position his work within classical Diaspora culture and aesthetics which, in most cases, is located in notions of trauma, loss and displacement.⁸³ For example, when Homi K. Bhabha speaks of Emily Jacir as a "non-nationalistic Diaspora artist" he is arguing that Jacir's work is diasporic because of these qualities of incompleteness (in spite of the fact that she lives as privileged artist between Rome,

⁸³ For example, as Stuart Hall indicates in his writing about Diaspora culture. www.rlvclarke.net/Theory/.../HallCulturalIdentityandDiaspora.pdf

Ramallah and New York).⁸⁴ Attia's work seems to do something else. It does not make a show of its inability to fit in. Instead, it offers a very complex approach to juggling numerous different notions of local and global. We see the complexity of belonging to cultures, not the complexity of not belonging. In the case of Attia as a cosmopolitan artist, Diaspora culture as a setting is not a question that is reflected in his practice and his cultural position. At the same time, I strongly argue that the artist is fully aware of his position and he is tactically merging between subjects, locations and nationalities. Even from outside of Egypt's political borders, he has successfully managed to continuously claim a position within the mainstream Egyptian arts, and to continuously introduce new pieces to that local context. We have reviewed his production of three different bodies of works at the same time, each very different in quality, media, and subject matter. Rather than placing his practice within Diaspora as either a nostalgic or idealistic location, he has pursued a series of localisms that are staged in parallel with each other. (fig 4-8, 4-9, 4-10, 4-11)

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter examined Hamdi Attia's practice through an understanding of his personal strategies as an artist who has managed to position himself outside Diaspora culture. Attia, as we saw, speaks of his location as privileged in which his location helps him maneuver from position to another.⁸⁵ Each of those positions may be assessed as a kind of local position. In the multiple interviews that I conducted with Attia, he insisted on positioning himself as an Egyptian artist. For him, his migration narrative was specific, personal, and not sufficiently permanent or complete to bring himself into the Diaspora. In some pieces, such as *Two Performances. ram* (2009), he mobilizes his unique position as an Egyptian-born artist to claim a position as a bridge between two nationalities in which he acts as an "expert" reader of their codes. By way of explanation of the personal meaning behind the juxtaposition of Amr Khaled and Thomas Friedman in the 2-channel work, Attia has described how his interest in translation first arose from his childhood exposure to American culture via Egyptian television, a "subtitled" experience that produced obvious gaps between word and imaged content.⁸⁶ This work and its approach placed Attia into a hybrid identity, in which both sides of the Egyptian-American designation are maintained and in fact emphasized. The artist shows an ability to merge

⁸⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fp6j9Ozpn4>

⁸⁵ Said. *Reflections on Exile*. www.dartmouth.edu/~germ43/pdfs/said_reflections.pdf

⁸⁶ Interview with Kirsten Scheid, "Intervening in Translation," <http://arteeast.org/pages/generate?id=120>.

comfortably between places, context, and produce artwork that fits with the very local need of each location of his interest taking into consideration the specificity of each location, culture, politics, as well with his artistic strategy. That can be very much traced in his branding strategy and market. Attia seems to migrate comfortably between diverse groups of hyphenated identities, migrations that are a direct outcome of the change in his citizenship status. The analysis performed for the purposes of this dissertation demonstrates that this kind of shifting is a representation of a need to be located as a cultural producer within a narrative and context.

This chapter's aim was to critically examine Attia's position in contrast with the Diasporic cultural framework that is offered by Homi K Bhabha, as a space for the creative cultural production of the migrant, one located in post-colonial discourse and its parameters. It was demonstrated that Attia's immigration experience is specific to him rather than broadly a part of any "Arab Diaspora culture." His Egyptian background and history offer a very different relationship to Diaspora, one that remains linked to the modern history of Egypt as well as the United States. As a result of these histories, an Egyptian Diaspora is not a locational option for an Egyptian artist. Moreover, it always bears noting that both the Diasporic and the assimilated positions became much more complicated after September 11 and the emergence of a strong Islamophobia in popular culture – making any hyphenated identity into an exceedingly complex set of obligations having to do with translation and bridging. In the case of Attia, we see that in certain strategic moments, he has presented his position as a bi-cultural observer to engage with translation-based expectations for his practice. For other locations, he addresses only a local audience.

By examining Attia's artistic practice with the specificities of his migration experience, it is demonstrated that "Diaspora" as a cultural project again fails to offer insight into the interpretation of a body of work produced by a visual artist who migrated voluntarily from Egypt and the Arab world. By contrast, he managed to locate himself in the centre of three locations. Upon examination of his work as a set of specific strategies that aim to be in the mainstream of three very different locations, it may be concluded that a Diaspora positioning for the creative immigrant does not offer sufficient analytical power to accommodate the visual practice of such a complex artistic strategy. The element that is an open voyage is not Diaspora, but rather the act of interpretation itself – an act that must take into account migration patterns, the dilemmas of assimilation,

and the artist's own strategies for addressing different audiences as encountered in local situations.



Figure 4-1 Snapshot: Akram Magdob and Hamdi Attia. Golden Lion.
 Figure 4-2 New Movement in Street Art
 Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4-3
Figure 4-4

The People and The Army Together
The Egyptian pavilion at the 54th Venice biennale.



Figure 4-5 Hamdi Attia, Blue Sky; Mixed Media on wood panle.
Courtesy of the artist

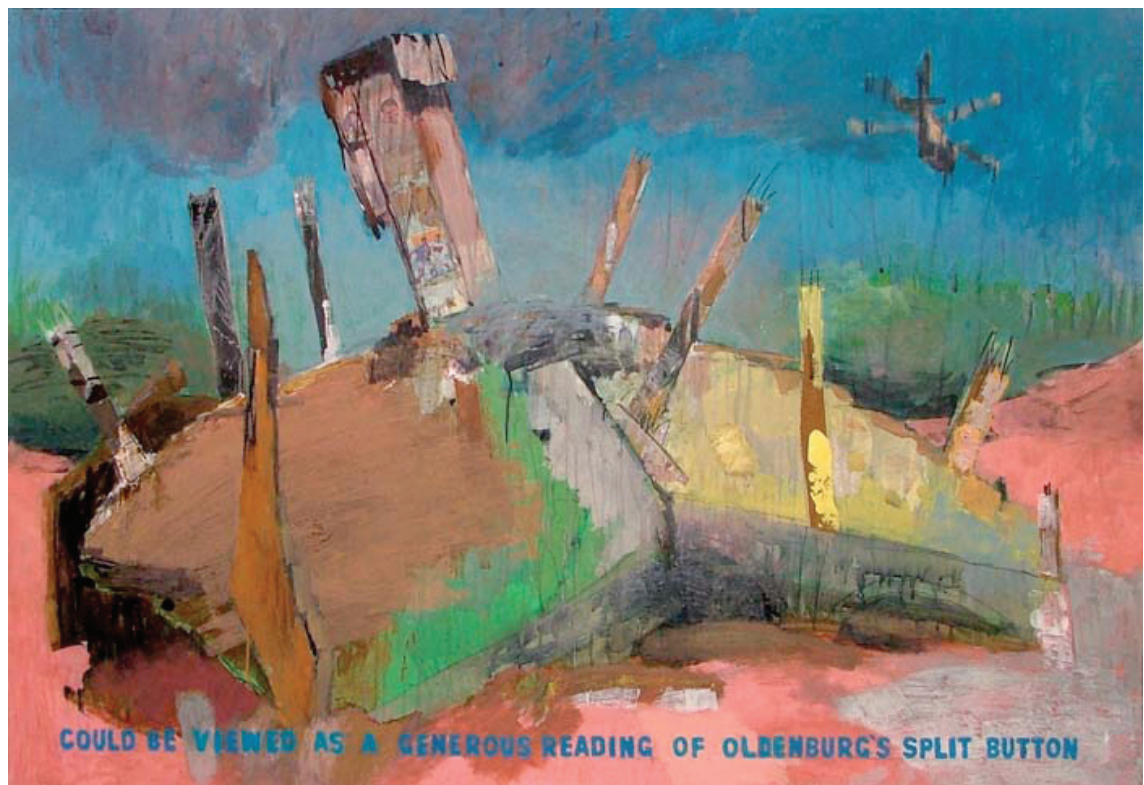
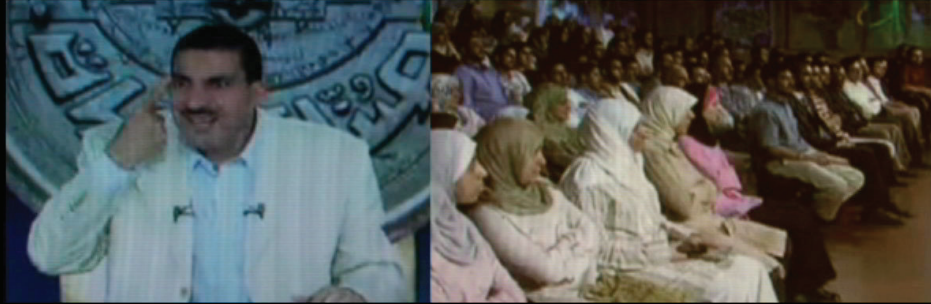


Figure 4-5 Hamdi Attia, Courtesy of Oldenburg, Mixed Media on wood panle.
 Figure 4-5 Hamdi Attia, Daisies Field, Mixed Media on wood panle.
 Courtesy of the artist



If you repeat an idea to the unconscious,
it can't tell if the idea is fact or fiction!
That's how the unconscious works!



انت بس تاخذ تذكرة عليها ارقام "أ.ب.ج"

Figure 4-6 Hamdi Attia, Two Performances.ram. Courtesy of the artist
Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4-7 Hamdi Attia, Archipelago. Courtesy of the artist

Chapter V

Where Am I Going

This chapter presents an analysis of my position as a Palestinian-born migrant artist who is based in New York (even while living outside it) and exhibiting internationally. It is written using the techniques of the “reflective practitioner” as an approach to research-based visual art practice. Specifically, I analyze the path of my own shifting position as a migrant moving from Haifa, Israel, to the United States as well as the shifts in my theoretical understanding of my relationship to this immigration. As in the methodological approach developed in the preceding two chapters, this chapter begins by providing an overview of the modern history of Palestine and the visual arts within it. These conditions are reflected in my experience, particularly the opportunities and ambitions available to me during my early career in Haifa in the 1980s and early 1990s. Ghasan Kanafani's 1968 cultural analysis of Palestinians in Israel, an analysis that he developed as a Palestinian literary critic and activist, is used to highlight these sociocultural aspects. I discuss the characteristics that he identified as they appear in the final work I made as a resident of Haifa, an installation piece called *My Dream House* (1999). I then outline the ideological shifts enacted by my migration to the United States, my new citizenship status, and my accrual of a hyphenated identity. Having come from a complex sociopolitical background where art was realized within a project with propagandistic aims, the new setting prompted significant changes in my research-based practice. I conclude with an in-depth analysis of works from the recent years of my artistic practice that deal with issues of displacement. In these works, my immediate location ceased to become important and any readymade position offered to me, such as Diaspora artist, proved irrelevant to my primary artistic concerns.

For the purpose of this research, I followed the method of a reflective practitioner so as to convert the expertise generated by the process of knowing-in-action into knowledge that may be articulated.⁸⁷ As Schön observed, this practice begins with a largely intuitive process of reflection-in-action on the part of the practitioner, beginning with the fact that, when faced with a professional issue, a practitioner usually connects with his feelings, emotions and prior experiences to attend to the situation directly. Reflection-*on*-action on the other hand is the idea that after the experience a practitioner analyses his reaction to the situation and explores the reasons around, and the

⁸⁷ Carole Gray and Julian Malins, *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2004), 22.

consequences of, his actions. It is reflection-on-action, and the articulation of the exploration of the situation and its reasons, that produces valid knowledge. In my practice, my articulation of my own reflection-on-action is facilitated by my working method. I frequently adopt the position of designer, and I respond to a context into which I will release my new artworks by first formulating a brief and then proceeding to make things. Or, I might develop a representation of a concept using the forms of a plan or program, and then commission and direct others in the process of its construction. In the context of design actions such as these, Schon has identified the "conversation with the situation" that is undertaken in any good process of design as a reflective piece of the process. In response to outcomes and consequences entailed by action itself, the designer advances his practice by reflecting on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, and the model of the phenomenon that had been implicit in his initial moves.⁸⁸ This approach was appropriately flexible and open-ended, allowing me to maneuver between learning and making, and knowing and making. As suggested by the title I chose for this dissertation, initial projects were created in response to basic ontological questions: "who am I, where do I come from, and where am I going." Reflection upon the action involved posing the question of *where* these projects had positioned myself as an artist and researcher (Figure 5-2). Finally, because to take a position is a declaration of belonging, culturally and politically, the implications of that belonging were also assessed.

5.1 Before Immigration

Often it seems that the modern history of Palestine is both overly familiar and entirely unknown. Thus, this section begins with a review of the key points from that history and their relation to contemporary conditions. For the whole of the twentieth century, the people of Palestine were engaged in a national struggle for independence, first from under British colonialism in Palestine, and later, after the 1948 *Nakka*, from under Israeli occupation. The establishment of the Jewish state led directly to a great exodus of Palestinians and the loss of Palestine as a homeland for Palestinians. No Palestinian who left has been allowed to return. In other words, the Zionist movement and its agendas brought about the forced displacement of the majority of the Palestinians and created the modern condition of Palestinian exile. As Edward Said described it,

⁸⁸ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 79.

*Perhaps this is the most extraordinary of exile's fates: to have been exiled by exiles, to relive the actual process of up-rooting at the hands of exiles. All Palestinians during the summer of 1982 asked themselves what inarticulate urge drove Israel, having displaced Palestinians in 1948, to expel them continuously from their refugee camps in Lebanon.*⁸⁹

Said's analysis is useful not only for its reflection on the weird symmetry of exiles producing further exile, but because it also details the rhythm of that exile even after 1948. For example, the second major historical event occurred in 1967, an event called in Arabic *al-Naksa*, which was a war between Israel, Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, lead to a new displacement of Palestinians. As a result of that war, Israel annexed the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Jerusalem and has been occupying them since.

Additionally, parallel to this massive displacement, there has been a form of interior displacement of the Palestinians who remain within their geographic homeland in Israel. As historians like Ilan Pappé have observed, the shameful result of the intersection of colonial histories is that Palestinians then and today have almost no rights, including being able to live in peace and security on their own land in their own state that no longer exists. Palestinians who are not in Diaspora (i.e. living outside the bounds of their geographical homeland in other countries) either live in Israel as unwanted Arab citizens with few rights, or in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where their lives are suspended in limbo in an occupied country in which they're subjected to daily institutionalized and codified racism and persecution.⁹⁰ Put even more directly by legal scholar Darryl Li, "For over forty years, ten million people between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea have lived under a single segregated political regime – the State of Israel."⁹¹

Given these particularities of the modern history of Palestine, it has followed that the question of identity remains fundamental to Palestinian aspiration. Palestinians have engaged rigorously in establishing and linking their identity as Palestinians to the place of their origin, doing so in contrast to the Zionist narrative of "Palestine is a land with no people, for people with no land."⁹² The identity question remains rooted in both popular

⁸⁹ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (2000), 178.

⁹⁰ Ilan Pappé, *the ethnic cleansing of Palestine*.

⁹¹ Darryl Li, "Occupation Law and the One-State Reality," *jadaliyya.com*
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2295/occupation-law-and-the-one-state-reality>

⁹² "A land without a people for a people without a land" is a widely-cited phrase associated with the reintroduction of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. Although usually assumed to have been a Zionist slogan, the phrase was used as early as 1843 by a Christian Restorationist clergyman and it continued to be fairly widely used for almost a century by Christian Restorationists. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century period in which this phrase was in common use, the Arab

and high cultures, and affects Palestinians in exile as well as those who live in Israel, such as myself from 1969 until 2000. Culture remains the practice of the group rather than the individual. Moreover, because of this history of collective struggle, the political and the cultural function as parallel processes that intertwine within a nation-preserving project, often resulting in the loss of meaningful borders between culture and politics.

In their study of Palestinian art, its practices and contexts, Bashir Makhoul and David Sweet offer a useful three-part schema of the groups who comprise the body of "Palestinian practitioners."⁹³ The first group are those who continue to work in the geographical Palestinian homeland, (now known as Israel). The second are those displaced into camps in the Occupied Territories -West Bank and Gaza- ruled, with some recent exceptions, by the Israeli military authorities. The third, and largest group are the exiles, most of whom are refugees. He also observes that one might predict that the centre of Palestinian art would be in Palestine itself, but this is not the case. Those who regard themselves as Palestinian, and live in the geographical homeland (ie Israel), are typically seen by others as having the most compromised national identity of the three groups. Part of the difficulty in terms of the perception of this group's loyalties has to do with the art institutions, such as art schools and galleries, available to them. These are controlled by majority Israeli interests, and as a result, Palestinians within Israel tend to be offered only the options of being ignored as artists, or assimilating into the Israeli art community.

Since the mid-1960s Palestinian cultural practice on all three fronts has revolved heavily around the national liberation movement. Political leaders have endorsed this practice. In 1979, in Beirut, at the opening ceremony for the first conference of the Palestinian Artists Union, Yasser Arafat – then the leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) – proclaimed, "In our revolution, the gun merges with the brush of the revolutionary artist, the pen of the writer, the scalpel of the surgeon, the sewing needle of the Palestinian girl, and the healing touch of the nurse into the frontier of the revolution. This complete creative platform forms our revolution. Our revolution is a civilizational revolution standing in the face of the abuse of civilization."⁹⁴ Arafat's statement reflects the national agenda of Palestinian cultural practice. We can track its

inhabitants of Palestine did not in their view constitute a coherent national group, "a people", and, therefore, Christian Restorationists argued that the "land of Israel" should be given to the Jewish people. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_land_without_a_people_for_a_people_without_a_land

⁹³ Bashir Makhoul and David Sweet, "Palestinian Art on Three Fronts"

<http://www.bashirmakhoul.com/publication/publications.html>

⁹⁴ Text on the website of the Palestinian Artists Union. <http://www.palartist.com/news/15>

manifestation across different disciplines. Themes of resistance and cultural identity have been the dominant subject matter in painting, film, graphic design, poetry, music and writing. For example, the Palestinian refugee artist Ismail Shamout led the Visual Arts Section of the exiled Palestine Cultural Ministry, under the PLO, from 1964 until the early 1990s. Over this period, the PLO was based in Beirut, Lebanon, and later moved to Tunis where it remained until 1993. Shamout adopted a platform of Socialist Realism in his art practice, and advocated for the values of art for the masses and in the service of the resistance movement. Additionally, the PLO's poster art, as well as paintings and literature by its members and sympathizers, demonstrate an inspiration from Soviet design. The affinities are not incidental, as the USSR and its programmatic approach to graphics and art, was seen to offer effective visual languages for mobilization in the name of a cause.⁹⁵

5.2 The Palestinian in Israel: Art and politics

The situation for Palestinian artists who live and practice within Israel's 1948 boundaries is slightly different. While cultural questions there also remain intimately linked to political activism, the key differentiating point regarding support for Palestinian artists inside Israel is that patronage came almost solely from the Communist party. From the 1960s to the mid-1980s, the Communist Party was the leading political party among the Arab Palestinian minority in Israel and it was the only party in Israel's elections to lobby for the Palestinian right of self-determination. The majority of its membership in Israel is Arab. Its newspaper, *al-Ittihad*, is an Arabic-language daily and the only Communist daily printed in the Middle East. Effectively, while the Communist Party in Israel was a fully Israeli entity in the sense that it participated in the Israeli election cycle, running candidates for local and national government, the role it played for Palestinian artists living in Israel is similar to the PLO's role for Palestinian artists in exile. The Party was involved in proclaiming and maintaining a Palestinian identity.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that the themes and forms of Socialist Realist influence on Palestinian policy and practice did not occur in simply in an amorphous, cultural context, but through more concrete political channels too. Here I am referring to a Socialist Realism as a product of the Soviet political system and how, in the Arab world, it was implemented in full awareness of the connection. For example, the PLO was established in 1964 by the Arab League and with the support of Gamal Abdel Nasser – then president of Egypt, leader of the pan-Arab movement, and a major proponent of Arab socialism. Egypt at the time was supported and armed by the Soviet Union, and culturally the Egyptian Revolution advocated the same principles in art and culture practiced in the Soviet Union, where artistic expression shifted from the individual's experience to the political woes of the masses. The PLO, as an exile government, modeled itself on this example, adopting the principles of Socialist Realism. www.palartist.com/news/15

Moreover, as a body that gave patronage to artists, it tended to promote a Socialist Realist ideological platform with a Russian genealogy.

Almost all of the group of Palestinian artists who practiced visual art within Israel were active in the Communist Party and received their education in art schools in the socialist Eastern bloc countries. For example, Abed Abdi (b. 1942), a leading figure in contemporary Palestinian art in Israel, studied printmaking and painting in the Fine Arts Academy in Dresden, East Germany (1964) by means of a Party-facilitated fellowship. Upon return, he worked as the art director of *al-Ittihad*. He was also a mural painter and sculptor who exhibited his work locally and designed many monuments in various Arab cities and villages, all the while working on the Communist Party's propaganda publications.

In 1968, Ghassan Kanafani published a groundbreaking book titled *The Palestinian Resistance Literature Under Occupation, 1948-1968*.⁹⁶ The book introduced, for the first time, the cultural production – in particular the poetic work – of a group of Palestinian poets and intellectuals from the Israeli Communist party as producers of resistance culture. He argued that cultural resistance is equally important as armed struggle in the liberation of Palestine. He declared that Mahmoud Darwish, Imir Habibi, Tawfiq Sayyagh, Fowzi Al-Asmar were all producing innovative creative work that fit into the Palestinian revolutionary aspiration. What was groundbreaking about the study is that, in the Arab world, there had been no awareness of any Arab cultural production within Israel. Kanafani's book was the first to recognize these practitioners and their work within the shared struggle for Arab liberation. It broke the Israeli monopoly over these voices. The book should also be noted for its Marxist grounding, and its understanding of cultural production as a political praxis.

I too worked for *al-Ittihad* as a young artist in the 1990s, doing lay-out and drawing political cartoons under a pseudonym, among other activities. Abed was my art teacher. Habibi was my boss at the newspaper. Thus, my access to the collective project of Palestinian nation building was mediated through the Communist Party, and I was brought into a direct encounter with the aesthetic platform and vision of an imagined Socialist state. I emphasize this point not because the Party in any way desired or managed to prescribe a single aesthetics for the work of young artists in my generation. In fact, they supported many almost without regard to aesthetic style. Rather, it is to point out that the socialist realist aesthetic that may be noticed across all the "fronts" of

⁹⁶ Ghassan Kanafani, *Al-Adab al-Falastini al-Muqawam that al-Ihtilal 1948-1968* (Beirut: Mu'asassat al-Dirasat al-Falastiniyya. 1968).

Palestinian creative practitioners actually draws on several different types of causes and political orientations. The identity-based motifs that might seem to unify Diaspora aesthetics are more ideologically complex than their straightforward “nationalist” appearance.

In 1999, I was invited by the curator of the Haifa Museum of Contemporary Art to take part in the First International Triennale of Installation Art. My proposal was to create a site-specific installation that would be an idealized reproduction of a tree house that I used to build in my childhood, together with my friends and brother. The idea for the work developed out of my personal relationship to the museum space during my childhood. The museum was located on a plot of land that lay immediately adjacent to our Palestinian neighborhood, Wadi al-Nisnas. Thus, the museum’s parking lot and backyard used to be the playground for the Palestinian kids in the neighborhood. I and my friends used to literally occupy the space over our summer holiday, building a tree house in one of the trees in the backyard of the museum. The materials for the tree house were “borrowed” from the next-door Beit al-Karma, a community theatre house. The construction of the house was my and my brother’s responsibility because we could use the tools and the methods that we inherited from our father, who comes from a family of builders. After we would build the house in a middle-sized tree in the museum yard, we would play in it. But when we would leave, the museum guard would inevitably come and demolish it. We would return and rebuild it. Thus, without consciously enacting it, we were playing out the dynamic of demolishing and building that defines the relationship between the Israeli state and its Palestinian citizens on a micro-level. As kids, we didn’t understand or know anything about politics except that the backyard of the museum had a name that the Palestinian community of Wadi al-Nisnas had given it: Mala’ab al-Yehud, in English, the playground of the Jews. The museum building had once been a high school belonging to the Protestant church, but the Israeli government had confiscated it. Sub-consciously for us, this was a risk-taking activity. The museum tolerated our risky activities for some time until the situation changed it built a metal fence to close access to its backyard.

Nineteen years later in 1999, for the first time, I entered the museum through the main gate as an artist and offered to rebuild this house as an art piece. I drew up the plan, the drawings and then presented them to the Haifa Museum. Its museum technicians followed my specifications to build, paint, and install the artwork on the same location. The difference of time meant that the tree house was not built in a tree, but rather on the railing that ringed the museum grounds, with its back end protruding into

the street behind the museum but its entrance opening off the museum grounds. My understanding of my relationship to the invitation extended by the Haifa museum was expressed by this location for this “Dream House” (Figure 5-1). I installed it in a space that I knew well, from my own childhood, and also a space that was outside the bounds of the museum institution. It was a way of saying “I don’t belong to you.” This response to their invitation was completely grounded in my practice as an artist and activist in the time, so that my piece was conceived as a political statement. The politics of the piece were immediately grasped by British curator Gordon Horn, who visited the Triennale, and whom I had invited to write about my work. In his text entitled “Whose Dream Home Is It?” he examines the notion of Israel as a homeland for its nation and the position of Palestinians living next door to the museum. The museum never published this text.⁹⁷

5.3 My Migration

In 2000, I uprooted myself from this local context and undertook my migration to New Hampshire in the United States. My own personal journey as a Palestinian who, over time and in multiple stages, became American, follows a structure of in common with that I outlined for Attia and Al Fadhil: break from the past involving the stripping of national markers, and reformation in the present by means of a choice made between Diaspora and a form of assimilation. I arrived in the United States, found my existing sense of how art and culture operated to hold little direct applicability to my new conditions, and also found that a certain Diaspora, or ethnic, category also existed as a readymade template for anything new that I might make. I was faced with the challenge of understanding, then testing, my options for a new position and context – a process of reflection in which this dissertation has also played a part. Such reflection and testing was in fact an intuitive and urgent response to my new position. The stark truth is that after arriving in a new country, one starts out as nothing, a total stranger, what is in legal terminology called an *alien*. I personally discovered that living as a legal alien is a process of estrangement. I came to the United States with a Masters Degree in Art Practice but I arrived with no immediately marketable skills. This feeling of lack, the fear that I lacked relevant skills, was compounded by the profoundly rural character of New Hampshire and its distance from centers of intense artistic activity. I lost interest in my craft as I felt my roots cut out from under me. Serious questions arose in terms of my artistic interests and my daily practice. In over twenty-four months, I produced only one

⁹⁷ It was eventually reproduced not by the museum, but rather in a Canadian project book titled *home project*, edited by Patti Young Kim (Halifax: 106 Press, 2002), 22.

piece of video art, *Dead Sweet* (Figure 5-3). I showed nothing in the United States, only abroad and in projects that had been planned before my departure.

In 2002, I moved from New Hampshire to New York. This was a turning point for my practice because it forced a new process of reflection on my position as an immigrant and an artist. I was back in the city and there, for the first time in my life, I belonged to an ethnic group. In Israel, I had been a stranger in my homeland. In New Hampshire, I became an alien immigrant in a foreign land. But upon arriving in New York, I found an Arab-American identity ready and waiting for me. The first job I found was as a youth recruiter for an Arab-American family support center, where I worked with young Arab immigrant school children to create programs that promoted youth empowerment and ethnic identity. Concomitantly, I was designing graphics for the same community. I created graphics for clients in the support center's community as well as American companies looking to break into the Arab-American market. I even produced advertising campaigns for Dish Network, marketing Arabic television to the Arab-American community. Finally, in 2003, I also joined a group of artists, filmmakers, graphic designers and activists involved in the cultural world of New York to together establish a non-profit organization for the arts called ArteEast. The group's manifesto was to introduce and promote Middle Eastern art and culture to the American public. ArteEast was created in the aftermath of the events of September 11 when the US was shifting into a new era of post-Cold War politics, in which Islamic fundamentalism became the new enemy. We found that this context put our project in a strange position, with some in the Arab American community suspicious of us (particularly because of the British Jewish origin of one of our members) from the "inside" while anti-Arab sentiment in the States made reception on the "outside" uncertain as well. At ArteEast I was nominated to the post of art director and I served as president of the board for two years. There I became acutely aware of the complexity of the migration phenomenon within larger social and political contexts.

5.4 Killing Time ("Queens International," Queens Museum of Art, 2004)

In 2004, I was invited by the curator of the Queens Museum of Art in New York to take part in the Queens International, an exhibition meant to showcase the best work by Queens-based artists. The work produced for the show was a response to my new involvement with the Arab-American community. Queens has the highest percentage of immigrant artists in the United States and the museum is highly aware of the immigrant

composition of its audiences and its relationship to it. In the context of this invitation, I proposed the piece that became “Killing Time” (Figure 5-4) The work is the first work I made and exhibited in New York, and it explores my new location as a newly-arrive immigrant. The piece was structured like a photo diary that documented a shisha café on Steinway Street in Astoria, Queens, which essentially manifests as a displaced Egyptian shisha café. My work interrogated the distortion of spatial and temporal experiences within the café – a distortion that followed from the displacement of the Arabic-speaking immigrant community, and the attempt of its male members to re-create the sense of familiarity denied them elsewhere in their American life.

I had noticed the café a few months after moving to Queens. I saw that it was topped with an American flag and emblazoned with the title “the Arab-American Community Center of Queens.” This name, and the displaced population within, struck me as a paradigm of Diaspora. This status became the focus of a new body of research into the status of the Arab immigrant in America. In particular, the café routine and its separate existence from everything else in the neighborhood (including the Starbucks only two storefronts away) – the certain regulars who would come, occupy the same seats and tables, and order the same things, day in, day out – became an object of my intense scrutiny. I had never frequented shisha cafés back in Israel. I had always felt serious discomfort in the inert atmosphere of such male-dominated places: spots where tea and coffee are sipped; water pipes smoked; and cards, dominoes, and shesh besh (backgammon) are played for hours at a time with endless monotony. But once I entered its analogue in the United States, I planted myself in a particular corner so that I could better observe the events and the dialogues and monologues of all the café’s visitors as well as inspect my simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the setting. Every night I would arrive at around 7pm, take my place and listen to the conversations around me. I became accustomed to the rhythms and the habits taking place within what was essentially a stalled life cycle of the café setting.

The form the piece took at the Queens Museum of Art, in which I was dubbed a “Palestinian-American,” was a photographic installation. I played the sound of quiet chatter and music from the café from a speaker in the gallery space. I printed my photographs in a large-scale format, composing a photographic study of men in the café: leaning back and reading a newspaper, smoking, talking on mobiles, projecting a kind of bored ease. Overall, I used the analytical visual language of sociology in order to talk about the condition of immigration as a set of social mores, of something produced. I was interested in how the condition of Diaspora became a designed environment, a

space of deliberate ambiguity meant to exist as simultaneously as home (in that it looks identical to a café in Egypt) and not-home (in that it must be visited; entered and vacated day after day).

5.5 Art Practice as a Reflection in Migration

"Killing Time" marks a turning point for my approach to the broad theme of cultural displacement. I had become a U.S. citizen. I finally held a national passport that I had chosen. I had taken up a position as an American with a specified ethnic standing, what critics and curators who write about my work often characterize as a "Palestinian-American artist."⁹⁸ But at the same time, I had begun to produce works of conceptual photography that explored my conceptions about migration as part of what I saw as a New York City émigré culture, an urban culture that does not accommodate Diaspora as a political ideology. From here, I left New York in 2006 and began my PhD and this sustained research into the theories and applications of Diaspora.

The subsequent parts of this chapter's analysis are divided into sections corresponding to specific positions within my migratory movement as an artist and the new cultural contexts I entered into, coupled with a discussion of the art projects that responded to my new positioning. In doing so, I am focusing on the links between the change in my location and the change in my creative practice. The final exhibited projects that will be discussed below must be seen as components of my larger, ongoing process of conceptual and visual research into migration as a phenomenon and an idea. It was through this research that eventually identified Diaspora and its application in the Arab context as a subject for my dissertation. My MPhil study was also an outgrowth of this research. My studio-based practice must also be recognized as a key component of the findings presented here, particularly as a means to test the application of the Diaspora position. My practice also explored migration as set of forms and formats of cultural displacement, including issues of Diaspora. Each exploration produced different aesthetic and conceptual outcomes. When I began my studio practice as a PhD student in England, I sought a way to move away from the documentary mode I had pursued in "Killing Time," with its highly specific emphasis on life in New York, so as to take on issues of cultural displacement by more metaphorical means. I sought to identify equivalents that were not tied to specific human identities and turned to nature as a source of more abstracted or 'essential' migratory patterns. The phenomenon of bird

⁹⁸ For example, Sarah Rogers in Amirsadeghi, H. S Mikdadi, and Shabout. *New Visions*.

migration emerged as the most prominent natural phenomenon, a case in which the primitive basic needs of movement found in nature could be mapped back on to human patterns. I decided to focus on it and began to develop a series of projects and experiments that used the image of birds and/or the patterns of bird behavior as a basis. I was fascinated by the behavior of migratory birds, particularly as a group of travelers with a leader. They would move from one place to another in a cycle, almost creating a performance of patterns. I also searched the collection of British military photographs of Mandate Palestine that could be found in the libraries in England. There, I found fleeting images of a few flocks of birds, caught by accident in the margins of the military's actual interest in landscape, tools, and people. The ephemera of the mass of the birds, and the out-of-placeness of their nonetheless natural and habitual movements became a central concern in my work. These forms of visual research and their application in my practice will also be discussed.

5.6 Dust and Dispute (Um el-Fahem Art Gallery, 2007)

In 2007, a contemporary art center in the Arab city of Um al-Fahem located in the east of the modern state of Israel hosted an exhibition titled "Dust and Dispute." I showed the first piece there that took the visual, theoretical and historical research dealing with issues of migration and displacement that I had been conducting as its basis. I created large-scale photographic images of flocks of birds in flight, each single frame locked into a pattern of migration that, as an image, gave no overt indication of destination or departure point. These were produced using the same low resolution digital processing used for billboard images (Figure 5-5). Each of these huge images of birds actually depicted a very specific species of bird in flight, one that I had learned fly away from Palestine every winter, crossing the Atlantic, and passing by England, only to return the next season. These birds are called the Sununu. I first knew of them through the songs of Lebanese pop star Fairuz, whose lyrics mention the Sununu as metaphors for cycles of return in the region. In the year that I was pursuing this research into the migratory habits of birds, I read in the newspaper that eight million Sununu would be passing through Somerset, England. The region contained a range of habitats that attracted over three hundred species of birds, as well as a community of committed birders who documented their movements and habits over their annual migration cycles. I went there to join them and to wait for the birds' arrival, and to document their appearance and movement. Through my experience of traveling to a site and carefully waiting for a wave of immigrant birds to appear, I began to develop a photographic collection of patterns of

visuals and social behavior. I continued to visiting many locations, followed the news on BBC, and surfed the web on line about bird migration schedules and locations. All these forms of research generated a massive amount of information that had fed back into my research, directly me to the next site of data collection (a process that continued after the 2007 exhibition).

The exhibition *Dust and Dispute* was a group show of three artists – me, Bashir Makhoul, and Oded Shimshon – all of whom all come from the same patch of land in the north of what has been made into the state of Israel. Each of us had begun our artistic education in Israel, then studied abroad, and eventually built careers as artists and academics in the UK. Another thing we had in common is that the three of us repeatedly traveled back to Palestine/Israel (although never together), and in this act of return, the process of photographing the landscape had become a necessary aspect of the experience. As we wrote in the catalog, our need to use the camera seemed to be a need to reveal just how our eyes contemplated the landscape – “At this particular time, in this particular place, this is how I see *my* land.” Yet my actual piece in the exhibition did not show the land at all. The photographs I finally put on display were meant as a document of my position as an artist who refused to stay fixed into a single position. I was trying to show the audience something that could not be touched or fixed.

The piece was well received by the audience at the exhibition and in newspaper reviews. However, to my dissatisfaction, the photographs seemed to resonate with the audience because of the romance of the image – they were huge and appealing and included melodramatic aspects such as the sunrise – and because of the nostalgia of the associations with the Fairuz song. As I reflected on the outcome of the displayed work, I felt that there was a disconnect between the final visual and the processes that had produced it. My personal travel to Somerset, and my documentary behaviors tracking the birds, did not seem integral to the resulting images of a bird suspended in flight. Although my reflection-in-practice had produced a series of aesthetically and emotionally pleasing work, that work had drifted too far from the context of actual existing migration processes and the diaspora conditions that result. After reflecting on my practice, I decided to shift my direction and work to develop work that was not straightforwardly documentary. It would still be based upon my image bank of photographic documentation, but instead work as a generative structure or program that would generalize the source images into patterns.

5.7 Expansion of Design Methods

As a response to the still unresolved aspects of the Dust and Dispute experiment, I reformulated my approach to my practice in a way that incorporated methods more frequently associated with design than fine art in its traditional sense. I decided to work toward creating a system that would actually create a statement about migration and positioning using my collected data rather than simply display that data as a photographic fact. In order to do so, I sought ways to use my own computer as a virtual studio that itself would be mobile and without a single anchorpoint. To use the portable computer as a studio seemed consistent with the research subject itself, that of movement and displacement (as opposed to locality and emplacement). I also began to work as if I were a designer, meaning that I would draw on my theoretical and conceptual research to create a brief and then hire assistants to work on the brief. I wanted to produce my new works through this decentralized apparatus in a manner befitting my post-Diaspora feeling. In the same year, I had accepted a position teaching in an art school in Monterey, Mexico, and the dramatic quality of the difference in location between England and Mexico only heightened my sense that a virtual design approach was necessary in order to create statements about migration rather than simply "show" migration. I shared the photographic and textual data I had collected with an assistant located in England and an assistant located in Mexico and asked them to increase the data bank even further. Each performed thousands of web searches on Google using the search terms "immigrant" and "exile" in multiple languages, filing away the graphic representations that were associated with these concepts. We then worked to distill the information into more distilled patterns or forms. Concomitantly, I realized just how textual in nature the conceptions of Arab Diaspora had become. As discussed in my Introduction, even the classic phenomenon of the *mahjar* revolved around a literary community and a writing project. Reflecting on this phenomenon, I decided to take the photographic data about bird behaviors and migration that my team had assembled and to distill it into a set of bird form typefaces that would allow me to literally type testimony about migration using images of movement.

5.8 Don't You Forget About Me

"Don't you forget about me!" was the first full project that developed as an outcome of my virtual studio and design process. It took the form of a simple poster that I designed while working in Bangkok, Thailand (a position I took after my Monterey job). The piece ultimately became a networked art project of decentralized and site-specific contributions from my friends and acquaintances, all curated online by me as a global

communication art project exploring themes of distance, mobility, transit and arrival.⁹⁹ My poster presents the imperative “Don’t forget about me!” (Figure 5-6) in a typeface I designed from the bird migration images I had been gathering over the previous years. The title came from a powerful, real-time good-bye I had experienced in the Spring of 2009, when I was preparing to leave Monterey and the set of relationships that had become unexpectedly meaningful to me, in order to return to London and continue work on my PhD. A dear friend of mine who came to say goodbye had left with tears in her eyes and the wish, “I hope you don’t forget about me.” She had also given me a gift, which I opened later. It contained a pack of postcards and a beautiful poem that cast me as an obstinate Palestinian man, doomed to storm off angrily, smell like “incomprehensible past,” fly from nest to nest, and always come back in search of land. My project thus began by asking how one person, the “you,” might manage to not forget about another, the “me.” On the poster itself, this sentence is typed in a typeface that I designed and called EXILE I. Each character is a distilled rendering of a bird in flight, based on years of research around issues of human and animal migration performed while my own movements ranged across a geographic distance through Mexico, England, New York, and elsewhere. Thus, each character references moments within a trajectory of migration (both mine and the theirs).

To live in Bangkok had brought with it an acute sense of intellectual and cultural separation that I had never experienced before. I had few colleagues with whom to talk about my work, and no receptive audience for my work or even my approach to making work. My realm of meaningful, creative living had migrated to Facebook and Skype almost exclusively. I found that I obsessively update my status, send notifications, and create my moods via online feeds. My daily social life is fully dependent on the social network. “Don’t You Forget About Me” as a piece can be read as an acknowledgement and exploitation of the new reality that I inhabited, one in which the real and the virtual could not be separated neatly. Realized in a form that would leave me with no physical traces, it refuses to act like a keepsake. I disseminated the poster as a .pdf, made available via a blog and a “Don’t forget about me!” Facebook event. Recipients were told to print out my “Don’t you forget about me!” poster and use it as the subject of a photo shoot. Each participant was to send me the image, via whatever means were easiest and without regard for aesthetic purity. They were also asked to write a note to accompany their photographs. I was surprised by the depth of the pain of remembering

⁹⁹ The project and all submissions can be viewed on my blog at:
<http://aissadeebiblog.tumblr.com>

that many submissions expressed, the fixation on the horror of needing to remember and the smallness of the contribution of not forgetting. One friend wrote a poem which ended with a line that says: *I know that I exist because I am the memory of the living and dead.* Another friend from Japan folded the poster into a crane, and in her message she talked about Hiroshima: *I can hear the victims of all wars crying out loud, "Don't you forget about me."*¹⁰⁰

One of the effects of the project was a great deal of personal anxiety regarding the motives behind the production of such a global communication project. I did not want the piece to become a work about wish fulfillment, i.e. about making sure that my friends in my electronic network still remembered me. Ultimately, the role of curator came to seem more appropriate. I realized that I was working to create an interactive monument of other peoples' memories – what they recollected, the people and things once forgotten and even those passed but still lingering in the present. The images the project brought together were site-specific ones. The project documented the specific spot that individual others selected, the spot that seemed appropriate to host the poster I had initially designed but subsequently released.

5.9 Current Positioning

Currently, I am a professor of art and design at the American University in Cairo. I now live in the Arab world rather than in what has been described as its Diaspora. Yet I did not arrive here directly. Instead, I "returned" via New York, a place where I became a citizen and a location that accommodates immigrant communities of multiple, overlapping types. This movement was then followed by a series of other displacements. Over the past five years, I have not maintained a single address for either work or residency for more than a year – I produced artwork in Spain, Bahrain, Qatar, Germany, Italy, New York, Palestine, Mexico, and elsewhere. This final section introduces three major projects that I produced from the position of an artist who takes New York as a base even while living abroad, and produced in conjunction with my continuous research as a way to continually re-articulate my position. This is the practice that intersects with my research questions about Diaspora as a sub-genre of cultural displacement, both the process for and an outcome of them.

¹⁰⁰ Yoko Malena WADA

5.10 TERRA INCOGNITA, Valencia, Spain

TERRA INCOGNITA was conceived for a joint exhibition with Spanish artist Alvaro Martin, originally intended for the Valencia museum in Spain and now likely to be installed in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Chile, in 2012 (Figure 5-7). The works will respond to notions of citizenship, notions that are predominantly articulated in relation to regional and global debates over legal processes pertaining to benefits, taxes, and opportunities for economic gain. As I discussed in Chapter Four, in Europe in particular, the centrality of the issues of migration, citizenship and assimilation is wrought through debates about multiculturalism and economic policy.

For my contribution to the exhibition, I conceived of a careful and deliberate video project I called “Last Night.” I wanted only to wait near the southern tip of Spain, the point where newcomers arrive and depart through the Mediterranean Sea, and record the location’s sound and images in time. This would be another way to try to understand migration, with the focus on the migration of those other than myself. Why does crossing this border between Europe and North Africa remain a dream for so many young Arab men? What is that moment made of, how is it seen? For the Valencia gallery, I would then digitally displace this point of entry by composing an 8 channel video installation, projecting eight endless loops of 12 min footage from the point onto museum walls to create a 360-degree landscape. No actual bodies or migrants would be seen in this landscape, of course. I merely wanted to bring this exterior locale to the interior space of an art gallery. ‘Last Night’ is an endeavor that enacts a displacement in time: a previous night becomes a present experience. It questions how we understand movement from one place to another – is it something geographic, temporal, or political? And will it always only be imagined, not proven or made legal? The work became a work composed purely of displacement, enacted without the presence of my own body or “position.”

5.11 Tell al-Samak (Art Laboratory Berlin, 29 April - 26 June, 2011)

In April of this year, I and Al Fadhil prepared a joint exhibition for the Art Laboratory in Berlin entitled *Artists in Dialogue: Aissa Deebi and Al Fadhil, Some Thoughts on Pain*. We saw our project as an exploration of the ties between the personal and political that we had faced by exposure to the blunt pain of losing our brothers to war-making in our countries. Al Fadhil lost one brother to the Iran-Iraq war (that brother was given a martyr’s ceremony, and his father was brought to meet with Saddam

Hussein). He lost a second brother in the civil war that followed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. My own brother Nassim died in the custody of Israeli police in 1999. The medical report labeled the death a suicide, but my family and I suspect that “suicide” is code for a deadly beating at the hands of the police. This subterfuge is common in prison deaths. My friendship with Al Fadhil has developed through our realization that we share the rare kind of intense but indescribable pain that comes from the completely needless deaths of our brothers.

The gallery in Berlin described our exhibition theme as “seeking to locate the personal within the larger historical and social currents that often overwhelm our lives.” They also saw the dialogue between me and al Fadhil as a piece of the new mobility required to make art in the 21st century, where the “artist no longer ‘belongs’ to a local, national or regional ‘school,’ but, along with an ever growing part of the world’s population, belongs to the currents and crosscurrents of globalized migration.”¹⁰¹ Christian de Lutz, director of the gallery, noted how everyone must now travel the world and plug into resources, taking part in residencies, biennales, seminars and conferences all while studying, teaching, living and working in different continents. But he also made the point that such mobility is typically understood as a luxury that grants and institutions support. By contrast, the mobile condition of both Al Fadhil and myself is not typically framed as a benefit. We each qualify for our own respective national Diasporas as well, and therefore can be associated with pain and displacement. Our lives have taken place within the context of the tragic migrations of the twenty-first century: flight from oppressors, one part by ‘choice’ and one part by complete dispossession at the hands of dictators and occupiers. This reading comes out of the gallery’s own exhibition platform in which it is developing a book on the subject of pain, developed in collaboration with nine international scholars.

This over-arching framework aside, the new piece I developed is actually a more subtle investigation into position and pain than any that can be accommodated by a framing of my absence from Palestine as a result of “the tragic migrations of the twenty-first century.” It traced my and my brother's connection to the land we grew up in (Figure 5-8). For this, I did not try to focus on personal details so much as I tried to evoke a space of memory that was slightly out of step with time. I made an understated installation of photographs and titled it Tel al-Samak in reference to our Arabic name for a small strip of coast which was near to my childhood home in Haifa. With it, I wanted to

¹⁰¹ Christian de Lutz, “The Exile as Artistic Forerunner,” ArtLaboratoryBerlin statement (May 2011).

superimpose geography, memory and historical space to form a mere palimpsest of the personal and the political. I had considered portraying my brother Nassim directly, or investigating the police and medical records of his death, but had eventually rejected these. Instead, I showed an intimate snapshot of our childhood.

When we were kids, Nassim and I would often go to Tel al-Samak together. We would skip class at the dull missionary school we attended on Abbas Street and head down to the sea to fish. The piece began by my mapping the route we took to get there. I then asked my friend Makboula in Palestine to photograph it. I described the path and asked her to walk along it, taking an image every thirty seconds. The result was over nine hundred photographs. Through her, I could capture this trip on camera again and, from Cairo (where I now live and work), see the place one more time. Thus I would traverse the few hours separating me from Haifa, and I would also traverse the many years separating me from Palestine. This virtual return to the past reconnects a disembodied self to the space, the land.

For the final piece, I selected sixty-nine photographs. I then used a commercial holographic process called “flip photography,” or lenticular printing, to compose an installation in which each photograph put on display contains at least three of the original photographs from the path to Tel al-Samak. As a result, once the landscape images were installed in formations on the gallery walls, a viewer would see certain views from a certain oblique angle but these would change once he or she walked to another spot in the room, or closer or further from the wall. The effect was that every viewer of these second-hand images (including myself) necessarily occupied a flux position. No one who visited the gallery could fix the relationship of his or her body to the images on display. In this, I was interested in distorting sensory phenomena so as to stir up vivid recollections which reconnect place and time.

Tel al-Samak was not just dedicated to the memory of my younger brother Nassim. Really, it was about him – his tragic exit from life and the way in which that tragedy converted what had been a naughty life filled with troublemaking and struggle into a kind of fantasia past. Thus the wall text I placed to the side of the piece was a series of poetic recollections of Tel al-Samak and its role in my childhood life. For example, my father Hanna used to take Nassim and me there on Saturdays. We would swim and fish for hours, and collect seashells. My father once used some of the seashells to tile the entrance of our house, all the way to the very small orchard we’ve owned. Nassim especially loved to fish and would spend hours preparing the fishing contraption we called the gargira. I provided other memories as well. It was important to

me that these memories did not address the issue of occupation or pain directly. Instead, because the piece takes my Palestinian childhood as a subject, a theme of escape comes out through the tactics of denial and imagination that my brother and I adopted over the course of our lives in an occupied city. For example, along the path in Tel al-Samak on display in the gallery, there were few signs of a colonial presence. One saw no Hebrew at all, for example (the only intrusion was one Israeli reconnaissance base built into one of the churches on the mountainside). Palestinians in Haifa used to say that Zionism couldn't change the water. We felt that the sea, at least, could not be altered. The beach offered us a kind of escape.

Altogether, *Tel al-Samak* represents a new update in my thinking about my personal journey as a Palestinian who, over time and in multiple stages, became American. As a result of the specificity of my passage and my homeland, I still cycle through attitudes of accepting and rejecting "Diaspora art" as a conceptual position. In this particular work, I can see that I have reaffirmed my deep attachment to my homeland at the same time I announced my glaring absence from it: the flux position. If I am recalling aspects of my homeland, I am doing so from the position of nomad artist. My memories of an escapist childhood are rendered into strange and displaced visions that hang outside any one person's head. In turn, the sense of pain that the piece explores is very personal. It stems from the fact that in 2000, I actually did leave the conditions of the ghetto apartheid in which we had lived in Israel. After that, I no longer had to imagine that I was elsewhere.

5.12 But I am the Immigrant (Bahrain, upcoming December, 2011)

This piece comes out of my long process of research into migration behavior using birds and their flight as a subject. As described above, in 2007, I began to track flight patterns using a variety of means, photographing and mapping and in-person observation. I also worked with this documentation to create a series of constructed photography pieces as a component of the research practice. I adopted a procedure-based approach to understanding this behavior, mapping and characterizing shapes. In order to convert my findings into an actual art piece, I wanted to go beyond merely representing images of birds in flight or their flight patterns. I began to think through how to automate the creation process, making the production of forms of migration into a system without a direct relation to myself. Finally, I settled on designing a typeface that I called Migration. Each character in the character set, is a figure taken from the body of photographic documentation of birds in flight that I had already assembled. To type a

sentence is to type a sequence of black bird outlines, arrayed in white space. Thus, I can create an artist's book that is not designed to be read.

The final, resulting work became a book of 100 pages. Each page is one composition of migration, composed through a processing of my research by means of a typed out font. Using my keyboard and word processing software, I typed out the bird forms onto the page in the same formation as the flight patterns I had photographed and recomposed as drawings. (Figure 5-9). Each page became a black and white inkjet print of birds in flight printed onto glossy photographic paper. In turn, the pages and books become modular, with the birds on each single page only a fraction of the larger group. I will print an edition of twenty-five so that each book holds an exhibition within it. The pages of one will be installed in Bahrain in November. I will also send a book to Palestine, and to Italy. As a set of one hundred pages, they will go on display as a wall grid, each page aligned but separated from the others by a thick metal document frame. The installation will create a sense that the pattern can be extended indefinitely, not primarily because of the gridding of the panels (though that too suggests infinity) but rather because the migration of birds is both understood and experienced as a basic need, an instinctual drive, a part of nature.

The piece's title, *But I Am the Immigrant*, is a reformulation of the famous Mahmoud Darwish line of poetry, "but I am the Exile." By switching "immigrant" for "exile," I am interested in exploring the possibilities of considering the broader spaces of immigration and migration generally, as a movement, rather than focusing on the now identity-laden theme of exile. The work is conceived not as an illustration of my research on migration, but rather a realization of it.

5.13 Conclusion

This chapter discussed my practice as I pursued it in parallel with my theoretical interest in Diaspora. Through a detailed discussion of specific artworks in relation to my self-positioning as a migrant artist, the chapter demonstrated the meeting of my theoretical understanding and my actual ongoing practice engaging issues of migration, movement, and displacement. It also detailed the movement of my position as a practitioner and researcher from the specific historical and social context of contemporary Palestinian art within the different "fronts" of that community toward a Diaspora position in the Arab-American community, and then away from that community as a decentralized artist working with decentralized means of production. My virtual studio experimentation, and my outsourcing of image construction – whether by means

of a typeface, or by a friend's camera in Haifa – demonstrates that the actual condition of change is more important to the creative space of artistic production than my end position within any one group.



Figure 5-1 Aissa Deebi, My Dream House

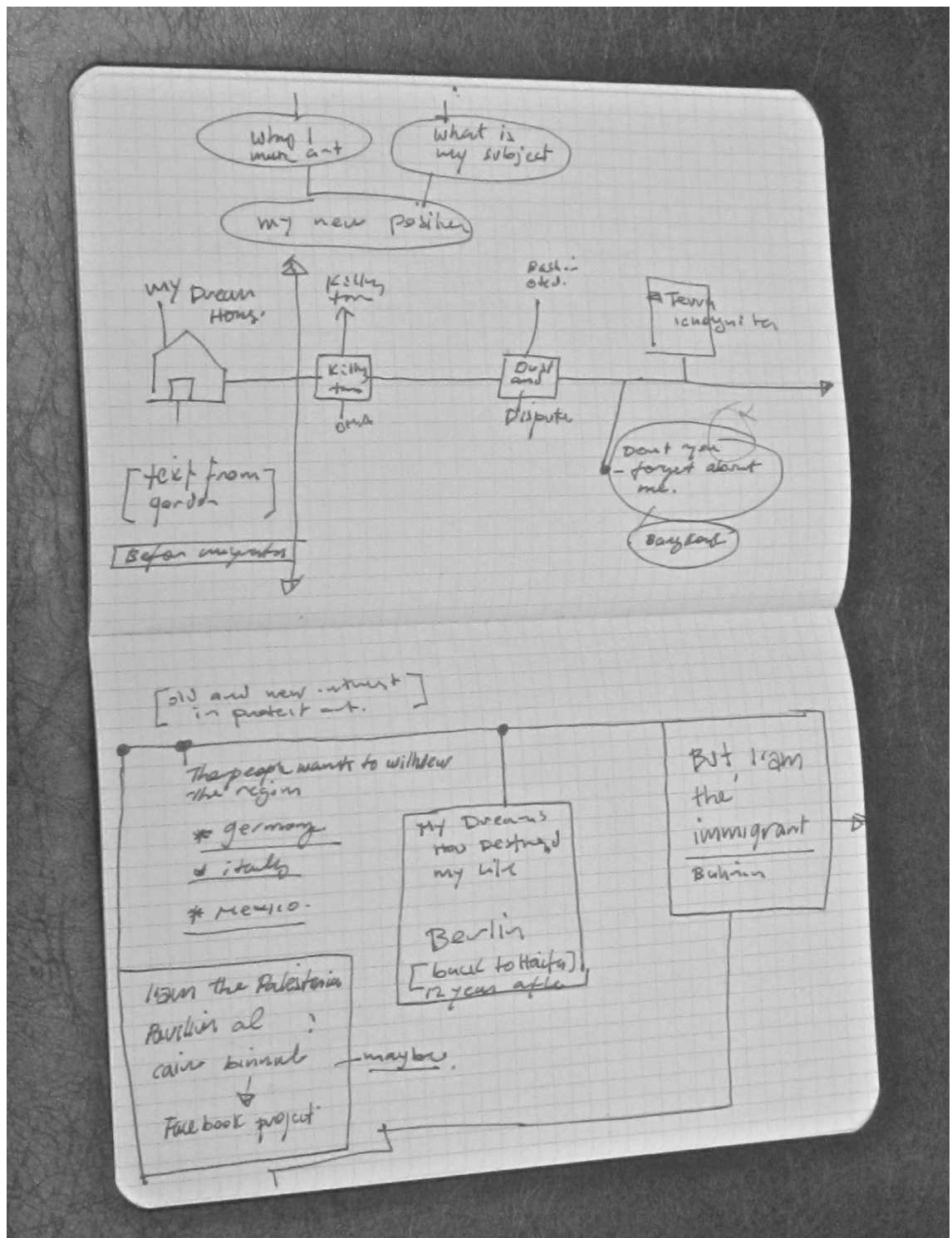


Figure 5-2 Snapshot: Mind mapping Diagram. Artist Creative Process



Figure 5-3 Aissa Deebi, *Dead Sweet*, Video stills. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5-4 Aissa Deebi, *Killing Time*, Installation detail. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5.5 Aissa Deebi, Dust and Dispute. Courtesy of the artist

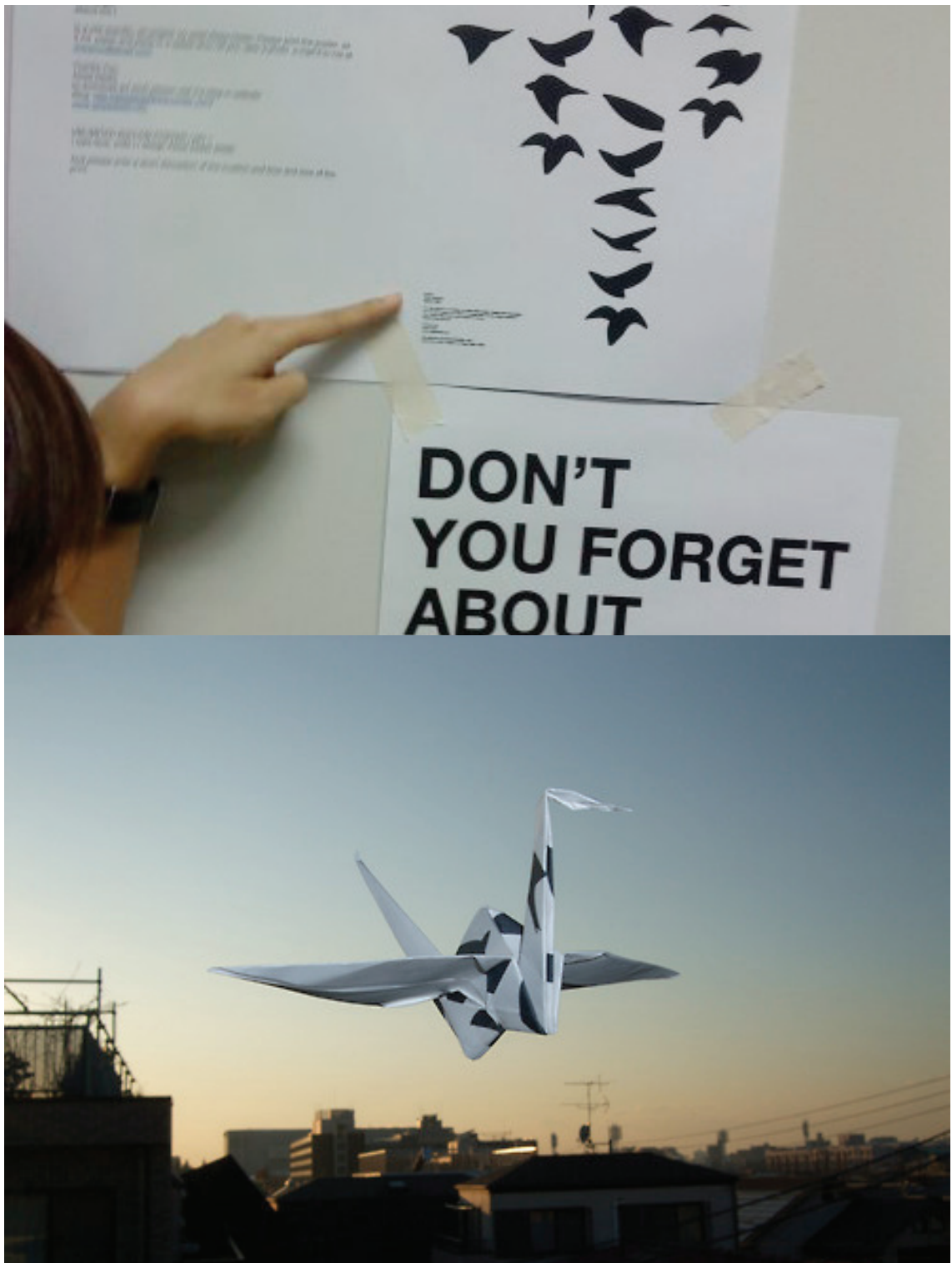


Figure 5.6 Aissa Deebi, Don't you forget about me. Artist blog: <http://aissadee-biblog.tumblr.com/page/4>

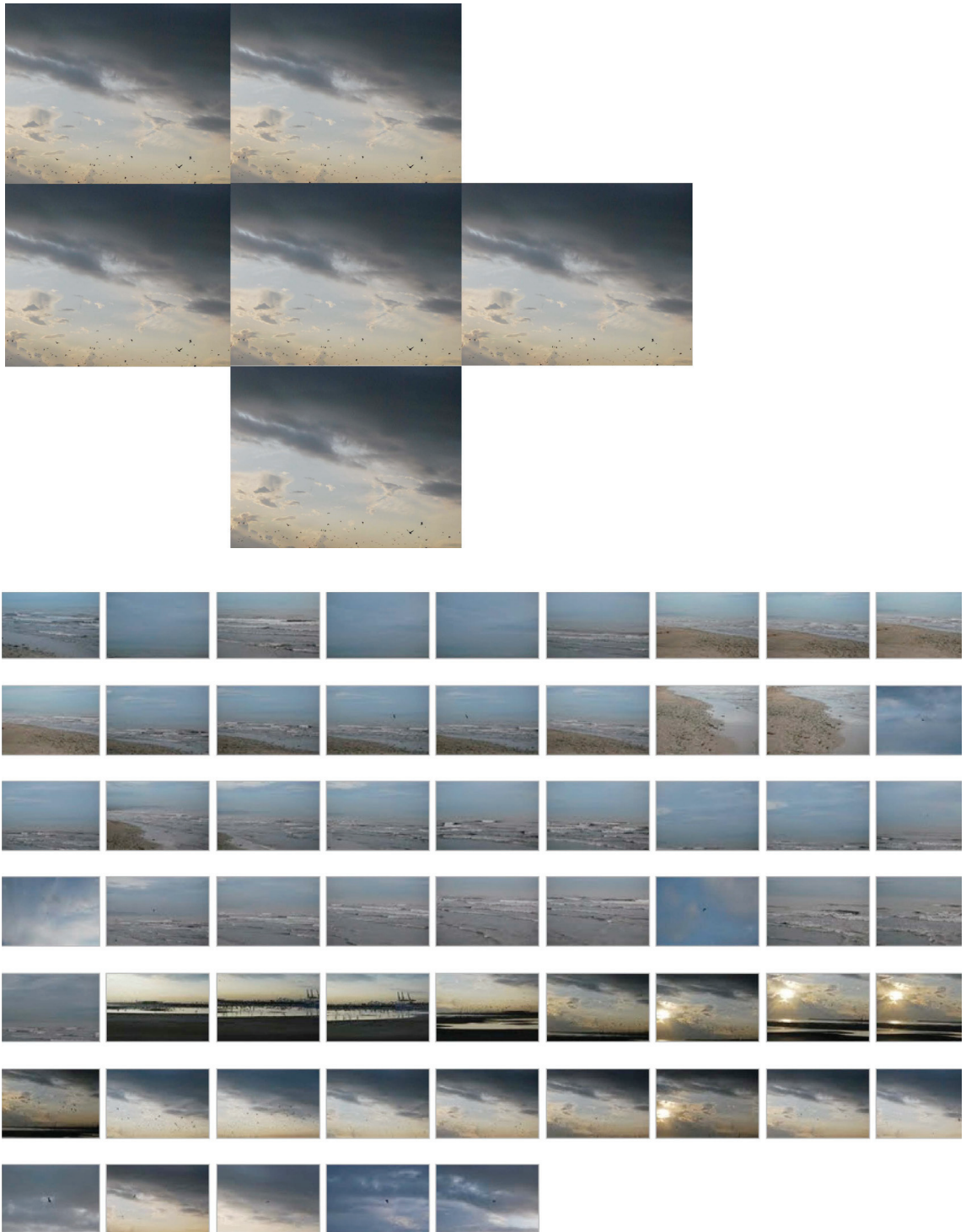


Figure 5-7 Aissa Deebi, Terra Iconogita. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5-8 Aissa Deebi, Tel Al Samak. Installation detail. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5-8 Aissa Deebi, Tel Al Samak. Installation detaile. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5-8 Aissa Deebi, Tel Al Samak. Installation detail. Courtesy of the artist

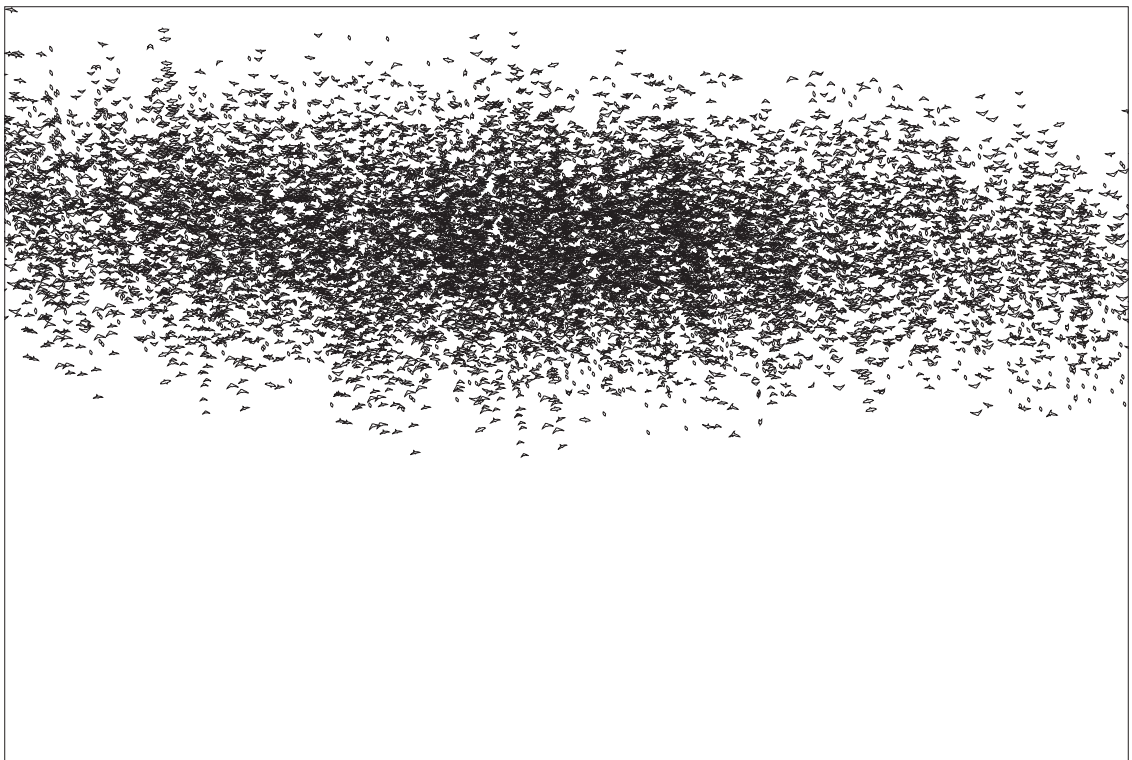
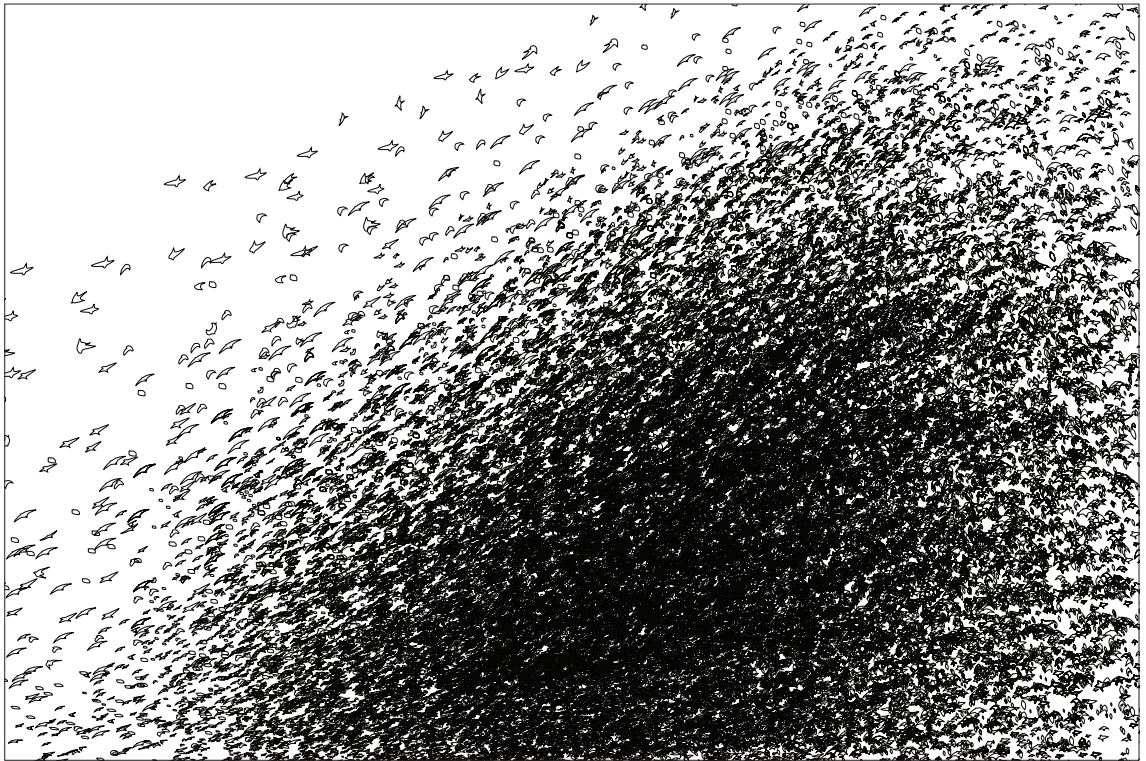


Figure 5-8 Aissa Deebi, But I Am The Immigrant, Courtesy of the artist

Chapter VI

Summary of Conclusions

This dissertation critically examined the concept of diaspora as applied to the Arab experience, particularly its potential application as a creative space for Arab artists who live and work outside their countries of origin in Europe or America. It adopted a qualitative analytical approach meant to bring elements of cultural theory and criticism into interaction with my artistic production and my reflective analysis of it. The theoretical insights offered by existing literature on the topic of migration and diaspora was used as a grounding basis for studio-based research with the purpose of identifying a starting context for experimentation leading to tacit knowledge about Diaspora. The phenomenon of Diaspora, signalled by the use of an uppercase 'D,' was found to indicate a position in mainstream culture that emphasized communities and cultural identities rather than the straightforward fact of a geographic dispersal.

Initial literature reviews suggested that the gap in verifiable knowledge about the Arab Diaspora as an applicable creative space had to do with the romantic versions of Diaspora that postcolonial theory had produced in the 1990s, followed by the new identity politics of the post-September 11 era. Thus, the next stage of research involving questionnaires, study cases, and reflective practice aimed to gather data about three questions: What kind of space for creation is provided to an Arab immigrant artist within actual existing diaspora communities? Does this space differ from the diaspora position that postcolonial theories have identified? What are the uses and limitations of these different models of diaspora for my own practice?

Within this research process, the literature produced by the Arab-American museum and the numerous artist interviews I conducted revealed that the space provided within Diaspora for artistic creation is highly constrained. Many of the artists interviewed felt that Diaspora offered only an extension of the nation-building project, and their reluctance to take on the designation revealed that they were suspicious of ever professing any single delimited identity. My readings of the now large body of literature on the Arab-American diaspora suggested that Diaspora feeds off feelings of mainstream nationalism; it is part of the economy of the nation-building project. Thus, the dissertation offers a fundamental finding about Arab diaspora as a creative space: the commitment to the (home) nation can actually be imagined and sustained in the Diaspora location long after the nation-building project fails in the country of origin. Paradoxically, it is often the failure of a national project that prompts an artist to migrate,

but once he or she opts into the Diaspora location, the appearance of nationalism returns stronger than ever. In this sense, the Diaspora position seems opposed to postcolonial, postmodern condition rather than exemplary of it. Diaspora art is often realized through a daily practice of nostalgia.

The research also demonstrated that the real, existing Diaspora space in the U.S. or Europe does differ from the diaspora position that postcolonial theories have identified. In works like Bhabha's field-defining *The Location of Culture*, the diaspora location as well as other border conditions are formulated as liberated spaces. My research suggests that, once situated in actual Arab-American or Arab European diaspora communities, Diaspora functions in the opposite way. It provides a set of constraints which determine certain aims and valuations upon otherwise highly specific and personal artistic practice. While the early impetus to formulate these research questions came out of my personal position as an immigrant to the United States and my relationships (often uninvited) to the Arab-American community, my ultimate finding is that the notion of diaspora aesthetics offers little analytical insight into my practice or interests as an artist.

With the three case studies that comprise chapters three, four, and five, the specificities of the history of Arab migration were highlighted. The sixty years of modern history in the Arab world and its Diaspora have produced a complex structure of Arab communities existing outside their place of origin. In the United States, where the larger national narrative of the American dream prevails, the Arab Diaspora community is framed as an ethnic sub-group within. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the Arab-American National Museum and its mission to “enhance knowledge and understanding about Arab Americans and their presence in this country” may be taken as a representative institution of this kind of hyphenated identity. This ideal contrasts starkly with the attitudes toward the Arab Diaspora in Europe in which multiculturalism has been the ideal, and the migrant’s new country of residence is termed a “host” rather than an “adopting” country. Given the divergences in Diaspora paradigms that this dissertation tracked, any single specific working definition of ‘Arab Diaspora culture’ was ultimately rejected as not sufficiently descriptive of actual conditions.

Chapter Three offered an examination of the notion of Diaspora in the context of the Iraqi experience. Al Fadhil, a mobile artist who may be seen as a practitioner who claims a critical position relationship to mainstream cultural Diaspora. His positioning as an artist may be termed that of “an outsider within,” meaning that while he and his personal narrative might easily fit into Diaspora, his criticality and his approach to his

work makes this impossible. The chapter reviewed the specifics of his rejection of cultural Diaspora as evidenced in his practice, particularly the shift he made in 2003 in which he became simultaneously an artist, activist, and immigrant. From the 1970s until 2003, the artist had positioned himself and his artwork outside Diaspora culture because he saw it as characterized by false nostalgia and hollow sense of history. After 2003, Al Fadhil politicized his rejection of Diaspora as a cultural project. He now explicitly rejects it on ideological grounds because of its capacity to produce political consensus. Chapter Four introduced the practice of Hamdi Attia and his personal strategies as an artist living between Egypt and the United States who has sought to position himself outside Diaspora culture. The chapter outlined how Attia's strategy involves the perpetually positioning himself as if a local. Attia seems to migrate comfortably between diverse groups of hyphenated identities, motivated by a need to be located as a cultural producer within a narrative and context. This chapter also found that Attia's practice does not fit into the Diasporic cultural framework that is offered by post-colonial discourse and its parameters. It demonstrated that Attia's immigration experience is specific to him rather than broadly a part of any "Arab Diaspora culture." His Egyptian background and history offer a very different relationship to Diaspora, one that remains linked to the modern history of Egypt as well as the United States. Finally, the dissertation discussed my own practice in relation to my theoretical engagement with the notion of migration. The specific projects I developed around the phenomenon of migration, and my reflection upon their success and shortcomings as commentary on the reality of cultural displacement, show how Diaspora as a position does not offer a sufficient creative space for my own moving practice.

To conclude, while the dissertation has argued that Diaspora culture poses itself as a choice, it has also highlighted alternative choices. These three cases – Al Fadhil as an "outsider within," Hamdi Attia as a "parallel local," and myself and my "moving practice" – provided a constellation of cases that are extreme in the context of the research. Some of the other artists interviewed in the research process did draw some minor benefit from the designation "diaspora artist." Zineb Sedira and others, for example, welcomed this descriptive term and in fact in the 1990s built careers on the concept in relation to an emergent sense of global culture. Ultimately, however, the dissertation does not dwell on these mainstream cases as key points within its examination of Diaspora as a creative space. Rather, the dissertation offers a critical examination of Arab diaspora as a creative space after what Stuart Hall identified as the failure of multiculturalism after September 11, 2001. Given the continually shifting

conditions of contemporary artistic production, the categories of "outsider within," "parallel local," and "moving practice" may offer new points of entry into the analysis of art by Arab artists working outside their countries of origin. While these categories are defined as "extreme" positions in relation to mainstream Diaspora, as my research suggests, they do offer an alternative space of creation to practicing artists.

This dissertation studied Arab diaspora as a creative space. The next question must therefore be: What happened after diaspora? A number of possible avenues for future research may be suggested. For example, can it be argued that the process of rejecting Diaspora as a creative space also in some sense extends it? Do the positions of "outsider within," "parallel local," and "moving practice" present an alternative to diaspora? Or its replacement? In a separate but related inquiry, might not the specific Arabic terms for diaspora – including *mahjar*, *ghorba*, and others – offer a set of alternative ways to describe the experience of migration (both physical and conceptual) rather than mere synonyms for diaspora? The research uncovered many instances of artistic rejections of Diaspora as a creative space; these rejections have made it imperative to articulate alternatives to located culture. If the diaspora position remains the only imagined space understood to be relevant for Arab artists, then the collective project of studying contemporary international art practice in all its complexity and ambition will always remain incomplete.

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