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**CELEBRATING WOMEN ARTISTS IN JORDAN:
REFRAMING GENDER ROLES AS RESISTANCE**

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis focuses on women artists in the capital of Jordan, Amman, and particularly on their cultural practices as an expression of a creative agency. These women create independent spaces, cultural initiatives, public performances and original artworks that allow the reframing of gender roles in neoliberal patriarchal societies today. Beyond labeling the emergence of a new female activism, or *femivism*, as feminist or revolutionary, I suggest reading it as the reconfiguration of a new wave of feminisms in Jordan, which engages with the visual arts, the contemporary cultural scene of Amman, the geography of the city and the political commitment, often in informal domains rather than in institutionalized contexts. The analysis of artistic itineraries, performed spaces, collective practices, urban cartographies, personal stories, individual or common artworks form this feminist ethnographical research in which the researcher has engaged, drawing on a postcolonial, postexotic, transnational, intersectional approach.

Key words: women, artists, feminisms, Amman, Jordan, Middle East, ethnography, creative agency, postcolonial, intersectional

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List of Participants of the Research/Interviews in Amman, Jordan (2015-2016)

Deema Dabis, 36 years old, documentary filmmaker, yoga instructor

Dima Maurice, 29 years old, architect, graphic designer, co-founder of “Hayyez”

Sally Shallabi, 38 years old, storyteller

Noura al Khasawneh, 34 years old, artist curator, co-founder of “Spring Sessions”

Lina Khalifeh, 32 years old, taekwondo instructor, founder of “She Fighter”

Reham Sharbaji, 31 years old, art teacher, visual artist

Rawan Zeine, 35 years old, curator, founder of “Ta3leeh”

Maryam Khawsaneh, 27 years old, historian, researcher in filmmaking

Sahar Khalife, 42 years old, singer

Rula Khoury, 34 years old, visual artist

Shermine Sawalha, 33 years old, cultural manager, founder of “Malahi”

Dina Haddadine, 33 years old, architect, painter, visual artist

Natasha Dahdaleh, 31 years old, painter

Lubna Juqqa, 31 years old, arts curator, former curator at “al-Balad Theatre”

Mais Darwazeh, 41 years old, independent director and filmmaker

Melika Qutishat, 29 years old, graphic designer, founder of “Meme”

Rand Abdul Nur, 27 years old, painter, art director in film production

Toleen Touq, 37 years old, art curator, cultural manager, co-founder of “Spring Sessions”

Samah Hijjawi, 40 years old, visual artist, performer, curator, researcher

Saba Innab, 36 years old, architect, painter, visual artist

Linda Khouri, 36 years old, photographer, founder of “Dar al-Tasweer” and “Fann w chai”

Shreen Zmout, 30 years old, actress and theatre assistant director

Asma Khader, 55 years old, lawyer, human right activist

Samia Zaru, 78 years old, painter, visual artist, teacher

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Note on Transliteration

For the transliteration of Arabic names I follow the Library of Congress system. Diacritics are omitted as a convenience to non-specialists. The two main exceptions to the system are: (1) common English forms such as Amman; and (2) some personal names and other transliterated words that appear as cited in particular works in western languages. The names of the people I interviewed are spelled according to their preferred English spelling. When I quote an author or a scholar I leave his or her own transliteration.

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Introduction

*“Any creative expression
is a way, a critical response
to the power structure
that we live in”.*

Dima Maurice¹

When Dima Maurice, an architect, graphic designer, and co-founder of a creative space called Hayyez, designed Joz Hind, a small restaurant in Jabal el-Webde in Amman that only sells organic food, she had to face a lot of problems. She designed – and then they built – a façade, a big window in the restaurant, looking onto the street. But the Municipality of Amman did not want to give them a permit to open this kitchen out onto the street.

In my opinion their refusal was because it celebrated the street too much; (...) fighting for a façade was my dance between the power structure and the people’s will; my being critical of the political power structure.

Dima won her battle and Joz Hind opened up its delicious food to the streets. When her colleague and co-founder at Hayyez, Nora Salem, designed The Lab, a space for contemporary art at Darat al-Fonoon, a similar instance occurred. The idea of the creators of this space – Noura al-Khawsaneh, co-founder of the Spring Sessions educational art program in Amman, and Rana Beirut – was to exhibit contemporary arts in a space where two huge windows show off the artworks and open them up to common citizens and passers-by. Through exhibitions at The Lab, as well as seminars and workshops, they aimed to immediately display arts to the public, as non-consenting and unconscious participants of the art. Today The Lab has these huge windows and anyone just passing by is always updated on the latest exhibition or workshop going on.

Capturing their creative and resistant arts practices to celebrate arts for/in the streets, while trying to involve as large an audience as possible, I want instead to celebrate them, the women artists in

¹Interview with Dima Maurice, architect, graphic designer, co-founder of the Hayyez space in Jabal el Webde, Amman, 7th June 2015. All Dima’s work can be found at: <https://dimaswork.wordpress.com/>.

Amman, who with their every-day struggles brighten and liven up contemporary arts and cultural fields in the capital of Jordan, Amman, one of the most controlled and monitored capitals in the Middle East, and also subject to an authoritarian regime and monarchy. But “Amman is not sexy!” as an art hub and destination, and “artists are in a bubble in Amman!” most of the interviewees said. Amman and Jordan are not effectively the privileged destinations in the Middle East. “Sexy” for the regional and international, especially Western, perception and market, is arts in Palestine, with its endless conflict and the military occupation; sexy is in Cairo, the psychedelic city of twenty-five million inhabitants; sexy are Beirut, after a long civil war, and Dubai, the new hub for the arts: but not certainly the apparently calm Jordan. Privileged are instead their creative artists, most of whom belong to the middle and upper class of the capital, in the ethnographic research I have carried out. It is in the geo-historical, political and socio-cultural contingencies of contemporary understudied Jordan that I have placed my study about creative women and arts, focusing on the creative agency that lets women artists reframe gender roles in their society, providing a large and original contribution to the country and to the entire region. So eventually, the bubble artists and cultural managers feel Amman’s art world has, has burst.

Women artists in Jordan do not want to be labeled as feminist artists. This ethnography research – which instead claims to be a feminist study – reckons with a new signification of feminisms in Jordan today. Identifying women artists with their practiced spaces and arts as the protagonists of an empirical experience of feminism, and not only – or perhaps beyond – an intellectual recognition, I stress their critical and geographical positioning as one of the characteristics of a post-label and post-ideologies generation. The reasons why they do not want to be labeled as feminists reside in the ancient misogyny, translated today more than ever into a pseudo-political discourse. A general rejection of the term “feminist” derives from a misinterpretation – not ideologically neutral – of the word “feminism” itself. Most people and especially politicians, as well as women sometimes, have portrayed feminism as a Western idea and phenomenon which aims to infect a genuine and authentic vision of religion, traditions and values in Muslim countries. Feminists – in women’s views as well – are being defined in the national discourses as: men-hating, aggressive, Westernized women (or tools of Western projects), and most likely obsessed with sex in terms of seeking sexual liberty (which is widely viewed as being immoral

and anti-Arab and anti-Islamic in terms of norms and traditions). Women's creative agency and so their ability to create and co-create, to invent and re-invent, to initiate and re-initiate, to found and co-found is portrayed in this research as one of the different modalities of agency that re-signify feminisms today in the Middle East. In this light, in their authentic (art) works, I stress how they disrupt dichotomies such as private/public, inside/outside, and subordination/subversion, rewriting in the multiplicity, a transnational, transversal and – in the end – feminist commitment. Their engagement is plural: arts are in creative spaces, cultural initiatives, artworks and in/through their bodies. The pluralization, hybridization and feminization of the spaces, names, arts, and movements they enact, reinforce our definition of *feminisms* as plural as well as *histories of arts* as plural, both of which are interventions and interruptions in the official history.

In fact, in an attempt to understand the history of women in Jordan, as well as histories of women's arts, an evident necessity arises: to re-inscribe women and feminisms in the history, presenting also an alternative to the official narrative. Nowadays the official narrative of Amman is a male-made history of neoliberal policies. The origins of these policies in Jordan have to be retraced to the end of the 1980s when Jordan entered into its first agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But it was since the beginning of Abdullah II's Reign in 1999 that the Hashemite Kingdom concretely opened up to markets and investments, joining neoliberal economies' styles, pretensions and ambitions. Neoliberalism is not only buildings and industrial zones; it is a cultural style of life. Bringing arts and culture to the city streets and spaces is a way to contrast this official narrative of neoliberal capitalistic Amman. I propose to see their creative works as spaces of dissent and re-appropriation of areas undergoing gentrification and as a re-invention of (male-dominated) professions. In a way, women enact their cultural resistance in this active and dissident responsive attitude to neoliberal political-economic choices.

Their specific kind of resistance is, first of all, material: trying to work with a mixed-funds model, they resist the capital which, for example, is invested in other arts markets, such as the one in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. A second modality of resistance to the official neoliberal Amman is political: women artists contest well-monitored and controlled society and

cities, enacting strategies of dissent. Third, their resistance is intimately personal: they somehow renounce the privilege of belonging to the middle or wealthy classes, inventing their professions, instead of acquiring one in male-dominated fields such as architecture or engineering. And it is personal since they mobilize directly their bodies in public.

Referring to the regime of surveillance in neoliberal cities and women's bodies, Samah Hijawi's public performance is a great example of dissent. She read a political speech in downtown Amman, defying the law which forbids gatherings or political speech. She used a strategy to bypass the intelligence service, asking for a permit through the Royal Film Commission to shoot a film, as I will explain in more detail in Chapter Five. Filming was then useful both to the performance and to bypass a prohibition. The intelligence service was so destabilized by the political act, without knowing whether to intervene or not. Destabilizing norms show how gender dynamics in neoliberal processes use arts as political resistance in authoritarian regimes.

Even if women form the large majority of initiators and managers, as well as creators, in the arts field, they are generally perceived as an exception; they, on the contrary, play with their minority status as women to enact in informal domains their creative agency. Their fluid presence, unaffiliated political action, together with their art strategies, allow them to express themselves more freely than in institutionalized and male-dominated contests. The different instances of defiance speak of resistance in less explicit ways, witnessing and bringing great enthusiasm – and then a big depression – after 2010-2011 Arab uprisings. Retracing a brief history of 2011-2012 in Jordan, I also underline the continuity of feminist activism, which I have called *femtivism*, in the arts as prior to 2011. While in fact dominant perspectives on the Arab world tend to emphasize 2011 as the starting point for a feminism awakening, I have on the contrary found, in the continuity within their recent history, the most relevant re-signification of creative fields and women's agencies.

This original ethnography embraces an intersectional and interdisciplinary methodology of research, drawing on the approaches of postcolonial and transnational feminisms. I have interacted for over sixteen months with women artists in Amman, attending workshops, exhibitions, cultural events, university classes, carrying out twenty-two deep interviews,

attending performances and parties, even supporting materially creative spaces in the city. This interactive dwelling is rooted in the belief that the itinerary of the research itself can be built up by the co-creation of female stories. Narrating my journey in the research, I aimed to position myself as co-creator of these new stories, rather than just an observer, contributing also to the field of Cultural Studies and Gender Studies in the Middle East.

This thesis is formed of five different chapters. Chapter One focuses on the methodology and methods of the research and it has been conceived as a broader introduction to the entire doctoral research. Following the tradition of postcolonial feminist scholarship and feminist ethnography, I have started my research explicating my positionality, tracing the origins of the research, travelling into the places of the research, defining the premises of the ethnography and the doubts and difficulties along the way. I have designed the research project and the methods, believing that the research is made up of the process and the interactions which help to produce new knowledge and new visions.

Chapter Two explores the theoretical framework of the research and particularly the concepts of resistance, culture and then cultural resistance in Cultural Studies. In one of her most compelling articles, “The Romance of Resistance”, the Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod problematizes the concept of resistance, enlightening the tendency to romanticize it in social sciences and anthropological theories. Starting from this premise, I question the conditions under which we can call women artists’ practices cultural resistance. I then individuate the actual neoliberal official discourse, policies and choices of the capital, Amman, and its well-rooted patriarchal constraints, as the power against which this resistance is enacted. I always refer to cultural resistance as a process in feminist interventions, looking at women’s creative agency as the counter-power for reframing gender roles.

Chapter Three describes the historical and empirical context. In order to better understand the significance of current debates and conflict, I tell the history of the newborn nation-state and monarchy, Jordan, and its colonial legacies. I then engage in the history of Jordanian women’s movement(s), stressing again the importance of the plural in today’s reconsiderations of feminisms. Particular attention is given to 2011 and 2012 and the history and to women’s voices

in Jordanian uprisings, in continuity with the struggle and movements prior to 2011. In this light, I ask a question about a new wave of Jordanian feminisms, built up by recent history, the current generation and the creative resistance agency, which operate against authority.

The analysis of the precious material I have collected in sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork is presented in Chapter Four and Five, which cannot be exhaustive of the entire context. I suggest reading artistic and cultural female interventions in contemporary Amman in three main spheres: the foundation of creative independent spaces and the work in the city of architects and artists; cultural initiatives and educational art programs; and public performances where artists mobilize their bodies.

Chapter Four reconnects with the tradition of feminist geography to consider spaces, practiced and performed spaces. I present to the reader the experience of an architect and graphic designer, Dima Maurice, and her creative space, Hayyez. I then turn to the space of the city, analyzing the works of two architects and visual artists, Dina Haddadin and Saba Innab, who engage in the distorted narratives of cities and refugee camps. I continue by speaking about Spring Sessions, an educational art project, co-founded by Toleen Touq and Noura al-Khawasaneh, who act in the geography of the city and share the commitment of artists to their city. They all work beside one another to counter-narrate neoliberalism in creative defiance.

Chapter Five concludes the whole thesis, encountering the female body as the intimate space of resistance. The storytelling of Sally Shallabiyye, who has feminized her name, and Samah Hijjawi's public performances, carve a space outside, mobilizing their bodies. They self-create a space with their bodies, which becomes the space of resistance. A last paragraph is dedicated to a painter, Rand Abdelnour, whose exhibition focused on women and rape. Breaking taboos, such as politics discourses in public spaces or gender and sexual based violence, becomes their way to midwife the change.

Celebrating women artists in Jordan is a journey in knowledge production and in cultural practices, based on the greater wish that through listening to the multiplicity of women's voices,

co-creating stories and sharing the beauty of the arts which are the expression of these voices, we can emerge again.

Chapter 1

The Journey of my Research

1.1 Dwell on Why Jordan

Do you realize where you are now? Do you really know the land you are standing on? Imagine, what would it feel like to wake up one morning and take a horse ride to a beach on the Mediterranean with your friends, a zeppelin over Jerusalem, take a boat down the Nile to see the Pyramids? Perhaps you could sail down the Great Euphrates River? If this vast land had no borders, how far would the landscape run? Where could your feet, horse, camel or boat take you? What food would you choose to eat? How diverse would the people be that you met?

This amazing region, known in history as the Fertile Crescent, a Crescent shaped that is moist and fertile although surrounded by the desert of West Asia and Egypt. It includes modern-day Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. The first to write down its stories with words, it developed writing. It holds the relics of one of the earliest known civilizations, many thousands of years old. It was here that time was first divided into minutes and seconds. It invented the plough, the calendar, algebra, irrigation, surplus farming and the wheel! It loved culture and the arts, its caravans crossed the desert and mountains to rivers and seas. They were among the first in the world to open vast trade routes².

Sami Haven, *Fertile Crescent* Exhibition

The *Celebrating Women Artists in Jordan* research project grew out of the process and the journey of the research itself, starting from my initial questions, curiosity and fascination about creative women and arts in the Middle East, and then my time spent specifically among the women artists and cultural practitioners of the contemporary cultural scene of the capital of Jordan, Amman. *Celebrating Women Artists in Jordan* comes as well from the desire to speak and let women from the Middle East and particularly from Jordan speak, especially celebrating their/our lives as a resistance to neoliberal patriarchal societies, where being a woman often marks an everyday struggle to exist and shine, in Jordan as in the whole world. Women Artists in Jordan through arts initiatives and creative ideas re-signify gender roles in the society, mobilizing their bodies in the arts research and the process of the self through their personal

² This text was written by the photographer and artist director Sami Haven to introduce the photo exhibition “Fertile Crescent” in Amman, April 2016. He committed suicide in Amman one month before the opening of this exhibition, which he previously organized and prepared: his words at the beginning of the first chapter also want to remember him and all the people who spent their lives working hard in the cultural field in the Middle East, the *Fertile Crescent*.

stories. With this respect, this project positions itself in continuity and in conversation with a long tradition of feminist scholarship.³ At the same time, it takes a new direction, focusing on a specific field –visual arts – which have been less explored by feminist scholarship in and on the Arab world.⁴ I want to celebrate women artists, cultural practitioners and creative women working and contributing to the field of arts and culture in Jordan, presenting to the reader a post-colonial, post-orientalist, post-exotic feminist ethnography,⁵ writing about women’s arts, their creations, their spaces, their lives, and how and under which circumstances they operate to affirm their presences, and to which extent they practice arts as cultural resistance. Most of the women I present in this study are part of the urban middle and upper creative class of the capital, Amman, part of the last ten years generation of the independent cultural scene and touched in different ways by the recent so-called Arab uprisings in the region and the political, cultural and social movements it entails. Protests, revolutions, uprisings, movements in the Arab world in the recent developments cannot be defined only as Arab, because they were also Kurdish, *amazigh* (Berber), feminist, and of different classes; not at all revolutionists were just Islamist or even only leftist. Throughout the analysis of their artworks, their creations, their artistic personal and

³ Feminist scholarships in the last decades intersected and reviewed different disciplines, focusing on the category of gender as a key-reader in (Arab) historiography, literature, and literary criticism, history of art, anthropology and political sciences. I mention here only some of the most meaningful in my work: J. Scott, *Gender. A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, «The American Historical Review», 91(5), 1986, pp. 1053-75; E. Warnock Fernea and B. Qattan Bezirgan (eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1977; L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1992; F. Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991; F. Mernissi, *Le Harem Politique. Le Prophète et les femmes*, Albin Michel, Paris 1987; M. Badran, m. cooke, *Opening the Gates. One Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990; M. Badran, *Feminists, Islam, Nation Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1995. I have also accounted on the feminist literature on history of art (not inherent specifically the Arab world) and the necessity of its re-making: G. Pollock, and R. Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1981; G. Pollock, *Differencing the Canon. Feminist Desires and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, Routledge, London and New York 1999; G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, Psychology Press, London 2003 (first published *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art*, Routledge, London 1988).

⁴ Lloyd, Fran (ed), *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art. Dialogues on the Present*, Women’s Art Library, London 1999.

⁵ L. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 2013; L. Abu-Lughod, “Orientalism and Middle East Feminism Studies”, in *Feminist Studies*, 27(1), 2001, pp. 101-113; L. Alga, *Ethnographie terrona des sujets excentriques. Pratiques, narrations, représentations pour contrer le racisme et l’homophobie en Italie*, PhD Thesis at Université Paris VIII, forthcoming publication; H. Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism - Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey 2008; R. Lewis, Reina, S. Mills, (ed.), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2003; C. T. Mohanty, *Feminism without borders, Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2003; b. hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, South End Press, Boston, 1981; b. hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, South End Press, Boston 1984; b. hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, South End Press, Boston 1989.

collective paths and their aesthetic practices, I have figured out that field and practice of the arts help to problematize gender roles and other intersecting power considerations in Jordan; my attempt then is to question critically to what extent this reconfiguration of gender roles can truly happen. Different circumstances under which female artists operate have led me to the identification and analysis of a women's creative agency as a modality of agency which destabilizes gender norms, political certainties and choices, and social and economic constraints.

Women artists shine throughout their existences and inspire creative and cultural resistance with their works.⁶ In order to introduce this research, I trace the origins of this journey, as (some elements of) the biography of the researcher shape the same genealogy of the research questions, and assuming what Adrienne Rich has taught us, enriching feminist research methodologies:

“I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a Lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in – the body. Here at least I know I exist, that living human individual whom the young Marx called ‘the first premise of all human history.’”⁷

Recognizing two moments, turns and interruptions⁸ that in a primary phase of elaboration of my research project marked my reflections on my methodology in Cultural Studies, and which I will elaborate in the following paragraphs, I need first to refer to the autobiographical moments, turns, and interruptions which brought me to the present work. These two autobiographical elements (or turns or interruptions) help me to explain to the reader (Why Middle East? Why women?), and to locate – geographically, personally and politically – my research.

This thesis, in fact, goes a long way back. From the day my political life actively began until today. It was the 9th of October 2001 when my severe Latin and ancient Greek teacher at high school entered the class saying that we were not going to study Latin that day: the US army had

⁶ The title of this thesis itself was inspired by the no longer existing artistic collective Aat, especially from the previous homepage of the website, (now available at Lana Nasser's website <http://www.lananasser.com/index.php/aat-network>) where they mention the aims of the collective “Celebrating Creativity”. I came to know about the collective and their outstanding work from the interview with one of the co-founders, ToleenTouq, in Amman, on the 21st of September 2015, as well as informal conversations with another co-founder, Shereen Zomout, in Amman in 2010 and 2015.

⁷ A. Rich, “Notes towards a Politics of Location”, in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, 1984, p. 212.

⁸ Citing the word “turn” I implicitly refer to the Cultural Studies tradition of moments, called in fact turns, where some intuitions, as well as changing directions, marked the development of this interdisciplinary field, while the word “interruptions” refers to feminisms as both interruptions of chronological continuity and the monologue of (patriarchal) history (<http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/finding-resonances-with-carla-lonzi>).

invaded Afghanistan and its government had declared war on the Taliban group ruling there. He said that we could not study Latin declinations of the nouns if we do not speak about, understand, and discuss what was happening in the world and why/how at the beginning of the twenty-first century a supposed democratic country was invading militarily – again and again – another country. He was heartbroken about the catastrophic event and we were shocked by his decision not to study Latin that day. From that moment onwards many different episodes, events, people, readings, brought me to the choice to study the Arabic language, and the History, Culture and Literature of the so-called Arab World.

The second turn in my educational journey and in my academic path was the 2011 uprisings and it was the most important: I started to put feminist questions into my studies and inevitably to the “Arab Woman” question, keeping in mind that “we are not the ‘woman question’ asked by somebody else; we are the women who ask the questions”⁹. An abstract concept such as the “Arab woman” does not correspond to the multiplicity of the realities and societies of any part of the Arab world. Arab women constitute rather a constellation and a mosaic of various women in various and different countries, where women are the half of the population and so too large to be homogenized in one expression, in one sentence. In this light, I have continuously attempted to understand in detail “Gender Studies in the Middle East” in which the present work is conceptually, empirically, historically, politically placed.¹⁰

The Middle East is too vast and so I needed to choose a country in the attempt to “specify, to particularize, and to ground in practice, place, class, and time the experiences of women and the dynamics of gender.”¹¹ My first thought was Lebanon, where I spent one month doing research in the first year of my PhD. My hidden thought was Jordan, where I spent one year in 2010 and which I knew was an under-researched place. But designing my research in the first year was shaped by the opportunity to apply for a scholarship and spend one year at the Institute of Women’s Studies at Birzeit University in Ramallah, Palestine. I applied; the second option I

⁹ A. Rich, “Notes towards a Politics of Location”, in R. Lewis, S. Mills (eds), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ First, in 2011 I completed my MBA dissertation on “Tunisian female associations before and after 2011” at the University of Napoli “L’Orientale”. Secondly, and thanks to that dissertation, I found a job as, first, a consultant and then as a project coordinator in an NGO project with women in Tunisia to found a Women’s Centre in the small city of Jendouba, Tunisia. Third, I have started my PhD on “Women Arts and Activisms in the Middle East”.

¹¹ L. Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998.

chose for this grant was Jordan. I was granted the scholarship, but I had never been to Palestine. The day I was supposed to start my academic year in Palestine I was denied entry to Palestinian Territories by the Israel Border authorities, who control and occupy militarily all Palestinian borders and territories. The sense of disappointment and frustration and injustice I felt during the nine hours of interrogation at the border was bigger than any thought of the future of my research. But after dealing with Embassies and Ministries for more than one month,¹² I found my place – and the best place for my research – in Jordan, where I lived from December 2014 until December 2015; and then again from March to August 2016.

On day I decided to start my research, one week after being denied and without knowing the future of my entry to Palestine, I entered *Makan*, not just a *place*,¹³ but an amazing art space in Jebel el Webde in Amman and from that moment I knew I stay (t)here in Amman. At *Makan Art Space* I met Shuruq Harb, a Palestinian visual artist and cultural initiator, who was at that time running the space as the Artistic Director. We spoke a little bit about my denial of entry and then she started giving me contacts in Jordan: starting with Professor Rula Quawas at the University of Jordan (UJ), well known for her Feminist Studies at the University and outside, who later became formally my (overseas) supervisor at the UJ, and then a list of ten women to interview in Amman. That list became my first guide and map in the city and in the research and a symbol of

¹² When I was told at the border that I could not enter “Israel, or Palestine, as you call it”, the reason was that I lied to the State of Israel and Israel would not forgive me. They did not tell me for how long I was denied and when I asked they spoke in Hebrew briefly, which I do not understand, and then said I should have gone to the Israeli Embassy in Jordan to try to obtain a visa. I knew from the beginning that this was useless, but anyway I tried, through the Italian Embassy, to get an appointment at the Israeli Embassy. They never welcomed me inside, saying that as an EU citizen I did not need a visa to enter Israel. I spent one month writing dozens of mails to the Italian Consulate in Jerusalem, Birzeit University, Italian and French Universities from which I was granted a scholarship. I sent letters to Ministries and went to Embassies (Italian, Palestinian, Israeli), until I was sent to the Israel Military Office in Palestinian Territories, who told me that they could not let me enter: I should have gone to the Israel Embassy in Amman. After four months, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called me from Rome saying they were dealing with my case. On the 12th of May 2015 they called me back saying I was denied entry to Palestine for five years, the official reason was that there were incongruity during the interrogations. Before going to Palestine and so before they denied me entry, I had tried to obtain a one-year student visa from the Israeli Embassy in Rome but I could not obtain it as I was not going to an Israeli Institution, but to a Palestinian one. The only way to obtain a visa is to go and ask for a touristic visa at the borders. I however presented my research during interrogations and I showed documentation of EU-funded scholarship I was going to attend. The unofficial reason, not given by the Israeli authorities, probably remains my endless support for the Palestinian people, my previous journey to Palestine and my political activism inside and outside Palestine. The surprising thing, which needs to be mentioned in the research as part of the academic journey of this PhD thesis, is that neither the French university coordinating the scholarship’s program, nor the Italian one, from where I came, did or wrote anything to protest at my denial of entry. Once they were sure my scholarship could be transferred from Palestine to Jordan, their job was done.

¹³ The Arabic word *مكان* *Makan* means in fact “place.” More details about it will be found in Chapter Four. The website is <http://www.makanhouse.net/>.

hope during the research and I proudly started my fieldwork in the capital of Jordan, making my contacts and my journey. Rula Quawas gave me an appointment and immediately from her words and her support I felt that the first place where I should start to pose myself questions was in Academia, at my home institution and the Academia I was meeting there. So I have decided to attend all Rula's classes, even if it was not compulsory for me, in order to better work with her and problematize my presence as a European researcher with Jordanian women at the place where they study and they produce knowledge. I will elaborate this point in the following paragraphs.

Going back to some aforementioned thoughts, Jordan was already in my mind to develop the issue of my research, a "hidden" thought as I said or the second option for the application for the above-mentioned grant. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is one of the outcomes of the dismantlement of Ottoman Empire, of British and French colonialism and repartition of the area, known as the Sykes-Picot secret agreement;¹⁴ and demographically as well as politically one of the consequences of the ongoing colonization of Palestine by the Zionist project; moreover, it is the actual container of stability, a "haven" of precarious peace, a country that receives many refugees, situated between explosive political instabilities or ongoing and exploded conflicts. When I told Dima, a creative and independent architect and graphic designer, one of the participants in this research, that I was denied to entry into Palestine, she said: "I think you missed out on going to Palestine but you are in another form of Palestine."¹⁵ Jordan is placed, in fact, among Palestine/Israel, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Strait of Aqaba in the Red Sea separate Jordan from the peninsula of Sinai, Egypt. Its population is made up by a majority of Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin, while the rest are local Jordanian citizens from Bedouin origin or otherwise. This whole does not include a homogeneous religious or ethnic population, since Jordan is the homeland of Christians and Muslims (the latter constituting the vast majority), and among its inhabitants there are also Circassians, Chechens and Kurds¹⁶. Added to the estimated

¹⁴ The Sykes-Picot Agreement, formally known as the Asia Minor Agreement, is a secret agreement signed in May 1916, after five months of negotiations between France and United Kingdom empires. Through this agreement, the two most powerful colonial empires at the time decided the spheres of influences and control in the Asian Middle East, for the period which followed the First World War and the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire. This agreement is still cited as the origin of Middle Eastern conflicts and divisions today.

¹⁵ Interview with Dima Maurice, architect, graphic designer, co-founder of the Hayyez space in Jabal al-Webde, Amman, 7th June 2015.

¹⁶ Exact numbers are hard to find as Jordanian officials have deliberately refrained from undertaking a survey of the population of cities or nationalities of origin. Estimates on the number of citizens of Palestinian origin range from 60

almost seven million¹⁷ people living in Jordan, there are two and a half million refugees, primarily from Syria and Iraq,¹⁸ but also from Yemen, Sudan, and from the Horn of Africa, and there are also hundreds of thousands of guest workers from Egypt, the Philippines, and other South Asian countries.¹⁹ So including about three million refugees and immigrant workers, the population in Jordan stands at nine and half million,²⁰ which has increased 87% in only the last ten years.²¹

As far as I have previously read about women, culture and arts in in the Middle East, both academic articles and mainstream media, I knew that Jordan was unfortunately absent in many academic fields. With the exception of Egypt and Palestine, and increasingly Lebanon, all Middle Eastern arts and culture encounters are underestimated by scholars and in the different disciplines which should approach contemporary arts and cultures differently, from Gender Studies to Politics in the Middle East. Media attention and the international artistic world is increasingly interested in the developments of last two decades of artistic production in the Gulf (United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait), with “high arts” being showcased very often at various exhibitions and museums. I have decided therefore to take “Roads less traveled in Middle East Anthropology” and “New Paths in Gender Ethnography”, as Marcia Inhorn advises younger anthropologists in her article to take.²² As Appadurai noted, there are – and continue to be – prestige zones of anthropological theorizing.²³ Inhorn recalls the three zones of theories in the

to 75 percent of the population (F. Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith and Progress*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2012). Of course, many Palestinian or people of other origins, such as Circassian, view themselves as simply Jordanian citizens, while as many as 30 percent of Jordanian citizens are Palestinian refugees (Human Rights Watch 2006) and they strongly maintain a Palestinian identity and positionality.

¹⁷ Department of Statistics, 2014 http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_a/main/Demograghy/2014/2-5.pdf.

¹⁸ The population of Syrians and Iraqis is also heterogeneous: while the majority are Arab Muslims, a number of Assyrians from both countries and Christian Assyrian Iraqis might be accounted for.

¹⁹ Department of Statistics, Census Results 2016: http://census.dos.gov.jo/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/02/Census_results_2016.pdf; United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR): <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html>; and United Nations Reliefs and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan>.

²⁰ M. Ghazal, "Population stands at around 9.5 million, including 2.9 million guests", in *The Jordan Times*, 22nd January 2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/population-stands-around-95-million-including-29-million-guests>.

²¹ O. Obeidat, "Population grew by 87% over a decade", in *The Jordan Times*, 22nd February 2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/population-grew-87-over-decade-%E2%80%9494-census>.

²² M. Inhorn, “Roads less traveled in Middle East Anthropology- New Path in Gender Ethnography” in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 10 (3), 2014, pp. 62-86.

²³ A. Appadurai, “Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 28 (2) 1986, pp. 356-361.

Middle East and the North Africa region enlightened by Lila Abu Lughod²⁴ in 1989 – tribalism, women and the harem, Islam – adding another “three zones of heightened emphasis” ethnography of places, ethnic and religious minorities, and politics regarding the state and nationalism. Abu-Lughod pointed to two quandaries relevant for our topic: the lack of interest in “creative” and “expressive” components of Arab society and the squandering of opportunities for contributing to social theory. So in her essay, referring to the last of the ten roads less travelled, Inhorn advises to take, she reflects on and describes a vibrant anthropology of art regarding the Middle East. Alongside the boom in ethnographies in Middle Eastern ethnomusicology and a rich new path in film and television studies,²⁵ there is not much attention on the arts: visual, fine, graffiti arts²⁶ and others. To conclude with her words: “we need a vibrant anthropology of art that captures the wonderful work of the creative geniuses living and working across the region.”²⁷ So if my work in Gender Studies in the Middle East could still be included in one of Abu Lughod’s three “theoretical metonyms,”²⁸ if not simply following disciplinary trends of theorizing about women, it aims to frame and specify gender in the anthropology and ethnography of arts, particularly women artists in Jordan, a less traveled country by researchers. By conducting feminist ethnographic research in the larger field of (European) Cultural Studies, I acknowledge also the absence of (Arab) Cultural Studies “as a distinctive discipline (...) at Arab institutions of higher Education.”²⁹ And, if in fact, it is the work of the Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod, among now many others, which “has linked both the macro- and micro-perspectives, structural analysis and thick description, critical political economy and cultural studies,”³⁰ Arab cultural studies as an academic field is almost non-existent, with the exception of certain institutions in the Arab world, such as Cairo University or the American University in Beirut and in Cairo, where the field is quite developed; elsewhere the Cultural Studies field exists, it “is already there in different treaties, PhD theses, journal articles and

²⁴ L. Abu Lughod, “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World”, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 18 (1989), pp. 267-306.

²⁵ M. Inhorn, *ibidem*.

²⁶ One of the exceptions mentioned by Inhorn is Jessica Winegar’s *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2006.

²⁷ M. Inhorn, *ibidem*.

²⁸ L. Abu Lughod, *ibidem*.

²⁹ M. Ayish, “Cultural Studies in Arab World Arab World Communication Programmes: the Battle for Survivor” in T. Sabry (ed.), *Arab Cultural Studies Mapping the Field*, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

³⁰ R. Ferjani, “In Search of Great Absence: Cultural Studies in Arab Universities”, in T. Sabry (ed.), *Arab Cultural Studies Mapping the Field*, I. B. Tauris, 2011.

books but it is not epistemologically conscious of itself or its parts of the whole.”³¹ So, instead of classifying my research in a formally non-existing academic field, at the University of my country of origin, as well as in the academia I encountered in Jordan, I would rather assert and position my research in an emerging field, which is developing transnationally and also in non-institutional and non-traditional ways. I, therefore, aim to enrich this interdisciplinary field through my research in Jordan, believing in the “interactions with European experiences which view the production of theoretical knowledge as a political practice.”³²

Furthermore, what made me reflect about the importance of writing about Jordan is that the country is not as unstable the neighboring countries, nor is there an ongoing conflict. So, is there an interest in speaking about arts, if there is no war, if artists, especially women artists, are not part of a “post-civil war” generation like in Lebanon, are not inside their homeland occupied by a military force like the Israeli defense forces in Palestine, are not refugees of an ongoing violent and chaotic conflict like in Syria or in different conditions in an unstable Iraq and part of its diaspora, or are not living in a new oppressive and authoritarian military regime like al-Sisi’s Egypt? One of the purposes of this thesis is to answer: yes, there is. The so-called Middle East does not correspond only with words like war, chaos, refugees, exile, diaspora, terror, backwardness, radicalism, terrorism, but also historically – and not randomly – with Culture and Arts. I do not use expressions such as Middle East or Arab world unproblematically; on the contrary, I am conscious of the both geographical and discursive construction of the region and the dominant discourse and stereotypes surrounding, at all levels, this vast region, home to various ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic pluralities and diversities. To simplify and facilitate matters to the reader, I choose to use common expressions such as Middle East and Arab world throughout my research, following fellow researchers and scholars of this area who “strategically (attempt to) reconstruct the negative and reductive production and reception of the region through the focus on its rich cultural production and artistic creativity.”³³ Positioning myself in this discussion and in the multiple contributions on the issue, I aim to approach women artists and resistance in a non-conflict situational context in the Middle East. However, I should honestly admit – and it becomes self-evident from the previous explanation – that my research

³¹ T. Sabry, “Introduction”, in T. Sabry(ed.), *ibidem*.

³² M. Ayish, *ibidem*.

³³ K. Larichi and S. Talajooy (ed.), “Introduction”, in *Resistance in Contemporary Middle East Cultures. Literature, Cinema, Music*, Routledge, London 2013.

was located in Jordan as a consequence of my political involvement and opinions towards the conflict and unstable politics of one of Jordan's neighbors, in my case Palestine. Out of this personal frustration and this political and current controversy, I created a "virtue" and I then followed my first intuition, the inner thoughts, and chose the second option: to speak about women artists in Jordan, as it was a place I knew well since I had already lived there and a country where multiple ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic pluralities live peacefully, although often tensions³⁴ are very close; where great women's voices and the resistance they endure in daily life are still hidden to the Western audience and scholarship. It is common for commentators and sometimes even for scholars to describe the political and social structure of the Kingdom using a familiar set of clichés. One is the division between Bedouin or Jordanian citizens and Jordanians of Palestinian origins, or Palestinian refugees. Another is the assertion that the Bedouin tribes are all loyal supporters of the ruling Hashemite family. Both notions are too much simplistic, and do not even correspond always to the reality.³⁵ I have always refused the simple and superficial description of Jordan and Amman as the boring place in the Middle East that you can easily describe and get rid of in few words and sentences: local tribes; Palestinian refugees and a Palestinian–Jordanian divide; honor crimes; and Petra, one of the seven wonders of the world and a mystic, exotic, orientalist, touristic and "touristized" place. Now, after 2011, we could add to this simplistic and superficial list: Syrian refugees in Jordan. I try instead to problematize many misconceptions and misperceptions and to drive attention to cultural and socio-political changes, as well as the political and economic choices which are affecting the country and encountering local resistance, not only by cultural and artistic means. If a place or country is made by the people and its (cultural, social and urban) movements and

³⁴ During the years of my research many different violent episodes happened in Jordan or outside Jordan that were, however, deeply connected to it and its stability and security. One was the assassination of a Jordanian pilot, Mu'ath al-Kassabeh, at the hands of the group Isis (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), whose death was confirmed and broadcasted on the 3rd of February 2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31121160>. The Jordanian government reacted by executing two prisoners responsible for terrorist attacks in Jordan in 2005. Another one was a car explosion killing seven soldiers and injuring nine on the 21st of June 2016 at the Raqban border between Syria and Jordan, where around seventy thousand refugees are stranded: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-jordan-island-stability-crumbling-its-edges-210772653>. A few other episodes affected temporarily Jordan's stability, even if it remained under control, but this was followed by the closing of borders between Jordan and Syria, as well as the strengthening of controls and the arrests of alleged religious extremists: <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/jordan> and <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/jordan>. On the 25th of September Nahed Hattar, writer, journalist and activist, was shot dead outside Amman court where he was facing charges for sharing an "offensive" cartoon on his Facebook pages. The assassination came few days after Parliamentary elections in Jordan.

³⁵ Y. Alon, *The making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2011.

changes, Jordan and the capital, Amman, today are in my eyes a very interesting and experimental crossroad and an underestimated niche of developing arts, ongoing gender dimension changes and progressive thought. This research project breaks new ground in research and scholarship in the Middle East, in Gender Studies in Jordan and in Arab Cultural Studies by introducing the arts and the dynamics of culture into a critical ethnography of women artists in contemporary Amman.

1. 2 Celebrating Women and Arts in Jordan: Feminism(s) as a starting point

While conducting my interviews in Amman, many of the women I interviewed sat with me and started by saying: “It is nice to meet you and speak with you, but I am not an artist.” I used to reply that I have noticed some of their art works or the cultural initiatives they have started. Besides, many other women have recommended them and so I was interested in speaking with them, even if they did not consider themselves as artists. And anyhow, we were already in the place of our meeting for the interview, often a cafe or a cultural space or a private house, so of course, I never left after a statement like that. During the same interviews, many of them, when we began to discuss more and I used to ask about feminism, replied immediately saying: “Of course I support the implementation of women’s rights, but I am not a feminist.” Or: “I am not a feminist, but...” Most of the time, at the end of our deep conversations and the reflections we made together, those same women used to conclude: “Well, yes, I can say I am an artist then”³⁶; or “I am not an artist and I refuse to be considered as an artist, but I am a creative woman working in the field of culture and arts.”³⁷ Or, concerning the second issue: “In the end, yes, I am a feminist, of course.”³⁸ These conclusions were not made out of my arguments, but were part of the women’s reflections themselves and of our dialogue exchange. I claim that, through the process of the interview, the artists engaged in a process of self-awareness. Consequently, feminist ethnographies contribute to the construction of feminism itself and, in this case, to a

³⁶ Interview with Deema Dabis, filmmaker, performer, yoga instructor, Amman, 4th June 2015.

³⁷ Interview with Dima Maurice, architect, graphic designer, co-founder of the Hayyez space in Jabal al-Webde, Amman, 7th June 2015.

³⁸ Interviews with Noura al-Khawsaneh, artistic and cultural initiator, Amman, 8th June 2015.

feminist creative field.³⁹ These initial statements and their following conclusions also became part of my reflections and let me understand many different points of the research and their feminist principles. First of all, as far as feminism in this research project is about women artists, *celebrating women artists in Jordan* is a feminist ethnographic research. Feminism is, among many other things, fighting against our own misogyny⁴⁰ and the basis of our socially influenced misogyny is the perception we have of ourselves. This perception is often not “being enough” to be or to become someone or to do something. Probably, the first feeling by denying themselves being artists was: “I am not (enough to be called) an artist” considering all the boxes of prerequisites you have to tick to be an artist, often boxes issued by a standardized Western and Eurocentric, male-dominated, upper and middle class framework of the world and its classification of culture and arts. The contrary of the feeling of not being enough – to be or to become someone or to do something – is starting to say “I am enough” as a feminist statement, claiming ourselves as women doing beyond the possible and the impossible. This statement became the core of the book *The Voice of Being Enough - Young Jordanian Women Break Through Without Breaking Down*,⁴¹ edited by Professor Rula Quawas and published in Amman in March 2016 as a result of the course “Contemporary Arab Women Writers” at the University of Jordan (UJ),⁴² given by Rula Quawas in the Spring semester in 2015. I took part in the class, the discussion, the focus groups and the meetings until I was asked to write and express my voice among the other ninety-nine Jordanian women, even though I am not Jordanian. Being part of this book informs much of my methodology, my presence and my participation at UJ and it also helped me to develop my positionality in the field. Illuminating my position towards the others, all women in my case, has founded my research – and well, my preoccupation – since the beginning of my ethnography. I am a researcher coming from a University in Europe and I am one of the hundreds of (female) researchers coming/going to the Middle East investigating women and their stories. Whilst perhaps scary, the last sentence also sounds a little bit boring and my research participants did not hesitate to tell me, almost disappointed or laughing: “Are

³⁹ Theoretical works on feminist ethnography and its contribution to the construction of feminism itself or, in my case, to a feminist creative field.

⁴⁰ Professor Rula Quawas, during her classes, introduced us to this idea of being and not being enough, and from these reflections the idea of the book was conceived. All the students were involved in working and focus groups to then go and interview women in Jordan about their being and the idea of being enough.

⁴¹ R. Quawas (eds), *The Voice of Being Enough- Young Jordanian Women break through without breaking down*, 2016.

⁴² From this moment on, I will refer to the University of Jordan as UJ.

you still in Europe writing research about women in the Middle East? Yes, there are women artists in the Middle East! It was 1998 the first time a researcher from Spain came to interview me as a woman artist;”⁴³ or more problematically: “I will not start the interview unless you explain to me what exactly your research is about and why it is about women and not artists in general.”⁴⁴ It is important to underline both women cited in this case are the elder women I have interviewed in Jordan, in their early forties, which means a generation older than the young women artists in their late twenties or early thirties I contacted. Secondly, given they were not – as in most of other cases – in my age group, it was more challenging for me to reply to them.⁴⁵ Upon their comments and questions, I first replied that I agreed with them, though we still need to research and write about women since few things have changed and there are still predominant narratives about women in the Middle East, if not directly orientalist or racist, that surely distort the reality of lives and hide women’s resilience and resistance. Regarding the methodology of the research and the interview process, the feminist, writer and scholar Gloria Anzaldua taught Ana Louise Keating, as the latter writes in the Introduction “Risking the Personal” of the *Interviews/Entrevistas*: “put yourself in it more, (...) put yourself and your body”, i. e. the importance of risking the personal in Anzaldua’s conception of the *geography of selves*. This was the point where, trying to answer to my participants’ objections with Anzaldua’s teachings, my ongoing reflections turned to more new questions: How can I speak about creative women in this area without feeling part of it, part of them? How does it influence me and how do I manage the imbalance of power (as a European researcher) between me and the interviewee? What are my responsibilities as a researcher?

The Italian feminist and art critic Carla Lonzi in her art book *Autoritratto*,⁴⁶ where she speaks about women artists in Italy in the 1960s, says she “is part of the book as a voice among artists’ voices, and as the person who transcribes and then creates a montage from conversations”⁴⁷ and she feels involved in the process of interviews and artists’ narratives in their work, making it a

⁴³ Interviews with Sahar Khalifa, singer, Amman, August 2015.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Mais Darwazeh, director, Amman, 3rd September 2015.

⁴⁵ I remember my voice was trembling as I had to defend myself and my thesis in front of an examiner. In the end, these two interviews were two of the richest and the dialogue turned often naturally to living stories or personal anecdotes, as they were willing to share them with me.

⁴⁶ In English Self-Portrait, to date, not translated.

⁴⁷ G. Zapperi, interviewed by F. Bueti, “Finding Resonances with Carla Lonzi”, in *Makhzin*, April 2016, <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/finding-resonances-with-carla-lonzi>.

participatory process that could be “personally transformative.”⁴⁸ As a part of my method of questioning in my studies and in my research, I begun of considering the journey of my research also as an autoethnography or *autohistoria*, as Gloria Anzaldúa would call it. I am doing research about women and arts in the Middle East to interrogate, in other words, also myself about something I try to do in the place where I was born: resistance through culture and culture through cultural or artistic initiatives.⁴⁹ But I am not speculating about myself and my work; I am talking about other women, “Arab women”. This is the reason why I need to question my position – interacting with them in a participatory way through feminist lenses, through postcolonial feminist reflections, through post-orientalism and post-exotic thoughts – on a subject that could eventually interest me.⁵⁰ In this way, I try to reduce the distance between me and the participants of the research. I acknowledge myself as a privileged researcher outsider, who in acknowledging this privilege (European researcher and outsider) makes a plus out of it: being foreigner is a privilege but also one with a responsibility; an outsider looking inside becoming an insider of a community of transnational Mediterranean creative women with an eye on outside. The result of these crossroads is the co-creation of new female stories, and not only an interpretation and analysis of some interviews. Co-creating new female stories becomes part of a feminist methodology of “multiple connotations” and of “the discursive possibility, not only of discovering knowledge but also of constructing it.”⁵¹ Through the meeting with women artists in Jordan, I aim to question arts beyond its borders as a personal and collective transformative practice outside the art world itself and how it can be considered a feminist practice of resistance and cultural resistance; and how women enact their creative agency, problematizing gender roles through it.

In order to frame my methodology in the field of Cultural Studies, I need also to refer to two fundamental moments in the history of cultural studies and feminisms: two interruptions and two

⁴⁸ G. Zapperi, *ibidem*.

⁴⁹ I am a PhD researcher, but I am also a creative person involved in writing, narrative reportages, collective arts projects, political activism, cultural events, daily work with professional photographers and directors in the Mediterranean area. And as I was born in Sicily, I also feel part of a Mediterranean society, fighting with the constructed idea of national states on the northern shore and the southern banks.

⁵⁰ Or simpler: a subject on which a researcher could come to Sicily and interview me, Marta, as a woman from the underdeveloped south of Italy, being creative and cosmopolitan, founding an association in my home-city, implementing projects and willing to come back to my Sicily, the island of my origins, one day.

⁵¹ M. Wickramasinghe, *Feminist Research Methodology: Making Meaning of Meaning-Making*, Routledge, London, 2009.

turns. First, I do refer to *Women Take Issue*⁵² from 1978, a collection of essays but also a manifesto, in which a pre-formed group of women academics at the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham write a special issue about, among other women's subjects, the necessity of including Gender Studies in the broader academic, intellectual and political Cultural Studies project. The second moment I want to refer to took place just a year before: another manifesto, the *Black Feminist Statement* written by the Combahee River Collective in 1977.⁵³ The latter is considered the precursor moment to what was then recognized as the intersectionality theoretical approach. Why is it important in the journey of my research to mention these two moments, turns and two different manifestos? Primarily, I need to inscribe my work in the history of Cultural Studies where feminisms and feminists in Stuart Hall's famous words "broke in (...); interrupted, seized a unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies."⁵⁴ It seems interesting to describe my methodology using the idea of this *interruption*: the category of interruption, rethought through Foucault⁵⁵ and through Lonzi with her feminist *soggetto imprevisto* (unexpected subject), is also the epistemological interruption which allows, in this case, a rethinking of the dynamics, the practices and the new correlations. Secondly, the Black feminist manifesto is one of the various moments of another *interruption*: the often irreverent interruption in the white feminist or western feminisms thought by black women's considerations and later postcolonial feminists. Both interruptions serve my case and both are one of the multiple initiatives and interruptions (cultural, intellectual, political, academic) that women in the history of feminisms took: it is the interruption of feminism in the chronological continuity and the monologue of (patriarchal) history.⁵⁶ The first is the interruption in a – until then – male-dominant cultural, academic and political project, while the second is the interruption of white and western thought. In the big constellation of different feminist approaches, I mentioned these two moments to draw my research specifically on a postcolonial transnational feminism approach, and so to relate to how

⁵² Women's Studies Group, CCCS, University of Birmingham (1978), *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*, Hutchinson: London.

⁵³ V. Perrielli and L. Ellena, "Intersezionalità. La difficile articolazione", in S. Marchetti, J. Mascot and V. Perrielli, (ed.), *Femminismi a parole -grovigli da districare*, Edizioni Ediesse, Roma, 2012.

⁵⁴ H. Davis, *Understanding Stuart Hall*, Sage Publications, London, 2004, p. 128.

⁵⁵ M. Tazzioli, "Interruzioni di confine, oltre la scena del politico", at the international conference *Il Pensiero Politico di Foucault*, 27th-28th November 2014, University of Palermo and Institut Français Palermo, Italy.

⁵⁶ G. Zapperi, "Il tempo nel femminismo. Soggettività e storia in Carla Lonzi", in *Studi Culturali*, 12(1), 1, 2015, pp. 63-81.

intersectionality analysis reads the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppression as linked not only to gender and sex, but also to race, class, and political, historical, and empirical contexts. Drawing my research on postcolonial transnational feminism, I glimpse the “conscious crossing of national borders”⁵⁷ shifting from the nationally oriented second-wave feminism to the clashes between “western” and “third world” feminists’ debates in the 1980s, and after that Chandra Mohanty’s *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* in 1984 inaugurated postcolonial feminisms, followed by Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*⁵⁸ To relocate feminist thinking and activism in relation to mainstream postcolonial theory, I also recall the postcolonial feminist *interruption* in the history of postcolonial studies where even “Edward Said’s seminal study *Orientalism* itself included little attention to female agency and discussed very few female writers.”⁵⁹ Writing about women artists in contemporary Amman and under which circumstances their artworks and cultural initiatives restructure their roles in the society recalls the necessity of postcolonial transnational feminisms to attend to the specifics of the empirical and historical context, of constructing theory on the ground and together with the participants of the research, as well as rooting grounded theory in the analysis of the cultural and the historical productions. What transnational means to me also is that it is linked to the concept of *resonance* in Lonzi’s thought; i.e. the relationship that can be established between two or more women who do not necessarily live in the same space or time. *Resonance* of another woman’s story in my own personal story opens the possibility of mutual recognition and reflection, which is the process I have been through interrogating myself and women in Amman about creative arts and cultures in our lives, where each other’s resonances reverberate. Furthermore, I do use the term feminisms in its plural as well as arts as plural: the plural form of feminisms enacts the multiple histories, struggles, and voices that constitute feminism as both concept and practice, capturing the one and the many;⁶⁰ while the plural form of arts follows the contemporary directions of art as multiple forms of objects, subjects and relations, as a plural identity instead of the monolingual one, as pluri-sensorial models of perceptions, arts that not

⁵⁷ N. Al Ali and N. Pratt, *Women and war in the Middle East: transnational perspective*, Zed Books, London and New York 2009.

⁵⁸ C. Romeo, “Femminismo postcoloniale”, in S. Marchetti, J. Mascat and V. Perrilli (ed.), *ibidem*, 2012.

⁵⁹ R. Lewis, S. Mills (ed.), “Introduction” in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory A Reader*, Edimburgh University Press, Edimburgh 2001.

⁶⁰ D. Atterbury, T. El-Ariss, M. Arsanios, “Notes from the Editors, beyond “one” or “two”, in *Makhzin*, 2, 2016, <http://www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/note-from-the-editors>.

only produce artworks but arts that create and multiply relations. Defining arts as plural links both the personalities of contemporary artists operating in different fields as well as the field of visual culture, which includes different “objects of study”: fine arts, craft/designs, performing arts and the arts of spectacles, mass and electronic media.⁶¹ Also Jessica Winegar, in her ethnography about contemporary arts in Egypt, defines as such the objects and the art as understood here there:

“Objects were used to constitute the local category of “art” itself: *al-fann al-tashkili* (the fine arts, or the plastic arts). For Egyptians this category consisted of paintings, sculptures, drawings, graphic prints, installations, performance art pieces, art photographs, video works, and ceramics, and was related to poetry, cinema, music, and dance- all of which were included in the general field of the “the arts”(*al-funun*). It did not include “handicrafts” (*ashghal yadawiyya*, e.g., mosaics, baskets, weavings, metalwork, woodwork), although the distinction between the two was not as strongly as in some Western contexts.”⁶²

But what defines contemporary artists more is the “interstices between the arts”⁶³ where they navigate, borrowing structures from different media. The hybridization of art tools, as Jacques Rancière said, belongs to the postmodern era, which also manifests political arts.⁶⁴ As they represent first-hand documents of socio-cultural processes, the anthropology of arts needs the concentration not only on the artwork itself but on the person who created it and the context from which it is conceived. Feminisms and arts together as plural starting points connect this research to the women artists in Jordan, in a continuous and ongoing dialogue within the postcolonial transnational feminism knowledge process.

⁶¹ In the afterword of the Italian translation of Mitchell’s *Pictorial Turn* essays, edited by Michele Cometa, the latter recalls the long list of the “objects” of Visual Culture, constituting for Walker and Chaplin the “quantity problem” in their *Visual Culture: an Introduction*. The question opened in the Visual Cultural field regards the possibility to study these entire visual “objects” accounting for the cultural contexts where they appear. See M. Cometa (ed.), *W.J.T. Mitchell. Pictorial Turn. Saggi di cultura visuale*, Due punti edizioni, Palermo, 2008; J. Walker and S. Chaplin, *Visual Culture: an Introduction*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1997.

⁶² J. Winegar, *ibidem*, p. 12.

⁶³ S. Banes, *Subversive Expectations. Performance Arts and Paratheatre in New York 1976-1985*, University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1998, p. 5.

⁶⁴ J. Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, La fabrique éditions, Paris, 2008, p. 28.

1. 3 Overcoming Neo-Orientalists' Perceptions: the Journey of the Research

*Don't wanna be your exotic/ Like some dark fragile colorful/
bird imprisoned caged in a/ land foreign to the stretch of her wings*

*Don't wanna be your exotic/ women everywhere look just/
like me some taller darker/ nicer than me but like me
Just the same women everywhere/ carry my nose on their faces/*

my name on their spirits

*Don't seduce yourself with my/ otherness/
(...) the beat of my lashes/ against each other ain't some/
dark desert beat it's just/ a blink get over it*

Suheir Hammad, *Not your exotic, not your erotic*⁶⁵

During the process of my research I was continuously interrogated in the first phase of the elaboration of a hypothesis about the categories of postcolonial theory and postcolonial feminisms, trying to formulate an asset where my interpretations and reflections may fit, and trying to articulate my postcolonial transnational feminist approach. I have considered the importance of presenting to the reader the debate around neorientalism and postorientalism, starting from the very limited category of the “Arab woman” in order to better articulate, later on, women’s creative agency in Amman today. This process also involved my prejudices and misconceptions and helped me to understand how it is important to consider this framework and present it to the reader even without choosing it as the main conceptual framework of my research. I first discovered that I was obsessed with the necessity to deconstruct neo- and gender orientalism by speaking about women artists. This obsession was also an indirect way of using my research to blame the Western mainstream media and Western academia and their gaze

⁶⁵ I report here the whole text of Suher Hammad’s poem: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xarc5PFknfw>. It inspired my reflections and my work: *Don't build around me/ your fetish fantasy your/ lustful profanity to/ cage me in clip my wings// Don't wanna be your exotic/ your loving of my beauty ain't/ more than funky fornication/ plain pink perversion in/ fact nasty necrophilia/ because my beauty is dead/ to you/ I am dead to you// Not your harem girl/geisha doll banana picker/ pom pom girl poom poom short/ coffee maker town whore/ belly dancer private dancer/ la malinche venus hottentot/ laundry girl your immaculate/ vessel emasculating princess/ don't wanna be/ not your erotic not your exotic.*

towards the Middle East and women. On the contrary, during my ethnography, I have listened more to the context and how it speaks, instead of trying to promote the presence of women artists as a challenge to neo-orientalism arguments. Meeting Jordanian academia has helped me to reconcile myself with my anti-neo-orientalism position, posing these questions: How does the Jordanian context speak about neo-orientalism? Is there a specific contrasting and exoticizing feeling in the West against women artists, particularly in Jordan? Under which circumstances women artists talk about themselves? And why, at the end, am I still willing to introduce postorientalism and neorientalism? The answer came from the journey of the research itself: while acknowledging that the readers of this PhD thesis are the Western academia in the field of Cultural Studies as well as the (Western and non-Western) specialized researchers in the field of Middle East Studies and Gender Studies in the Middle East, I needed both to frame the discussion about neo-orientalist perceptions at the beginning and to free my gaze from this framework of postcolonial and postexotic preoccupations. In other words, I decided during the journey of the research – as a researcher specialized in Middle East Studies and Gender Studies in the Middle East writing a PhD in European Cultural Studies – not to speak to a less specialized reader about the Middle East to deconstruct a neo-orientalist point of view, but rather to speak about the context itself, analyzing it from the questions raised during the ethnography – in the less traveled road of anthropology – and so not from the previous foreseen anti-orientalist framing. The outcome is the present a paragraph where I introduce this concept, trying to overcome it at the end to follow the very heart of my questions: women artists in Jordan as creative agents and their resisting roles in the cultural field.

The intersection between the post-colonial perspective and feminist criticism attempts to overturn and, otherwise, articulate the persistent Western fascination with the category of the “Arab Muslim woman,” as a constitutive element of the perpetuation of the hegemonic and colonial identity⁶⁶ and its cultural representations, while political and media consequences become linked to representations of sexual difference.⁶⁷ The unitary category “Arab Muslim Woman” does not exist, neither does “Third World Woman” as a social category of analysis.⁶⁸ An

⁶⁶ M. Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 1-13.

⁶⁷ M. Yeğenoğlu, *ibidem*, pp. 1-13.

⁶⁸ C. T. Mohanty, *Feminism without borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2003.

Arab and Muslim region does indeed exist: countries, with a majority of Arabs and Muslims, where Christians, Jews, and people of other religions and ethnicities⁶⁹ do exist and co-exist, together with people residing in Arab countries who are of a foreign origin, or of mixed nationalities, in a context where its phenomena, as well as its conflicts, are more and more characterized by transnational dimensions:⁷⁰ a multiethnic and multicultural region where, among others, Arab and Muslim women do, of course, exist, live, rebel, invent, and create. In the ongoing transformative process in the Middle East, creative initiatives and arts play an important role, redesigning the very classical meaning of political activism, and including a larger number of people, social interventions, and common spaces. Arts are the re-imagination of the actual world and actively contribute to this process. Women's creative presence is among the protagonists of this process. I refer to women's presences as protagonists of change, in the attempt to normalize their presence – referring to neo-orientalist astonishment of the “Arab woman's” existence in revolts, arts, society – as a part of the process, to combat stereotypical analysis and underlining their quite special contribution with a cartography of women visual voices, creations, and spaces. Arts bestow an authorial and a visual voice to a presumed subaltern woman subject; arts bestow an authorial and a visual voice to a presumed victim of the “third world.” There is, in fact, no third world, for the so-called “third world” is the “two thirds”⁷¹ of the world where “this is no longer the Middle of anybody's East.”⁷²

Post-colonial analysis reads this persistent and vague definition of a “Muslim Arab woman” and the post-2011⁷³ meta-narratives, as a form of neo-Orientalism⁷⁴, which aims to define – today as before – the geopolitical order of the area in question, by virtue of humanitarian and security principles in defense of women's rights. This trend views women as a homogeneous group and

⁶⁹ Even the use of expressions like “Arab Muslim World” as well as words like ethnicities is not here neutrally or uncritically employed. They are inherited from a colonial geography or a colonial divisional anthropology which will be touched upon briefly in the paper.

⁷⁰ N. al-Ali, N. Pratt, *Women and war in the Middle east: transnational perspective*, Zed Books, London and New York 2009, pp. 1-7. It is necessary to underline the distinction which al-Ali and Pratt operate in this introduction between “Transnationalism from above” and “from below”.

⁷¹ C. T. Mohanty, *ibidem*.

⁷² H. Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism - Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2008.

⁷³ R. Pepicelli (eds), *Le donne nei media arabi*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2014, pp. 6-16.

⁷⁴ R. El-Mahdi, “Orientalising Egyptian revolution”, *Jaddaliyya*, April 11, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1214/orientalising-the-egyptian-uprising>.

prevents the emergence of key elements for the definition of individual, collective, and multiple identities, such as generation, social class, as well as political, cultural, and sexual orientations.⁷⁵

These categories and discourses built the mainstream discourse on a stereotyped understanding of Muslim Women,⁷⁶ which needs to be deconstructed. The general trend of viewing women in the Arab world as a homogenous set tended to be considered as “a sub-field of colonial discourse,”⁷⁷ and not a main pillar of that same colonialism still operating as a divider. The grave tendency, defined as neo-Orientalism, is living in the last decade of a phase of revitalization.⁷⁸ The prefix “neo-” underlines a recent transformation which includes a number of characteristics of our time, alongside a number of methodological devices of classical Orientalism and classic dichotomies converted to contemporary events. In other words, as Hamid Dabashi states in his Introduction to *Post-Orientalism - Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*: “Though many insights still remain valid and operative, Edward Said’s observations will have to be updated and mapped out for the iconic events that have led to the post-9/11 syndrome.”⁷⁹ In her use of the prefix “neo-”, marking the difference in meaning and epistemology of Dabashi and Mellino’s post-orientalist reflections, Jamila Mascat highlights three significant changes. The first concerns geography, the second is in connection with discourse, while the third examines the auto-orientalization of female subjects. Neo-orientalist geography is “immeasurable” and “without borders”, but – I would add that though this geography that extended to include few decades included all the continents in/of this *Orient*, imaginary and imaginative, independent of a geographical location, effectively at the East of a centered-West, it remains a vague geography, sometimes incomprehensible. Neo-orientalist geography does not have borders because it invents the East as well as the West: the latter is inhabited more and more from this *Orient*. Nevertheless, Western countries’ internal and external geography remains far from any correct identification of the places of proveniences and origins of this Orient’s presence in the West: a vague and

⁷⁵ L. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 2013, and “Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies”, in *Feminist Studies*, 27/1 (2001), pp. 101-113.

⁷⁶ L. Abu-Lughod, 2013, *ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Yeğenoğlu, *ibidem*.

⁷⁸ J. Mascat, “Neo-orientalismo” in S. Marchetti, J. M.H. Mascat, and V. Perrilli, (eds.), *Femminismi a parole - grovigli da districare*, Edizioni EDIESSE, Roma 2012.

⁷⁹ H. Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism - Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey, 2008, p. xi.

approximate knowledge of this immense, and boundless *Orient*. Contemporary Neo-Orientalism's spatiality and temporality therefore remain as vast as they are incomprehensible.

The second new element, as indicated by Mascot, sees the discourse (speeches and rhetoric) going too far in their Islamophobic as well as racist attitudes. Ignorance mixed with fear, toward the Arab and Muslim world in particular, causes the divulgence of discourses in which the fascination, the curiosity, and sometimes the naiveté of the 19th-century stories evoked by Said – although many of them were already aware of the operation of the “orientalization of the Orient” – are replaced by a mystified narrative, a confused de-individualization, an imprecise or falsified, and often racist, political analysis. Most mainstream journalists' feature stories or news items should meet the demands of the market, and these criteria flatten the news, level out the critics, and satisfy a univocal narrative, with uncertain and unreliable data. Academic universities and public institutions sometimes assert this narrative, by strengthening/reinforcing the media, due to society's immense lack of knowledge and public opinion.

At last, the final aspect, already marked by Said when he asserts that the “Modern Orient is an accomplice/abettor of its orientalizing”, is the auto-representation of female subjects. In their individual narrative, on some female accounts, women contribute to emphasize that discourse where they are sorted out as victims or desirable objects. The emergence of a female erotic literature, particularly coming from the Arab world, shows how these “exotic” writers seek to tell and prove their sexual experiences to a Western audience to overturn prejudices that see them only as alien to a sexual life, or simply victims of a patriarchal and religious society. In fact, they enact traditional masculinist assumptions of Orientalism and those Western feminist discourses seeking to liberate veiled women.

As Jamila Mascot points out, what does inform much of the neo-orientalism trend is its tendency to establish “global strategies of commodification and consumption of the postcolonial Other in the cultural world market.”⁸⁰ In the following chapters, while analyzing cultural fields in Jordan and in the Middle East, I will explain further this point and its meaning specifically in my ethnography.

⁸⁰ J. Mascot, “Can the subaltern desire?” in [N. Dhawan](#), [A. Engel](#), [C. H.E. Holzhey](#), [V. Woltersdorff](#) (eds), *Global Justice and Desire. Queering Economy*, Routledge, London 2015.

Turning back to Mellino post-Orientalism, the essential question of Mellino's proposal of essays, responding to Edward Said's classical text, is: "How is it possible to develop post-orientalist knowledge, not aiming at cultural dispossession and segmentation, or at producing hierarchically-differentiated subjects due to the national and imperial needs of the State, of market and lines of capitalistic accumulation?"⁸¹ In his attempt to investigate "how and through what mechanisms 'the Orient' continues to be represented and sought to be dominated", Dabashi answers Mellino's primary question, asserting that "more to the point, how (in what particular terms) is it possible for a resistance to dominate."⁸² At this point, I place the creative agency at the very base of my ethnographic research, in particular, women's creative agency, as their setting of cultural resistance. In this sense, and in order to pursue the analysis of creative women's artworks and cultural initiatives in Jordan, we need, as presented by Dabashi, "to articulate the question of creative agency in a specifically revolutionary context" and "to place the postcolonial critique to be in accord with a post-Orientalist mode of knowledge production, a mobile guerrilla tactician unfettered by fixated discursive analytics." As well as going to understand that:

"...this demand for the dominant Regime to be brought down is a reference not only to political action but, even more radically, to the mode of knowledge production regarding "The Middle East," "North Africa," "the Arab and Muslim World" and the "West and the Rest," or any other categorical remnant of a colonial imagination (Orientalism) that still preempts the liberation of these societies in an open-ended dynamic."⁸³

We return to Mellino's primary question once more, which is how it would be possible to develop post-orientalist knowledge, and it is answered by affirming creative agency as a resistance mode, in political action, with people's demands and through cultural initiatives in a new reclaimed knowledge production, a post-orientalist one.

⁸¹ The original text in Italian "in che misura è possibile lo sviluppo di saperi *post-orientalisti*, e cioè non finalizzati all'espropriazione e alla segmentazione culturale, alla produzione di *soggetti gerarchicamente differenziati* in funzione delle esigenze degli Stati (nazionali e imperiali), del mercato e delle logiche di accumulazione capitalistica?", in M. Mellino (ed.), *Post-Orientalismo*, Meltemi, Roma, 2009, p. 10. The translation from the Italian is mine.

⁸²H. Dabashi, *ibidem*, p. xii.

⁸³H. Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism*, *ibidem*, p. xii.

Women's creative presence challenges neo-Orientalism narratives (geography, discourse, and auto-orientalization), affirming more and more hybrid identities, and not only national or fixed identities. Their identities show simultaneously situated and hybrid voices and stories. This question seems to be particularly intense within the Jordanian context where many women asked themselves what it exactly means to be Jordanian, in a country where half of the people are of Palestinian descent and many others are daughters of mixed marriages, and in cases where the mother is Jordanian while the father is of another nationality, their children are denied nationality as it cannot be inherited from the mother's side.⁸⁴ The filmmaker and performer Deema Dabis, in her short film *Shake*, tells the autobiographical story of a Palestinian-American who is denied entry to Palestine although she has a US passport. The story focuses on the woman being interrogated, humiliated, and denied an entrance permit to her homeland country. But, when the director herself, Deema, a Palestinian-American living in Jordan, went to Palestine, she was often told: "You are not Palestinian, because you have not lived here and you have a US passport," to which she would answer:

"Who/What is a Palestinian? Why don't I have the right to define myself as Palestinian? What about Jordan and its people who are from Palestine? Does my story not account as a Jordanian story? Why do we limit our stories? This is why I want to break out through my story telling, performance, and cinema work."⁸⁵

The author identifies herself by her story, not by the nationality she carries, but through the woman who had been humiliated and does not hold rights to her nationality identity. While being unable, as a woman, to transmit nationalities in Jordan as in Lebanon is clearly perceived as injustice in terms of gender equal rights, this is how the Lebanese visual artist Jessica Khazrik re-interprets and re-formulates this lack of justice:

⁸⁴ According to the Law No. 6 of 1954 on Nationality (last amended 1987), 1 January 1954, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4ea13.html>, known as Jordanian Citizenship Act, Jordanian citizenship can be obtained by birth or naturalization. Jordanian nationality can only be transmitted by paternity and women cannot pass on citizenship to their children of foreign spouses. The large number of foreigners in the country means that discriminatory nationality laws directly affect more than 65,000 Jordanian women and as many as 500,000 children (C. Warrick, *Law in the service of legitimacy: gender and politics in Jordan*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Farnham 2009).

⁸⁵ Interview with DeemaDabis, filmmaker, performer, yoga instructor, Amman, 4th June 2015.

“In Lebanon, you cannot transmit the nationality. This is the fantastic of the juridical: how could this happen, for instance? Women are giving birth, men are not; men give birth because they transmit the nationality...these laws treat women as though they were from a different time of the nation, they are the future, they are transnational, they do not even need to transmit nationalities (...) My mother, whenever she is outside, she would ask someone to take a picture. She is her subject; she is not the object of her work. She works in different lines, living in a non-case, she finds her citizenship through photography, she transmitted her citizenship to me through her photography.”⁸⁶

What seems to be more urgent and sensitive to women, in current times, is not only the battle for equal nationality rights, but rather a common need for a cosmopolitan nationality which interrupts the East/West binarism, freedom and safety to move and travel through the neighboring countries and a greater appeal to develop interregional relationships rather than nationality concerns. The real challenge to vague neo-orientalist geography is a common feeling of a world citizenship rather than a particular nation-state belonging, although women’s struggle in terms of rights continues to be at the top of the agenda, and it is a challenge to be situated voices, where their own stories are their own geography to tell, and where “womanhood is their perpetual challenge.”⁸⁷ In Dabashi’s words, “a new geography of liberation, which is no longer mapped on colonial, or cast upon postcolonial, structures of domination.”⁸⁸

Another big challenge to the neo-orientalist narratives is the blogosphere world, inhabited by women expressing themselves. In “Can the Subaltern Desire?” Mascot insists on the notion of the postcolonial authorship and how it is elected as *auctoritas* in the representation of “subaltern” subjects’ desire. In contemporary erotic literature from Arab women (Mascot analyses three authors in particular: Salwa al-Neimi, Joumana Haddad and Nedjma), the narrative and the “confessions” of the writers show a reductionist understanding of women’s lives, practices and choices, to the detriment of different forms of resistant agency. Women bloggers, on the contrary, are not (Western) bestselling authors because they do not appease the market. Self-representation

⁸⁶ Interview with Jessica Khazrik, visual art performer, Beirut, 12th August 2014. She devised a performance and installation about her mother’s photography and her mother’s thesis in the 1970s about Sex Tourism in Lebanon and the influence of sex in Tourism and Economics, interviewing prostitutes at a time where civil war started and tourism decreased.

⁸⁷ A. Oweis, “ICT in the search for gender freedoms: Jordanian university students think, talk and change”, in I. Buskens- A. Webb (eds.), *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East*, Zed Books, London 2015, pp. 159-168.

⁸⁸ H. Dabashi, *The Arab Spring and the end of Post-Colonialism*, ibidem, p. xviii.

in the blogosphere informs us differently of women's freedom of expression. In the essay "Jordanian bloggers: a journey of speaking back to the politics of silence, shame, and fear", Rula Quawas calls the blogosphere "blogtiza", which is similar to the vision of the *mestiza* (a person who expresses a multitude of cultures and operates in a pluralistic mode transferring cultural and spiritual values from a group to another), creating "a culture of polyvalent voices, of democracy, and of speech" and drawing attention to "the emergent role of women's bargaining and negotiating, their subversion and resistance as well as their more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis."⁸⁹ This blogtiza is, for instance, one of the spaces of self-representation, where the subjects move against the dominant discourses in a process of self-construction through writing: writing as *écriture féminine*, as a counter-narrative of the male-mainstream which invades the space of erotic literature, being attractive and desirable for a Western audience. Bloggers and creative women artists have much more to say.

The explication of the debate, moving from Mascot's arguments to Quawas's observations, talks about the process of my research where I preferred to listen to women artists' voices instead of using it to challenge an Orientalized gaze from the West. However, taking into account how the West undermined women's creative agency, preferring a non-specified homogenous "Arab woman" as a victim or as an erotic story-teller, forces me to tell women artists' stories and the only way to do it by escaping an orientalist perception is the co-creation and the collaboration of this desired new cosmopolitan narration.

1.4 Amman, Collaborative Practices in Engaged Research: an Interactive Dwelling

Trying to understand people's lives is for me a passion.

L. Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*⁹⁰

⁸⁹ R. Quawas, "Jordanian bloggers: a journey of speaking back to the politics of silence, shame and fear", in I. Buskens- A. Webb (ed.), *Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East*, Zed Books, London 2015, pp. 181-191.

⁹⁰ L. Abu-Lughod, 2013, *ibidem*.

Having introduced why this research is based in Jordan, the methodology, which feminism approach I embrace and the particular journey of the research and some initial concepts, this concluding paragraph finally explains in more detail the fieldwork design: my ethnography in Amman, and the ethical considerations behind it. One of the main questions which accompanied me during the fieldwork was about the relationship between methodology and methods and how much methods inform a feminist ethnography as well as a political relationship to the field. To consider doing research and to position myself politically implicates multiple challenges. The first challenge concerns – and we have been already anticipated the topic – the knowledge production and the subjects involved in the research. It unleashes some questions: Who sees? Who does? Who is it for? Who am I excluding?

Beside the considerations about methodology and methods, there is a first element to enlighten: again the journey of the research, but now we consider the journey in the “materiality of the travel”, the physical and geographical displacement during the research and the “temporary” dwelling away from home or from my home university during the constitution of the fieldwork.⁹¹ In fact, besides the concept of travelling, there is a physical displacement which also constitutes a choice, if not an obligation, during the research. The places of my research have been essentially three: Palermo, in Italy, my city of origin but in this case the city of the University where I have attended the international PhD in Cultural Studies, the University of Palermo: I have spent the whole of 2014 in Palermo (except for one month of pre-research in Lebanon); Amman, the place of my ethnography and the University of Jordan, where I was hosted for the whole of 2015; and London and SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, where I spent one term as part of the Academic Hospitality at the Center for Gender Studies, at the beginning of 2016. The three cities/places combined in 2016, the final year of the research, because I have been in London, then I needed to be again in Amman for another term as well as in Palermo to conclude my work. Coming back to Amman in 2016 is an essential part of the research because I temporarily interrupted the chronological linearity of the research (before the fieldwork, the fieldwork, after the fieldwork) where the fieldwork must have ended after one year (in my case in 2015). Reconsidering the linearity of the journey and consciously disarticulating it was an outcome of the reflection of the methodology and part of the methods.

⁹¹ J. Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1997.

First, it was a consequence of the affiliation and the relationship at the University of Jordan, primarily with the Professor Rula Quawas. Secondly, it was a necessity due to the relationship I have created with the women artists and their artistic projects, which I wished to continue to follow. Third, it was my personal desire to write my PhD thesis from “here” and not from “there” as a constant geographical reference during the writing process is made in t/here: in Jordan, in Amman. Well, I decided for most of the time to write in Amman, being in Jordan, as well as to continue to participate and collaborate with women artists in their events and lives. I felt that they should accompany my research until the very end – the submission, which also marks a new chapter in my life.

If we consider travel as part of the process of the research, a few remarks needs to be taken before presenting the “field”. In Paul Fussel’s *Abroad*, considering explorers, travelers and tourists, home and abroad are still divided. In the “spatial practice” of the travel there is a “go out” and “return” which includes, in the case of ethnographic anthropological research, a return to the home university and so to a “stable community of readers.”⁹² All these notions in anthropology, involving also the term “fieldwork”, form the heart of my reflection about the knowledge production. As Clifford pointed out, my fieldwork in Amman was a “spatial practice of intensive dwelling:” it aimed to break the dichotomy between home and abroad as well as other binarisms between experience and theory, academy and field, center and periphery. As Donna Haraway said, “feminist accountability requires knowledge tuned to the resonance, not dichotomy.”⁹³ First of all, the place of my research (Amman in Jordan, but it could have also been another city in another country of the Middle East: Palestine or Lebanon, for example) was not a new place to my eyes. I had already lived one year in Jordan in 2010 and I have also lived in other countries of the region in the past ten years. This made my displacement to the Middle East more as a coming back than an arrival in a new country. Since I have already introduced my familiarity with the region and my formation in the field of the Middle East Studies, my presence t/here – knowing the language (Arabic *fussha* and *‘ammia*, standard Arabic and spoken language) and the history and “culture” – was not that of any foreigner researcher, nor was I t/here due to an exotic curiosity. On the contrary, coming back to Jordan in particular was for me

⁹² J. Clifford, *ibidem*.

⁹³ D. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 1988, pp. 575-599.

a return,⁹⁴ a search of a reconnection, a “resonance” again.⁹⁵ It is in this moment that the university and the theory (the university of provenience and the university that hosted me in Jordan) started having a (different) role in my travel and in the *travel encounters*.⁹⁶ As Clifford asks and suggests, “Can this displacement be extended to include travel to and through the university? Can the university itself be seen as a kind of field site – a place of cultural juxtaposition, estrangement, rite of passage, transit, and learning?”⁹⁷ Attending an academic year at the University of Jordan,⁹⁸ attending courses such as “Arab Contemporary Women Writers”; “Research in Literature” and “Feminist Theory” with Professor Rula Quawas already announces how a different knowledge production process was happening. In fact, knowledge is produced and grounded not only in the academy of provenience of the researcher, but in all the places traversed in the journey of the research.⁹⁹ Dwelling in Amman, attending classes at the University and participating in the cultural life of the city constituted for me an interactive fieldwork: notions of travel as “a figure for different modes of dwelling and displacement, for trajectories and identities, for storytelling and theorizing in a postcolonial world of global contacts” and of theory “returned to its etymological roots, with a late twentieth-century difference; the Greek term *theorein*: a practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony; ‘Theory’ is a product of displacement, comparison, a certain distance”¹⁰⁰ both mixed in the process of the research. In Clifford’s eyes, the institutionalized normative practice, between the end of nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth one, especially since Malinowski, privileged relations of dwelling rather than relations of travels; so the “real” fieldwork was defined as a place of intensive and interactive co-dwelling, symbolized by the tent of the anthropologist in the village. These notions have been rerouted by contemporary anthropology and Clifford proposes to rethink the fieldwork

⁹⁴ But my arrival t/here was changed and enriched by the difference of my status: I was t/here before, working and studying, and I came back t/here as a PhD researcher.

⁹⁵ G. Zapperi, “Il tempo nel femminismo. Soggettività e storia in Carla Lonzi”, in *Studi Culturali*, 12(1), 1, 2015, pp. 63-81.

⁹⁶ J. Clifford, “Travelling Cultures”, in Grossberg, Laurence, Nelson, Cary, and Treichler, Paula (ed.), *Cultural Studies*, Routledge, New York, 1992, pp. 96- 116.

⁹⁷ J. Clifford, 1997, *ibidem*.

⁹⁸ Since I have not attended other courses in other departments except for Rula Quawas’s, I do not intend to refer to the whole University as a sole place. I have been in contact with the Women Studies’ Center as well as the Centre for Strategic Studies and one of the University’s revues, *Majalla*, directed by Professor Mohammed Shaheen.

⁹⁹ L. Alga, *Ethnographie terrona des sujets excentriques. Pratiques, narrations, représentations pour contrer le racisme et l’homophobie en Italie*. PhD Thesis at Université Paris VIII, forthcoming publication.

¹⁰⁰ J. Clifford, “Notes on Travel and Theory”, in *Inscription*, 5, 1989, pp. 177-188.

as an institutionalized mix of dwelling and travel practices, to decenter it, denaturalize it and in this trajectory fieldwork becomes “a *habitus* rather than a place” and “a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices.”¹⁰¹ In the attempt to reform and re-theorize the notion of fieldwork, the anthropologists Gupta and Ferguson propose to think of the research “as a form of motivated and stylized dislocation” and not to be reduced to a hierarchized “shift of location.”¹⁰²

Once I have introduced the notion of fieldwork, starting from the materiality of the displacement, the travel, and places of the research, I intend to present a reflexive anthropology¹⁰³ or an *antropologia encarnada*, an incarnated anthropology,¹⁰⁴ explaining the methods and the difficulties of my ethnography in Amman. This entire first chapter presents me, the researcher, as part of the research itself, claiming a sort of self-itinerary of the author, aiming to make explicit the interconnection between self-experiences and the research process. The feminist anthropologist and doctor *de mujeres* (of women) Maria Luz Esteban suggests a very specific anthropological exercise, an *antropologia encarnada* (incarnated anthropology) by means of which two analytical dimensions are claimed:

“(a) the autoethnographic dimension, that is, the pertinence of self-experience in order to understand the others and vice versa, particularly when similar experiences have been felt; (b) an analytical approach from the concept of embodiment: conflictual incarnation, interactive and resistant to the social and cultural ideals, a concept that perfectly integrates the tension between the individual, the social and the political body.”¹⁰⁵

Representing Others – especially if women – is always going to be a complicated and contentious undertaking.¹⁰⁶ This *autoethnographical* dimension described by Esteban, helped me not only to liberate myself from the neo-Orientalism obsession, which I have explained in the previous paragraph, but also to incarnate an interactive and resistant dwelling of collaborative practices. In other words, the only way to tell a story is to be a part of it. But since anthropology,

¹⁰¹ J. Clifford, 1992, *ibidem*.

¹⁰² A. Gupta and J. Ferguson (ed.), *Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1997.

¹⁰³ C. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography : A Guide to Research Selves and Others*, Routledge, London 2008.

¹⁰⁴ M. L. Esteban, “Antropologia encarnada. Antropologia desde una misma”, in CEIC, 2004, pp. 1-21.

¹⁰⁵ M. L. Esteban, *ibidem*, p. 1-21.

¹⁰⁶ D. S. Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethic, and Performance*, Sage Publications, London 2012.

especially in ethnographies, questions objectivity as well as intersubjectivity, it is not my *exclusive* experience – or what we have called *autoethnography* – which makes a *critical* ethnography. Madison contends that “*critical* ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among the Other(s), one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in the Other’s world.”¹⁰⁷ Since a critical ethnography is also founded on a critical theory and a conceptual thinking of the *travel encounters* to produce an original framework, ethnography becomes the “doing” – or better the performance – of it.¹⁰⁸ Describing ethnography as *critical theory in action* is according to Madison an interesting and productive description. The methods I have employed during my fieldwork rely on active interviewing,¹⁰⁹ direct observation, open-ended interviewing, and textual analysis of human products.¹¹⁰ I am aware of the fact that what I am making could not have been done outside the relationship with the protagonists of the research, seeking and pursuing a long-life term relationship whenever possible. The different forms of practices that I have experienced and shared in the "community" of creative women artists in the course of 2015 can be briefly listed: street performances in Amman with a group of women from the cultural and artistic scene who temporarily defined themselves as "Girl Gang" along with some of the women interviewed for my research;¹¹¹ discussions and exchange of expertise in music videos, ongoing projects and social projects (design of a safe house for LGBTQI community; solidarity architectural workshop for Syrian refugees camps in the country); material and cultural support, like crowd-funding campaigns, for the preservation of independent art spaces (*Makan Art Space, Studio 8*); invitations to the sharing of artistic events with the university students of the aforementioned courses; free exchange of technical material for audiovisual works; writing newspaper articles for the dissemination of painting exhibitions about gender issues and participation in them;

¹⁰⁷ D. S. Madison, *ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ J. L. Kinchloe and P. McLaren, “Rethinking Critical theory and Qualitative Research”, in J. L. Kinchloe, *Key Words in Critical Pedagogy*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, 2011, pp. 285-324.

¹⁰⁹ J. A. Holstein and J. F. Gubrium, “The Active Interview in Perspective”, in J. A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, Sage Publications, London, 1995.

¹¹⁰ G. Noblit, S. Y. Flores and E.G. Murillo (ed), *Postcritical ethnography: Reinscribing Critique*, Hampton Press, 2004.

¹¹¹ It was June 2015 when we met in *Hayyez* (Chapter Four) together with other eight women to discuss a street performance which could, even for a couple of hours in the streets of Amman, change the usual imaginary of women in the streets; we then gathered in the city center, *al-Balad*, performing, sitting on benches where usually only men sit and eating lupin beans. This attracted a lot of people who were more concerned about us throwing the beans’ skin in the streets more than our attempt to re-conceptualize women’s presence in the streets. However, this has led us to reflect of how men are not usually reproached for their negligence towards the environment, while women immediately draw everyone’s attention.

regular attendance and support at the gym *She Fighter*, a gym for women with personal self-defense courses; photographic portraits of artists, painters, story-tellers to help disseminate their work in Jordan and abroad; participation in events, like artistic talks, performances, festivals and leisure time such as dinner and parties. Most of these practices took place before or during the interviews, which started six months after my first arrival in Amman. The first six months were designed only for participant observation and cultural and political involvement in Amman; three months were dedicated in the middle of the fieldwork in 2015 for the interviews; and the last three months were dedicated to listening, transcribing and re-listening to the interviews to start the writing process out of my *interactive dwelling* in Amman. As in all relationships, the fieldwork and interactions were not without difficulties. The main ones were as anticipated due to my being a researcher in the field of Gender Studies. I have always been asked the question why my research was not about the cultural scene in Amman in general, instead of only about women (and actually the answer – out of my choice of interviewing only women – was given by the women themselves: the majority of the people in the arts field in Amman are women and it also has some historical legacy in the case, for example, of the museums);¹¹² I have often dealt with the indifference of the participants concerning answering mail or participating in meetings simply because they claimed to be much too busy; I was not always been answered concerning some requests for follow ups; and I also had some discussions with my Professor Rula Quawas while she was helping me to reflect on my topic with her *tough love*, which could seem like an impossibility of understanding. The way I have dealt with all these difficulties was always to find alternatives: when, for example, I asked all the women I interviewed to participate in a meeting to reflect together about the interpretations of their works in my research, I did not receive enthusiastic feedback, especially due to a lack of time rather than a lack of interest. But since I wanted once again to have their direct voices and their participation in my research, in April 2016 I sent all of them an email asking for a visual sign of their presence, i. e. a photo, representative of their personality, their arts, their works, their spaces, their places, their initiatives, their lives.

¹¹² See Carol Malt's case study, which we will explore further in the next chapters: C. Malt, *Women's voices in Middle East Museums. Case studies in Jordan*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (USA) 2004.

I interviewed twenty-one¹¹³ women, aged between twenty-five and forty, the great majority based in Amman, and belonging to the independent cultural and artistic scene of the capital of Jordan; as a result of my ethnography in 2015–2016, over sixteen months, I made these considerations which I will analyze deeper in the next chapters:

- The practice of arts, women running a space as an owner or manager, and the activities in the fields of arts and culture which they make and realize are often not socially understood or accepted, as they are considered unproductive, unsuitable for women, or because they pursue a certain kind of occupation, such as architects, that is still deemed as a man-only-activity: and by doing so, they attempt to challenge families' standards, to overcome censorship as well as self-censorship, and challenge social rules;
- They are initiators of cultural initiatives who are quite connected to the idea of practicing that as women in the society and in the arts circle, they are willing to think their work through critically and not in the male-/mainstream;
- Some of these women are part of a new generation, some of whom studied abroad, and wanted to return, after being influenced enthusiastically by the 2011 uprisings in the whole region as well as before;
- All these young women use arts or pursue their occupation creatively as a tool to express their feminine voice in a society and in a world out of gender balance: they claim their right to tell their stories as women;
- Some of them initiated spaces, physical, and creative spaces, as well as co-working and open spaces as alternatives to the formal, commercial, institutional ones, seeking the interpretation of, and engagement with, the arts;
- These women based in the capital of Jordan practice different kinds of arts or work in the fields of culture and arts management: a number of them are artists, while

¹¹³ I conducted twenty-one interviews out of a list of thirty-eight women; and actually two other interviews, with Asma Khader and Samia Zaru, which I will introduce respectively in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, were also very relevant to my research.

others are not, but instead work in the cultural field, approaching it in an interdisciplinary and intersectional way;

- Women in Jordan are not fully citizens in terms of rights and in the public sphere, as they do not enjoy the same rights as men, and as a result, their presence as creative people and initiators becomes a political identity connected to gender discrimination existing in their country and a cultural resistance to the status quo;

- The strong presence of women in the field of arts in Jordan is often ignored in the country as well as abroad: this research, through all their artworks and cultural initiatives, aims to normalize their presence in the public sphere as artists, creative women, and simple but influential active citizens, as well as to witness their desire to make arts and culture more visible;

- Many different artists or creative women in the fields of arts, architecture and graphic design use different forms of arts and they rarely identify themselves as just video-makers, rather than visual performers or painters. They are often moving through a fluid amalgamation of different arts such as performance, video, cinema, painting, photography, and story-telling. But not only performances, as these activists also include workshops to invite people to express themselves. Of course, there are women who are just painters or directors, but often painters work in film art productions or there are painters who are musicians at the same time, or dancers who sometimes ended up as cultural managers or artistic directors. Thus, I have not chosen the theatre or the cinema alone, or only art that includes paintings: as arts (pluralized) reunites these multiple meanings of art and personalities and expressions. So, rather than a pre-labeled form of art or artist, I want to speak about arts as voices, strong voices, women's creative agency;

- In a perspective of generational and long-term changes, these women might contribute, through their cultural and artistic work, to the creation of new gender visions and transformation in society. Meanwhile, their creative and active presence confronts Western-centered gender neo-orientalist constructs and local patriarchal restraints.

Sharing new visions and knowledge about women artists in Jordan in this PhD research is at the same time the continuation and the beginning of a broader cultural and political involvement in the region. Reflections and results presented in this research do not pretend to be comprehensive of the large cultural production and women artists' paths are deeper, more enthusiastic and more interesting than it can appear. Trying to understand and then show how their essential work contributes in Jordan, as well as in the whole region and in the whole world, as cultural and political resistance represents one of the modest contributions that this work attempts to provide.

Chapter 2

Cultural Resistance and Women's Creative Agency in Jordan

*We should not choose between
critical theory and ethnography.
Instead, we see that researchers are cutting
new paths to rein-scribing
critique in ethnography.¹¹⁴*

Since the first time I came to live in Jordan in 2010, I have had the chance to visit the magnificent site of Petra and its surroundings. Every time a friend or a group of friends or a member of my family from Europe or elsewhere used to come to visit me, I took the opportunity to travel and to discover more about Jordan. It happened that in August 2010 my best friends from Sicily came to visit me and in our trip to Petra, we went to Little Petra where we met Khaled, a young Bedouin man working with tourists in the archeological site of Little Petra, a smaller and a free-entrance site. We were four young women and so many times groups of young men used to approach us with a question or to accompany us. What I did not know at that moment was that this first approach led me to a life-long friendship with a Bedouin family. During those days, in fact, we were hosted by Khaled and his family: his father Abu Khaled (literally “the father of Khaled”) used to entertain us with his *rababa* music and all the sisters and the mother surrounded us. Keeping silent and shy was one of Abu Khaled’s daughters, who was in fact observing us, especially me, because I was a foreign young woman speaking fluent Arabic. I will not mention her name, to keep our intimacy and to respect her private life, so I will refer to her as Sara, an eighteen-year-old girl now. Four years later I went to visit them again, at Christmas 2014 and then two other times in the summer of 2015: the last time was for Abu Khaled’s first daughter’s wedding, Mariam. Being invited to this important wedding was a beautiful sign of a friendship developed from a simple experience of tourism. During these different visits I noticed how Sara continued to approach me in different ways. On the first visit after four years she showed me a notebook where she collected all the kind words left by visitors she had met in her house as her brother and father’s guests or in the small village near Little

¹¹⁴ G. Noblit, S. Y. Flores, E. G. Murillo, Jr., *Post Critical Ethnography: Reinscribing Critique*, Hampton Press, Kresskill N. J. 2004.

Petra. She wanted me to write a note as well and she asked me to translate some of the others, which she was not able to understand. Many of the letters of these visitors in her notebook were from males and so she asked me to keep the translation secret between us. While the time I used to spend in the house was often with her and the other sisters, outside the house my friends and I were always accompanied by Khaled. After some months, during the summer, again Sara approached me to speak to me. She told me that she remembered every detail of the first time I went to her house and so she was increasingly becoming confident with me. In those days, I spent different moments with her, and so I also discovered her secrets: she had been smoking for a couple of years and nobody except of her little sister knew of it. She offered me a cigarette and while smoking her little sister used to come running to warn her if one of the adults, especially her brother Khaled, was approaching. She started to dance, removing her veil and *jallabe* (a long dress) and she sang and jumped in the room happily. She wanted to show me her private world made of cigarettes, letters, music and dance. Despite – or because of – the fact that she stopped going to school, she was passionate about knowledge, about other worlds. From her private world to my foreign experience and presence, we started to chat a lot until the point she told me that her brother once beat her. He used to forbid her to have a private mobile phone and of course any contact with other men. My reaction was very strong and I told her to try not to allow him anymore to touch her violently. Luckily enough, her father Abu Khaled was good with her and all the other daughters, sometimes even protecting her from the fury of the eldest brother Khaled. Inevitably, my relationship with Khaled became very cold and distant, while the contact with Sara and the other daughters continued through her father's telephone or the oldest sister's, Mariam.

This episode at the beginning of this chapter is not connected directly with the ethnographical research, since I did not investigate Bedouin women in Petra, rather I have spent most of the time in Amman, developing my research with women artists of the creative urban middle class or sometimes even women artists who are part of the privileged elite in the capital of Jordan. But this anecdote was for me fundamental to understand the theoretical approach and framework I had developed and what resistance might be. In fact, in one of her illuminating articles “The Romance of Resistance”, Lila Abu- Lughod problematizes the concept of resistance, enlightening the tendency to romanticize it in social sciences and anthropological theories. It was reading this article that I understood and started to diagnose the concept of women's resistance

through the same kind of cases she mentioned in her ethnography with Bedouin women in Egypt:

“(…) women daily enact all sorts of minor defiances of the restrictions enforced by elder men in the community. Women use secrets and silences to their advantage. They often collude to hide knowledge from men; they cover for each other in minor matters, like secret trips to healers or visits to friends and relatives; they smoke in secret and quickly put out their cigarettes when children come running to warn them that men are approaching. These forms of resistance indicate that one way power is exercised in relation to women is through a range of prohibitions and restrictions which they both embrace, in their support for the system of sexual segregation, and resist, as suggested by the fact that they fiercely protect the inviolability of their separate sphere, that sphere where the defiances take place.”¹¹⁵

She then mentioned in detail other forms and cases of Bedouin women’s resistances in Egypt, such as resistances to marriages, poetry and sexually irreverent discourses. When I was a direct witness of Sara’s episode, I diagnosed her act as an act of resistance, but actually it was Abu-Lughod’s essay that let me discover that first of all it was a diagnosis not only of women’s resistance but especially of gendered power relations, which I did not pick up conceptually immediately. At the very beginning of our first encounter, in 2010, viewing the special type of kindness which Khaled used to reserve for me and my visitor friends, I had barely imagined the possible violence which he used to enforce with her sisters. My relationship with Khaled changed throughout the years, standing instead in solidarity and support with his sisters and critiquing his way of being “liberal” with female foreigners and being oppressive and violent with the female members of his family. This practical and immediate change was not at first diagnosed as my reactions to gender power relations in a sexually segregated women’s world, but only as a sign of women’s solidarity. In other words, Abu-Lughod’s article, and so theory beside my (ethnographic) observations and ongoing reflections, helped me to articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that were operating beneath appearances; guided judgments and evaluations emanating from my discontent; directed my attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and codes; accompanied me to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; provided me insight and inspired acts of justice, which I had instinctively done previous to any

¹¹⁵ L. Abu Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance. Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women”, in *American Ethnologist*, 17(1), 1990, pp. 41-55.

conceptualization; and then finally pushed me to name and analyze what I had intuitively felt.¹¹⁶ Abu-Lughod's essay encourages us to see how power needs also to be analyzed in relation to resistance, and not only the contrary. The gender relations of power in Abu Khaled's family give an example of the sense of complexity of forms and nature of domination. "The romance of resistance" and the popularity of it have also followed a well-known statement in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*:¹¹⁷ "Where there is power, there is resistance." Inverting the terms of this phrase, as Foucault himself will do later on his speculation, in "where there is resistance, there is power",¹¹⁸ Abu-Lughod attempts to drive our attention, especially for ethnographic analysis, to the strategies of detecting power and of deciphering resistance.

Paying attention to the "various forms of resistance," I intend to go back now from the Bedouin women's examples to other – and often non-collective, non-organized and not self-proclaimed – acts of resistance: the cultural resistance which interests women female artists in Amman. Not assuming resistance as a universal category, learning Lila Abu-Lughod's lesson, the first questions being addressed in my research are: What is cultural resistance? And what is it resistance to? Is resistance a category we can get rid of? Can a certain modality of artistic creative women's agency be called cultural resistance and why and how? It is in fact in the analysis of forms of resistance that we can indicate specific forms of power: not only then the political powers largely intended, but rather the exercise of the multidimensional political powers in different facets and, such as in the case of Amman, the choices of the neoliberal capitalist economy and ongoing patriarchal norms in setting women's societal spaces. Moreover, the female artists' resistance, practiced in the fields of arts and culture, must take into account their multi-layered and always evolving nature. So the (research) questions enter more specifically in detail: Under which circumstances can arts problematize gender roles in a neoliberal patriarchal society? To what extent do women artists practicing their creative agency constitute a kind of cultural resistance?

¹¹⁶ D. S. Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethic, and Performance*, Sage Publications, London 2012, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ M. Foucault, *La volontà di sapere, Storia della sessualità* 1, Feltrinelli, Milano 2013 (first published as *La volonté de savoir, Histoire de la sexualité* 1, Editions Gallimard, Paris 1976).

¹¹⁸ Foucault's quote in English is taken from R. Salih and S. Richter-Devroe, "Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond: on the Politics of Art, Aesthetics, and Affect", in *Arab Studies Journal, Special Issue: Cultures of Resistance*, 22(1), 2014, pp. 8.

2. 1 Cultural Resistance: Processes in Feminist Interventions

The term *culture* has been conceptualized extensively. In this research, I build my understanding of “culture” on the tradition of Cultural Studies, starting with the founders of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. In his *Keywords* glossary, Raymond Williams states that “culture” is one of the most complicated words that we can find in the English Language. As a scholar who works in five different languages, I would say that Raymond’s statement applies to all languages I have experience of. He tries to categorize three main meanings of culture in contested terrains. However, he concludes by emphasizing that culture is always a process, a constant flux. Through his text we will not be satisfied with a final definition, not a fixed or stable unique meaning. First, culture is a process with an implicit sense of development and change; second, it is a way of life, a practice and understanding in everyday life; finally, it designated a cultural activity and so culture in its widespread meaning of an artwork.¹¹⁹ Williams indicates culture also in its plural, cultures, recurring to the historical and philosophical moment where nation and civilization were theorized; but also he recalled the spiritual and material nature of culture, as the three distinct meanings testify. The Cultural Studies project, while attempting to define and reconstruct the origins of the concepts, was constantly troubling the meanings of its keywords, contextualizing and renewing them. Moving a step backward from the Cultural Studies project, Antonio Gramsci, whose thought nurtured the aforementioned projects of researchers and thinkers, links culture to revolutionary thought. Writing from the Italian fascist regime prisons, the communist intellectual theorized hegemonic culture, which he indicates as the different forms of cultural domination by a certain class. Hegemonic classes are to impose decisions and to enforce a system of control through daily practices. Beside and beyond the hegemonic, stands the concept of counter-hegemonic culture. According to neo-Gramscian political science theorist Nicola Pratt, whose study in the past ten years has been especially concentrated on Gender and Politics in the Middle East, counter-hegemony constitutes “a creation of an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in

¹¹⁹ “(i) the independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development, from C18; (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general, from Herder and Klemm. But we have also to recognize (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity. This seems often now the most widespread use: **culture** is music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film.” From R. Williams, *Keywords*, revised edition, Oxford University Press, New York 1983, p. 87-93.

preparation for political change.”¹²⁰ This compelling conceptualization of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic culture applies to my analysis of the work of the two founders of the art educational program in Amman, *Spring Sessions*, which will be the focus of Chapter Four. Toleen Touq and Noura al-Khawsaneh, both arts curators and cultural managers, bring arts and culture to the city streets and spaces to contrast the official narrative of neoliberal capitalistic Amman. Their cultural practices create and reinforce a counter-hegemonic culture in the terrain of the civil society. However, throughout my work I do not intend to label female artists’ cultural and artistic work as a pure counter-hegemonic culture. Antonio Gramsci insists that the form itself is always the product of a specific socio-historical context. Far then from being a simplification, Gramsci’s concept needs to be contextualized and specified or as Hanan Toukan puts it in her thesis about Lebanon’s post-civil war contemporary cultural practices “counter-hegemonic cultural production cannot be evaluated without a comprehensive reference to the politics of locality, temporality or spatiality.”¹²¹ In other words, a further analysis of the *Spring Sessions*’ cultural and artistic initiative, ideated and managed by two women, as well as other female artists in Amman, can contribute to the understanding of the “different forms that resistance through culture takes, the various reasons it takes it and how it transforms with the passing of time,” and enlightening, instead of obscuring “particularities of the processes by which works come in to being, circulate and then get framed and discussed” as again Toukan affirms. We can then acknowledge counter-hegemonic culture as a weapon and a continuous ongoing process, rather than an assertion, a label or a definition. In the very essence of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, the process of enacting cultural resistance stands in the revolutionary, whose job consists in discovering “the progressive potentialities that reside beside within popular consciousness and from this material fashion a culture of resistance.”¹²² The intention of visual artist and performer Samah Hijawi in her public performance, *Where are the Arabs?* (see Chapter 5.2), in May 2009 in downtown Amman, was similar to that discovering of potentialities in popular consciousness. By performing in the popular area of downtown Amman, embodying and pronouncing a speech given by Egyptian and Arab major leader Jamal Abdel Nasser’s words, she aimed to remake the city space a political space and to investigate the popular

¹²⁰ N. Pratt, “Bringing politics back in: examining the link between globalization and democratization”, *Review of International Political Economy* Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004, pp. 331-336.

¹²¹ H. Toukan, “Art, aid, affect : locating the political in post-civil war Lebanon’s contemporary cultural practices”, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2013.

¹²² S. Duncombe, “Introduction”, in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Verso, New York 2002.

conscience through this enigmatic and familiar speech. Effectively or not, consciously or not, planting and embodying seeds of revolutionary thought for political, economic, and socio-cultural change, is the kind of cultural resistance that we attempt to delineate here, through women's creative agency, which destabilizes traditional norms and roles.

A step further towards cultural resistance's conceptualization is surely made by Walter Benjamin in his well-known "The Author as Producer." Benjamin relates culture with the terms and conditions of production. So he refers to culture as cultural products and he precisely poses the question:

"(...) the rigid, isolated object (work, novel, and book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations. (...) Social relations, as we know, are determined by production relations. And when materialist criticism approached a work, it used to ask what was the position of that work *vis-a-vis* the social production relations of its time. That is an important question. But also a very difficult one."¹²³

As we have already mentioned above, referring to social and historical conditions, we here add politics within the context that a certain culture is produced. In other words, it is not only the content of the culture that makes it radical because it could be "dissimilated and neutralized if presented in the context of high art or commercial entertainment."¹²⁴ In this shift in cultural resistance from product to production, it is necessary to constantly challenge the material, hierarchical and mainstream possibilities and solutions to make what in Benjamin's text might be a radical culture. The case of Amman's women artists that I have encountered and selected during my research pays special attention to this shift from product to production. Belonging most of them to the urban middle and upper class of the capital and the metropolis of Amman, most of them could have easily joined stable positions in governmental cultural institutions or they could have occupied and opened traditional studios to exercise their professions, as in the case of architects. This could have also gained them a direct responsibility in the neoliberal developments and narration of the city over the last decade. But they would have always been the minority because they are women: all the famous architects, for example, are male. Instead,

¹²³ W. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", in *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London and New York 1998.

¹²⁴ W. Benjamin, *ibidem*.

while accepting and integrating a mixed typology of funds, they do create their informal domain where to enact culture – and then cultural resistance – out of the convenient, remunerative and profitable (governmental, royal or private) market. This finally brings us to Adorno’s theory of the commodification of culture. In modern capitalist society, the increasing commodification of culture had transformed culture itself into a crucial medium of ideological domination, and a vital means by which the capitalist order itself is maintained. Together with Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,¹²⁵ he coined the term *Kulturindustrie*, a “culture industry,” to describe the commodification of cultural forms that had resulted from the growth of monopoly capitalism. The culture industry, they argue, plays a central role in cementing its audience to the status quo, and had transformed culture itself into an ideological medium of domination. However, culture had not always served this role, rather the meaning and function of art changes historically. In their work, they contrast the emancipatory potential of what they term “genuine” or “autonomous” art, and the products of the culture industry, which play the opposite role. By uncovering the social conditions that gave rise to both forms of art, they claim to reveal the impact that commodification has had upon art itself, and hence on society as a whole and our very consciousness. In relationship to a differentiated emerging culture and arts context, such as the one in the Gulf States and their capital accumulation art, Jordanian women artists’ practices negotiate continuously their presence, remaining full of controversy. While in fact they recognize Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi in the Emirates as an emerging and affirming hub for the arts in the Middle East, the constant critique of this specific form of commodification of culture and accumulation of capital to invest in art, made them resist fully wedding themselves to it.

Having brought together some of the elements, parameters, and definitions which can help to define cultural resistances, we can re-affirm that cultural resistance is a continuous process and not a stable and fulfilled concept, where the criteria are from time to time, from place to place, reshaped. Since “cultural production shifts in conjunction with political developments and contingencies,”¹²⁶ we might need to investigate all the empirical circumstances that made women’s arts a cultural resistance. Stephen Duncombe, in his *Cultural Resistance Reader*, develops schematically some more parameters to the definition of cultural resistance, which I

¹²⁵ T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London 1979.

¹²⁶ R. Salih and S. Richter-Devroe, *ibidem*.

consider appropriate to report here as they might be useful for our further analysis. First of all, it creates ideologically and materially a free space where to enact political activity or a stepping stone into it, but it can also constitute a “haven” to escape politics and problems. Secondly, the content (“the political message resides within the content of culture”), the form (“the political message is expressed through the medium of transmission”), the interpretation (“the political message is determined by how the culture is received and interpreted”) and the activity (“the action of producing culture, regardless of content or form or reception, is the political message”) are the means of cultural resistances. To conclude, Duncombe identifies different scales of resistance which varies in three levels:

unconsciously political	appropriation	self-consciously political;
individual	subculture	society;
survival	rebellion	revolution.

The gradual progression that concerns the scale of cultural resistance reveals also that “art can dissent in less explicit ways”¹²⁷ and that the mix of individual or collective artists within the particular historical and empirical context make the ways less or more explicit. Sometimes it can invest all these aspects together; sometimes it can remain at the level of the unconscious. If in Jordan, we had barely witnessed the revolutionary point through arts and culture, the subversive of artists’ interventions are surely self-consciously political, or better “the political is the motivation”¹²⁸ or the “cultural resistance is the motivation.”¹²⁹ The transformative power of the dynamic cultural production of the Middle East, as the current scholarship of politics and cultural resistances prove,¹³⁰ has been often highlighted the recent uprisings of 2010–2011 and onwards. The need for change has been simultaneously the reason and the effect of a diversified artistic production. From Iran to Morocco and from Saudi Arabia to Palestine, a well-established tradition of contemporary literature, films, music, visual arts and other artistic interventions, such as graffiti and rap, have always backed critical thought and political dissent in organized

¹²⁷ R. Salih and S. Richter-Devroe, *ibidem*.

¹²⁸ Interview with Toleen Touq, artist, cultural manager, researcher, 20th September 2015, Amman.

¹²⁹ Interview with Saba Innab, architect, painter, visual artist, 21st April 2015, Amman.

¹³⁰ C. Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Paperback, London 2013; R. Salih and S. Richter-Devroe, *ibidem*; K. Laachir, Laachir, and S. Talajooy (eds.) *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music*, Routledge, London, New York 2013.

movements. One of the greater thinkers and critics who most embraced and narrated forms of (literary) cultural resistance was Edward Said, who looked first at the relation between culture and imperialism, to attempt a decolonization of culture. First of all, he described “the period of ‘primary resistance’”¹³¹ which was made by all the great anticolonial movements; there comes “the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance, where efforts are made to reconstitute a ‘shattered community to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system;”¹³² finally, in his claim of decolonization of minds, he asserts “the idea that resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history.”¹³³ Embracing in his analysis about resistance and opposition Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, he thinks that nationalist cultures can be overcome by drawing on “a fertile culture of resistance whose core is energetic insurgency, a ‘technique of trouble’, directed against the authority and the discourse on imperialism.”¹³⁴ On the same wave, he will then recommend, through the reading of Franz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre*, that an “entirely new post-nationalist theoretical culture is required.”¹³⁵

Although all stories of independences from colonial powers, revolutions against dictatorships and struggles against occupation in the Middle East in the last century have not been and are not painless, their multiplication and diversification testify their resistant character. With regard to the ideologies of the last century which shaped Middle East history as well, arts and cultures in the region nowadays are not generally nostalgic to any of the “revolutionaries’ moments,” rather they are questioning them and trying to experiment new models for political change, in what we might identify as a post-label, post-nationalist and post-ideological generation. Charles Tripp in his *The Power and the People* about art and political resistance in the Middle East individuates in art the strength of creating “a powerful vocabulary” and “a common, mutually reinforcing imaginary.”¹³⁶ Jordan is following and writing stories of its cultural resistance as well, in this process of civil society’s growth with new media and technologies implied in the re-signification of a globalized world.

¹³¹ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, London 1993.

¹³² E. Said, *ibidem*, p. 33.

¹³³ E. Said, *ibidem*, p. 259.

¹³⁴ E. Said, *ibidem*, p. 322.

¹³⁵ E. Said, *ibidem*, p. 323.

¹³⁶ C. Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East*, Paperback, London 2013.

In the intersectional and interdisciplinary methodology, attempting a definition of cultural resistance, gender as a category of analysis needs to be interconnected with previous parameters, determining specific layered elements of the process of cultural resistances. Duncombe does include in the above-mentioned reader a chapter on women's cultural resistance, "A Woman's Place". Virginia Woolf's words open this section, where Duncombe illustrates her struggle to conquer "a room of her own", a place to work in and write: this is a well renowned, historically rooted and compelling theme in feminist studies. However, Duncombe's analysis appears to be grounded on a poor selection of a few feminist issues, such as the private space and domestic sphere (Virginia Woolf) while Virginia Woolf intended her room, as the space, to be creative; the definition of a woman free from men's one (Radicalesbian collective), the devaluation of women literature's (Janice Radway), and the very controversial notion of shopping malls as a space for women's cultural resistance (John Fisk).¹³⁷ Duncombe fails to present a strong and rich model of women's cultural resistances in the history of feminism and in different parts of the postcolonial world of the global south. The risk while talking about gender is always and again to isolate women as a homogenized category. Gender is one of the intersections of power, like class and economy, in the definition of cultural resistances, so it must be included in any kind of analysis and not only as a separate field of investigation. Women in different empirical contexts have been and are one of the minority groups that throughout history have fought and resisted in order to exist with dignity. In order not to generalize but instead designing our views on the research I have conducted, the particular kind of resistances that women artists in Amman shape is based on their need of reclaiming the public sphere and, in their sense, of building community practices and spaces, rather than an individual-talented-innate genius as paradigm of the artist, against an individualization of lives in gated communities. While belonging to the middle and upper class of the capital, they re-signify gender through their – sometimes subversive or rebellious – destabilizing acts in the patriarchal society to which they problematically belong. In Linda Nochlin's well-known essay, "Why have there been no great women artists?", the author argues that the institutional, public and social preconditions for the achievements in the arts have rendered the emergence of women impossible. The historian of art poses an intellectual problem which is not only a feminist preoccupation, but also a deficiency in the discipline itself, the

¹³⁷ I found this last intervention on shopping malls as women's space of cultural resistance very problematic. I have instead identified in Amman's women artists a very strong tendency to oppose neo-liberal policies and spaces (and shopping malls often constitute the core of these places), as their way of cultural resistance.

history of art, as well in many other areas and fields. In the formulation of this “crucial question,” she accuses the acceptance of the “normal” absence of women in the discipline and therefore in its history, where a feminist critique is needed instead:

“A feminist critique of the discipline of art history is needed which can pierce cultural-ideological limitations, to reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in regard to the question of women artists, but in the formulation of the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole. Thus the so-called woman’s question, far from being a peripheral sub-issue, can become a catalyst, a potent intellectual instrument, probing the most basic and “natural” assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questioning, and providing links with paradigms established by radical approaches in other fields.”¹³⁸

The feminist’s reaction has been to “dig up from the history women artists not appreciated, to rehabilitate careers, to rediscover forgotten...” While not blaming such attempts, she lamented the reinforcements of “negative implications” that such work can produce. On the contrary, Nochlin calls for a re-conception of what arts are, opening an intersectional point of view: the question of not being part of the history of art is for all non-white, non-middle and upper class, and non-male – so women – included in the exclusion. This is the problem that has occurred throughout the whole male-made history, where stories became the Story and the History. As a strategy of cultural resistances, women artists in Jordan constantly play with their status as a minority, if only because of the formal and legal status in the Monarchy, and their less institutionalized presences in the fields of arts and cultures as well as in the State and in the society to make their discourse a dissenting one. Playing with their invisibility makes them protagonists of certain art discourse of the capital. In addition to Nochlin’s contribution to the history of art and to a feminist rethinking of history of art and women’s presence in the arts, Griselda Pollock speculates on *histories* of arts. If with that essay Nochlin is considered the mother of the feminist history of art, Griselda Pollock, born in South Africa, is the British daughter. The pluralization of *histories* of art in her long life’s work and her precious contribution to art history and feminist studies “is specifically significant since it opens out the field of historical interpretation beyond a selective tradition, the Story of Art, a canonical version

¹³⁸ L. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?”, in Gornick, V., and Moran, B. (eds.), *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, Basic, New York 1971.

masquerading as the only history of art.”¹³⁹ While both authors call into question a discipline and pose an intellectual problem, engaging critically with their feminist methodological tools, narratives, representations and histories, “feminists’ interventions in art’s histories” are at the core of their interdisciplinary work. Since my research deals specifically with women’s interventions in Jordan as cultural resistances, I have found of particular interest Pollock’s thought in speculating on women’s arts in Amman – and the study of the issue – as an engagement with critical thinking. By the expression “feminist interventions” Pollock means not only the interventions in the field of art, but also in the interruptions and the writing back of feminist thinkers of the last century. As we operated in our attempt to define parameters of cultural resistances, we revisited the outstanding literature of the twentieth century, which has been part of the formulation of political and aesthetical radical theory. Well, our feminist interventions, women’s arts today, and reflections of it are not denying this vibrant and living tradition; on the contrary, they were made and continue to be made possible “by our full participation in this surge of intellectual curiosity and thought, this site of intellectual dissidence in the face of what Adorno lamented as the increasing commodification of all aspects of culture.”¹⁴⁰ Often being nurtured by Western scholarships, many of the women artists’ thoughts I have encountered have been and are in dialogue with all this tradition of thinking, enriched then by the particular and interiorized contribution of postcolonial and post-orientalist authors, not always included in Western academia. My research was enriched and fed by women artists’ reviews of works and analysis on their city, for example the articles of visual performer artist – and actually PhD researcher – Samah Hijawi or the previous experimental artist and cultural manager Toleen Touq, and others, who all wrote to nurture the discussions on visual contemporary arts and culture in the Middle East. Cultural resistances are then also infused with their critical thinking and contributions not only to their area and country of origin, but also to Western academia, where some of them studied or researched, often problematically or in controversy. Others who never studied or did research in some western academia anyway develop critical thinking and understanding of their surroundings, such as the architect and artist Saba Innab or the architect and graphic designer Dima Maurice, only to cite a few examples.

¹³⁹ G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*”, Routledge Classics, London 2003.

¹⁴⁰ G. Pollock, *ibidem*, p. XXIII.

Cultural resistance is situated within the historical, political, cultural and social complexity where women are – despite themselves – dismissed in the official and institutional realm and have to reinvent themselves in no less complex pre-defined roles which they challenge. Cultural resistance, in conclusion, is made up of all the specific circumstances, which we will underline later on, under which women intervene and practice and in the strategies they enact to problematize, through arts and cultural activities, their gender roles. Women’s practice of arts can be in itself an account of cultural resistance, but I do not intend to take it for granted; instead I continuously question women’s art and their practices as resistance. Furthermore, as I have already introduced in the previous chapter, most women do not define their works and interventions as feminist. This could be read as another form of their cultural resistance: they do not wish to be labeled as feminists, though in my opinion most of the analysis of this cultural scene is of a feminist nature. But as cultural resistance, this feminism operates “in less explicit ways.” We could examine as feminists their geographical and generational critical positioning, their desire for difference instead of identity, their constant attempt to venture and dare to act in public, to defy institutions: and all of this always through the arts. Pollock would call it a “differing the canon.” I would instead propose in my research a reframing of women’s roles as cultural resistance, promoting and endorsing a new visual language and a new creative women’s agency in the politics of aesthetics in Jordan, in the Middle East and in the world. Before analyzing the circumstances and to what extent arts problematize gender roles, I wish to deal with the question of the conditions of current and old challenges, and so I attempt to tackle the question: resistance, specifically to or against what?

2.2 Resistance to what? Neoliberalism versus Cosmopolitan Outlook

Writing about neoliberalism in Amman my thoughts go to a number of Middle Eastern cities, such as Istanbul, Beirut and Amman, where the political and economic policies are shaping urban planning and urban lives, as well as conditioning – often negatively – (natural) resources and (sometimes progressive) thoughts. When I usually walk from downtown Amman to Jabal al Webde or Jabal Amman, there is a steep climb up to the top of the hill, unless you – and I usually

do – take a “service.” It is a very cheap shared taxi that, like a public bus, travels a fixed route and each passenger – unlike buses – can stop when s/he wants and does not have to wait for a specific stop. To get off the service, you simply pronounce the phrase “Ya’ateek el’afie”, “May Allah give you health,” and the service driver immediately stops to let you get off. Many times, especially in mornings on working days, I have seen bakers or other shopkeepers from downtown exploiting the service in order to deliver some of their goods, using the hood of the car and paying for the service as a passenger. I have thought that this was a very practical and informal way to economize and to work in cooperation with other merchants in the cities. Living in the neighborhoods of East Amman has presented me with very different situations. Moreover, some of the small shopkeepers in my street had often thanked me, especially because I continue to buy food in small shops and not in big supermarkets or malls. Living in Jabal al Webde and in Jabal Amman (both on the East side of Amman) in 2015 and 2016 has been for me a privilege, not only due to the vibrant cultural life of Amman, but because I could also enjoy the small different forms of economic resistance in a city which was almost twenty years ago was literally chewed up by big private–public investments and foreign capital to build new buildings for offices to rent or for families who can afford it. James Scott has called those acts “hidden transcripts of resistance,”¹⁴¹ sometimes unconscious, through which population differs itself from power and economic elites, where resistance is often the only way to survive for them. Instead of investing in the ancient nucleus and old part of the city, where the Roman theatre and the Citadel, as well as all the beautiful old houses and buildings are, even if a significant number are abandoned or need restoration, Amman continues endlessly to build vertically and in the “west” (the Western and richest part of the city) with its development projects, skyscrapers, free trade zones, and amenities for the wealthy, aimed at attracting more and more foreign capital. The cosmopolitan West part of the city is considered the rich and developed part, because lifestyles and the cost of living are significantly different from the working class areas of the dusty East, but also because it is where the investments flow into. Afaf Almala, a researcher and citizen of Amman, described this division thus:

“The clearest social division in Amman is not a division based on ethnicity and religion, it is rather the division between the west and east. West Amman is largely the area for wealthy people, however, some

¹⁴¹ J. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1990.

parts of west Amman consist of middle-class professionals who have well-paid jobs. East and central Amman contain both middle-class and poorer populations, and some parts are less privileged than others. Some areas in east Amman are very poor and lack basic services, such as Hai al-Tafaileh and Jabal al Nadhaif, where I conducted interviews with women from disadvantaged areas.”¹⁴²

The origins of these policies in Jordan have to be retraced at the end of the 1980s, when Jordan entered into its first agreement with the International Monetary Funds (IMF). But it was at the beginning of Abdullah II’s Reign in 1999 that the Hashemite Kingdom concretely opened markets and investments, joining neoliberal economies’ styles, pretensions and ambitions. Neoliberalism is not only buildings and industrial zones; it is a cultural lifestyle. It has been seen as the “paradigm of our time”¹⁴³ which many described also as a utopian project. Instead, in Amman as in the entire world, it has only facilitated the growth of inequalities and restored the business class elites.¹⁴⁴ Moreover, the unfair distribution of powers and resources has intensified radical racialized, gendered and classed lines.¹⁴⁵ The State, institutions and organizations have all fostered capitalistic models which have “deepened the impoverishment and marginalization of women – especially women who are already oppressed by well documented circumstances of poverty and race”¹⁴⁶ beside a false consciousness over women’s rights and empowerment. In the analysis of the development and redevelopment in Amman in the neoliberal order, Michel Hourani highlights the interconnection and interpenetration of the political and the economic power, especially in Jordan. The origins of this strict and determinant link are to be found in the British colonial State formation. When the British initiated their mandate in Jordan, they had to deal with the tribal and the communal leaders. They had, in the eyes of the British, a “communal ownership” of land.¹⁴⁷ In order to put an end to the previous Ottoman system and deal with the tribe leaders, they initiated a “regime of private property,” which during and soon after the end of the colonial mandate became the terrain of favoritism in exchange of political and financial

¹⁴² A. Almala, *Gender and guardianship in Jordan: femininity, compliance, and resistance*. PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2014.

¹⁴³ R. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times (History of Communication)*, 1999, p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Eisenstein, 1998; C. Mohanty, *ibidem*, 2003, Keddie, 2010.

¹⁴⁶ M. Pietrobelli, Marta, *In whose interests? The politics of Gender Equality in Jordan*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2013. The literature Pietrobelli takes into account includes: Eisenstein, 1998; Blackmore, 2000; Jaggar, 2002; Mohanty, 2003.

¹⁴⁷ M. Hourani, “Urbanism and Neoliberal order: the Development and Redevelopment of Amman”, in *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 3(2), 2014, pp. 634-649.

support: “the currency of royal favor.”¹⁴⁸ This was only the beginning of the oligarchic elites and powers of a new political–economic entity: the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This fusion throughout of all the new nation-state enforcement process grew until it encountered the neoliberal oligarchic networks’ market, which again Hourani reads as “rooted in colonial state formation.”¹⁴⁹ Twenty years of illiberal political economy has not stabilized the debt, nor has it diminished high rates of unemployment and poverty in the country. It is in this domain that Jillian Schwedler investigates around aspirations and engagement with some of the possible positive outcomes of the neoliberal city. She approaches the urban change in spatial, economic and cultural terms to be able then to understand the specific cultural effects in “transversal” movements for the “aspiring cosmopolitans.”¹⁵⁰ West Amman is partly defined by its cafés, malls, nightclubs, hotels, health centers, leisure places and real estates (the “cosmopolitan” city), while the East is identified with the archeological sites, the *sug*, the mosques, and the dust of working classes’ slums. In her article, Schwedler speculates that citizens, mainly workers of East Amman, cross daily the borders of the city not only in spatial terms, but also in cultural ones, trying to participate in the economic wealth and opportunities. This crossing is not only spatial and cultural but also defies class hierarchies: what is usually criticized as the mainly exclusionary nature of neoliberal cities and economies, in the essay is sometimes proposed as “emancipatory” for those who instead of experiencing the devastating effects of the unequal distribution try instead to occupy a space. Schwedler does not give an optimistic outlook of the destructive capitalism, rather a geographical and cultural practice of the subaltern’s agency, a middle-lower class. If in these spatial, economic and cultural movements, which very much concerns subjectivities and desires, but also survival needs, the circulation (of people, goods, thoughts) is made from East to West, the Palestinian anthropologist Aseel Sawalha examines the opposite tendencies, again in spatial and in cultural terms. Some of the cultural practitioners of the city, part of the middle and upper class of Amman with their families living in the West of the city, have on the contrary increasingly moved or inhabited some of the neighborhoods of East Amman, such as Jabal al Webde, Jabal Amman and the *balad*, the downtown. Single women, in particular, namely some of the artists from this research, in countertendency with the neoliberal

¹⁴⁸ M. Hourani, *ibidem*, pp. 634-649.

¹⁴⁹ M. Hourani, *ibidem*, pp. 634-649.

¹⁵⁰ J. Schwedler, “Amman Cosmopolitanism: spaces and practices of aspiration and consumption”, in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 30(3), 2010.

expansion of the city, chose to live in the “old” part, to try to contribute to its reanimation and revalorization. All these cited neighborhoods are the ones subjected to strong gentrification but also are often inhabited by foreigners. This opposite trend can be explained by the big increase of living costs in West Amman, but also by the urban growth due to the arrival of the mostly Syrian and previously-Iraqi citizens, as well as workers from Southeast Asia and Egypt and other refugees (Sudan, Eritrea, and Somalia). In this socio-spatial process Sawalha individuates a consequence of the Arab uprisings, but she especially analyzes urbanism and the shaping of an “Ammani” urban identity –rather than a national one – also in its connection to art and artistic communities. In fact, the young members of this countertendency, “a number of whom are deeply involved with the art scene,” promote “new modes of cultural production and consumption.”¹⁵¹ As for the two opposite geographical and cultural factors of Amman’s urban change, from East to West, from West to East, my research has dealt more in depth with the second one due to the contact with the women artists and cultural practitioners, especially in Jabal al-Webde. Particularly referring to gender dynamics in these socio-cultural and spatial shifts, I do argue that neoliberal processes are only in appearance promoting an “independent women’s model”, while according to me it reinforces a patriarchal one. First of all, trying to integrate despite economic possibilities to an exclusionary way of life, does not offer the conditions for dissent and re-invention of gender roles. Secondly, women who can afford or are already economically integrated into capitalist consumerism are, in the end, only consumers and not protagonists of a male-designed and male-managed city. Third, women’s independence and “liberation” coupled with the “liberalization” of the political economy, without problematizing gender norms in the neoliberal patriarchal realms, is a hidden and well-constructed mechanism to flatten women’s personalities who are not the creators of this pleasant and expansive world. Of course, many women have found their role as protagonists in the neoliberal city spaces, but all these spaces are of profitable and commercial interests, rather than in contestation and dissent of politics. I do contest, therefore, this false liberal and liberating model where women are passive consumers or economically excluded or frustrated observers; while on the contrary I do propose to see arts and culture fields as the space of dissent and re-appropriation of areas undergoing gentrification and re-invention of (male-dominated) professions. In a way, women enact their

¹⁵¹ A. Sawalha, “Art and Culture Reshaping the Urban Landscape in Amman, Jordan”, in Sharp, Dean and Panetta, Claire (ed.), *Beyond the Square: Urbanism and the Arab Uprisings*, Urban Research Publications, New York 2016.

cultural resistance in this active responsive attitude to neoliberal political-economic choices. One could contest that it is only an elite of women are the protagonists of these changes, but I do see the problematization of their families' class at the core of their cultural and artistic work. Moreover, their active presence in East Amman's neighborhoods is a constant attempt to open and make visible arts to the whole city and citizens, as we will see in greater depth in Chapters Four and Five. Even if sometimes criticized as privileged educated women of Amman, it is in the urban "creative class," mainly middle and upper class, that Richard Florida¹⁵² indicates the synergy to create urban growth.

Sometimes the female artists I interviewed denounced themselves as part of "a bubble." In this challenge to involve a larger portion of local inhabitants and refugee citizens in suburbs areas or outside the capital in rural areas or refugee camps, their work as cultural producers and artists buoys the economy in working class areas and benefits everyone. They simultaneously work to create "their own social and cultural environment where aesthetic values rule and they can feel at home in their own taste community,"¹⁵³ attempting to fascinate and involve local residents. Of course, they also benefit – not uncritically – from international funds. They see that their practice also has some negative effects: the market and the investments, in fact, detect the essence of business around the creative class and precipitates to contaminate it: the "commodification of cool" with its "broader social implications."¹⁵⁴ Indeed, what I want to remark on in my research is the women's creative agency that renders such practices vital and a source of resistant politics facing the capital-invader. The political-economic nexus does include internalized patriarchal norms and values where women of all classes are caged in different degrees and scales, but no woman is immune. Their creative agency shows the attempt to redefine gender roles in their immodest cosmopolitan life. While in Schwedler's article, the term *cosmopolitan* is "most often associated with elite consumerism, economic globalization and secularism,"¹⁵⁵ I intend here to define female artists' cosmopolitanism in a different manner. The "aspiring cosmopolitans" in Schwedler's article are apparently not impacted by the high rate of work exploitation that unfortunately hits the mass of servants, housekeepers, and loaders of West Amman. Belonging to

¹⁵² R. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York 2002.

¹⁵³ S. Zukin, "Cool Artists, Cool City", in *Sociological Forum*, 25(4), 2010, pp. 861-863.

¹⁵⁴ S. Zukin, *ibidem*.

¹⁵⁵ J. Schwedler, *ibidem*.

this Ammani modern cosmopolitan identity unfortunately makes people adopt, maybe unconsciously, an orientalist lens while defining the same co-citizens as “the others.” In the case described by Schwedler the ones perceived as the “others” by the cosmopolitan Ammanis are, for example, the members of the tribes in Jordan. Tribes and the “tribal” have a very varied meaning and their conception, roles, and contradictions cannot be essentialized only as an opposite of modernity or only as synonymous with tradition. This common essentialization misunderstands and misinterprets changes and evolution in society, even tribal groups, and shows how Ammani cosmopolitan citizens often adopt uncritically an orientalist gaze. Of course, power, violence and corruption, often attributed to tribes, are also to be truly referred to as critical elements presented by these elite views or by the labels. But it does not engage in an in-depth approach of knowledge towards different specific and heterogeneous individuals within tribes and tribe leaders. A different and more comprehensive approach would enrich opinions and de-essentialize judgments on their own co-citizens of Jordan. Moreover, this lack of larger and deeper visions also simplifies gender issues, as the tribes and the tribal mentality are, without any exception, judged as the perpetrators of gender segregation and gender injustice.

Finally, the neoliberal society to which less wealthy citizens would like to belong is a well-monitored society. While feeling free to move thanks to financial possibilities, it is not negligible the way security and surveillance enter lives and have formed the framework of neoliberal development in Jordan. To this cosmopolitan lifestyle, which often ignores social justice, effective freedoms and real women’s agency, and which is marked by consumerism rather than culture, I do embrace a diverse “cosmopolitan outlook”¹⁵⁶ on the city embodied by women artists which appears less “superficial” than the one described above.¹⁵⁷ This cosmopolitan gaze results from mixed and multiple gender, sexual, class identities, or rather an overcoming of identities to favor differences as a value, and “zones of contacts”¹⁵⁸ rather than gated communities and private and elitist areas. I have found female artists’ cultural resistance a cosmopolitan resistance, if we embrace this hybrid cosmopolitan outlook rather than referring to the consumerism of other cosmopolitan Ammanis. This cosmopolitan point of view incorporates

¹⁵⁶ The Italian geographer Vincenzo Guarrasi theorizes the *sguardo cosmopolita*, the cosmopolitan outlook, in and for the Mediterranean cities and in *La città cosmopolita, Geografie dell’ascolto n.1*, G. B. Palumbo Editore, Palermo 2011.

¹⁵⁷ V. Guarrasi, *Urban hybrids: Mediterranean Cities in search of new identities*, Plexus 8, 2012, pp. 95-105.

¹⁵⁸ V. Guarrasi, *ibidem*, pp. 95-105.

what Guarrasi calls a “geografia dell’ascolto”, i.e. “geography of listening.” For many of the female artists who participated in this research, the attitude in the research for their artistic interventions was that of geographers. The “geografia dell’ascolto” is not only revealed by the ethic and political values behind their practices, but also witnessed by their methods of art and cultural research. Guarrasi describes “certain strategic moves” in order to “rethink the metropolitan dimension:”¹⁵⁹

“Proceed by on-the-spot surveys. Ground inspections may identify the critical places in which change is manifesting itself: it is a constellation of events and places, which traditional studies and experience would have us eschew and discard because of their hybrid, unstable and contingent character.”¹⁶⁰

The way these artists in Amman exercise their creative agency corresponds to this on-the-spot way of surveying, *sopralluoghi* in Italian, which not only ties them to the neighborhoods where they act, but also intensifies the meaning of their resistance in the highly surveilled Amman. Also, the aesthetic of their collective artistic spaces, such as Makan in Jabal al-Webde, co-founded by three women, is “cosmopolitan and international, but not commercial” as written by Sawalha, who describes the space with its second-hand furniture not only for its aesthetic but also for its overarching ethic. The cosmopolitan outlook adopted here to describe the different cosmopolitan lifestyles, aspirations and actions of the female culture practitioners – even of the middle and upper class, who I dare to repeat, in their arts, and their listening to places and spaces to create and re-invent positions and roles, especially in East Amman – can be refurbished with many examples. Here I only cite them to make a sense of this geography, while the next chapters will dig into the details. The already-mentioned project, Spring Sessions, by Toleen and Noura, is at the heart of this human, political and cultural geography. Every year the art program has chosen a different location in East Amman, Downtown and Jabal al-Webde, in addition to a workshop and final exhibition in the 2016 edition in Culture Street in Shmeisani, the first area in the expansion of Amman in the West in the 1970s. They have looked, after different *sopralluoghi*, for the places and spaces where to refresh and involve the community as much as possible: the first edition was in an old hotel in the heart of downtown, which was abandoned and was renewed and re-inhabited by the young artists of Spring Sessions. Another project

¹⁵⁹ A. Amin, and N. Thrift, *Cities. Reimagining the urban*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001, cited in Guarrasi, *ibidem*.

¹⁶⁰ V. Guarrasi, *ibidem*, pp. 95-105.

dealing with this geography and this cosmopolitan gaze was also created by Toleen, together with other two artists, Samah Hijjawi and Shuruq Harb, and it went beyond the geography of the city, questioning the geography and cultural limits of Jordan in connection with Palestine and the river Jordan, which separates it from Palestine: *The River Has Two Banks*.¹⁶¹ It aimed to create more cultural and artistic connections between the East and West banks of the Jordanian river, Palestine and Jordan, separated by the history and politics of the conflict, but also by nostalgia and refusal. I again remember Samah Hijjawi's public performance, this time referring to the above-mentioned regime of surveillance in neoliberal cities: when she read a political speech in downtown, defying the law which forbids gatherings or political speech, she used a strategy to bypass the intelligence, asking for a permit through the Royal Film Commission to shoot as if it were a film. Not only did she document the project in this way, which turned out to be later a video performance as well, but she bravely bypassed the surveillance system. Challenging the cosmopolitan strict and homogeneous view of the tribes, Deema Dabis, video-maker, performer and yoga instructor, organizes every year a gathering in a Bedouin camp in Little Petra where the leader tribe of the local community tries to get in touch with the Ammani visitors to let them know about their own local (Jordanian) environment: a way to internally support local tourism as well as disrupt the Orientalizing gaze of many visitors who enter in contact with the Bedouin community and their amazing hospitality. From these examples and many others from the active Jordanian civil society, what specifically concerns my research is the women's creative agency, which represents a practical, geographical and cultural dimension opposing patriarchy. Deniz Kandiyoti defines the new phenomenon of patriarchy as "masculinist restoration."¹⁶² It is no longer "patriarchy-as-usual," and it "requires higher levels of coercion and the deployment of more varied ideological state apparatuses to ensure its reproduction."¹⁶³ We can then take as an example the neoliberal policies and the state of surveillance that we have already described as part of these varied ideological state apparatuses which enforce renewed patriarchy. While these restored masculinities witness the profound crisis of masculinity, female creative agencies shake

¹⁶¹ "*The river has two banks* is an initiative addressing the growing distance between those living on either side of the river (Jordan, *ndr*). From 2012-2016, *The river has two banks* created a series of events in different locations across Jordan and Palestine." From their website's description: http://theriverhastwobanks.net/?page_id=73.

¹⁶² D. Kandiyoti, "Fear and fury: women and post-revolutionary violence", in *Open Democracy*, 10th January 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/deniz-kandiyoti/fear-and-fury-women-and-post-revolutionary-violence>.

¹⁶³ D. Kandiyoti, *ibidem*.

deeply “notions of female subordination.”¹⁶⁴ Dealing with the spaces in the city and different classes, and encountering formal and juridical discrimination, women artists’ agency challenges body politics, which implicitly encourages the masculinist restoration. Being unsubordinated and active in a creative mode makes women contrast the constant and renewed patriarchal apparatus. So, it is not only an opposition against patriarchy, rather the re-placement, through creativity and arts, of female subordination. This is how agency, the cause and effect of the Arab uprisings, shapes cultural resistance in Amman. But, as we have defined earlier, only social, historical, political-economic, and cultural circumstances could make us question the meaning of resistance in contemporary Jordan. So then, to what extent and under which circumstances can arts problematize gender roles in the current neoliberal patriarchal society?

2.3 Women’s Creative Agency: Reframing Gender Roles

We consider cultural resistance as a form of agency. We should therefore take into account the author who changed, in an incontrovertible way, the terms of the critical discussion on the category of agency, especially concerning the Arab and Muslim world, the anthropologist Saba Mahmud. By doing ethnographical research on women of a pious movement in a mosque in Cairo, at the end of the 1990s, she scrutinized the meaning and sense of agency as one of the different modalities of action, rather than merely constructing a theory of agency. In countertendency with the feminist theorists who had previously intended agency primarily as acts that challenge social norms within structures of subordination, the remarkable analysis of agency in Mahmud’s *Politics of Piety* is based on “the different modalities it takes and the grammar of concepts in which its particular affect, meaning, and forms resides.”¹⁶⁵ The description and conceptualization of different modalities of agency, on which her work insists, defies the “binary model of subordination and subversion.”¹⁶⁶ In my attempt to look at women’s arts as cultural resistance, I individuated women’s creative agency that, underlying the word

¹⁶⁴ D. Kandiyoti, *ibidem*.

¹⁶⁵ S. Mahmud, *The Politics of Piety, The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005.

¹⁶⁶ S. Mahmud, *ibidem*.

creative, does not want to repeat the subordination–subversion dichotomy. It, instead, drives our attention to a mobile, not static or normative, agency, continuously processing meanings and forms of interventions in the cultural field in Amman. Emerging from the analysis within the specific empiric and historic context, women’s creative agency is constructed in the continuous process of creation and recreation, invention and re-invention of arts in the city. Processes and women’s creative agency are in a dialectical interchange and not in fixed definitions. Reframing gender roles and identities through arts is that process that entails “agentival capacity (...) not only in those acts that resists norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.”¹⁶⁷ In the complex challenges of the metropolis Amman, urban middle/upper women’s creative class, who I have encountered during the past two years, are cultural actors and agents who affect a wider debate on contemporary visual cultures in the Middle East and North Africa in which potential avenues for agency might occur. Their artworks as well have an agency, resulting from the process of creating it through the effort, struggle, exertion, and achievement, the agency as an ability to realize, and not only as an act of subversion. Dabashi theorizes on creative agency not referring specifically to women, but to the subaltern subject. In his words and, in a Saidian move, as he said, “the subaltern in a contrapuntal position that refuses essentialized agency” acts in the aesthetic domains, speaking out about “historical traumas that have, in fact, sought to silence him/her.”¹⁶⁸ Women’s creative “aesthetic practices” in Rancière’s terms, are one of the different modalities of agency. These aesthetic and artistic practices are in fact “ways of doing” that acquire visibility *per se*, but also for the public and the “common.”¹⁶⁹ In their ways of doing and being, contemporary forms of arts have a “political polyvalence,”¹⁷⁰ made also by the hybridization of tools in arts of postmodern reality.¹⁷¹ Women’s creative agency is exercised in the experience of these aesthetic practices, which touches therefore politics in the experience of dissent. In this sense, this modality of agency cannot be only or easily described as subversion in politics that is opposite to subordination. It is a tentative effort

¹⁶⁷ S. Mahmud, *ibidem*.

¹⁶⁸ H. Dabashi, *Postorientalism: Knowledge and Power in time of Terror*.

¹⁶⁹ J. Rancière, *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, La fabrique éditions, Paris, 2000, p. 14. The translation from the original French of the single expression or word is mine. The English version I have consulted is the follow: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London 2004.

¹⁷⁰ J. Rancière, *ibidem*, p. 38.

¹⁷¹ J. Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, La fabrique éditions, Paris, 2008, p. 28. The translation from the original French of the single expression or word is mine. The English version I have consulted is the following: *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London 2009.

to “reconfigure the common experience of the sensible.”¹⁷² Therefore, if we look specifically at women’s arts practices in Amman, there is no a political strategy of arts, nor a calculable contribution of arts to political action. There is no organized resistance movement behind the arts practices, but rather “instances of defiance.”¹⁷³ Arts interventions could be identified as the production of very punctual and symbolic acts of destabilization and re-imagination of the system. The creative agency is more a “repository of imagination”¹⁷⁴ and from that imagination there is a construction of sensible forms in collective life to arouse an aesthetic sense of collective appropriation of the space. All forms of bodies, voices, and sounds in performances contribute to re-forge the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our effects. From this frame, they try to open some possible passages towards new forms of political subjectivation. As Deniz Kandiyoti recalls, in the different “degrees of patriarchy” of the sideline effects of powers, “a form of contestation may differentiate along gender-specific lines,”¹⁷⁵ depending on the specific circumstances of their context. The gender-specific line that invests women artists in Jordan is the perception of arts itself and of how a disadvantage can be taken as a strategy. The disadvantage is that art in Jordan is still very marginal: the strategy is to use the marginality to take up space and do it. Women also use the gender marginality to enact freely their interventions and often use the common perception of “women as less dangerous in politics” to perform politically in public. Art is not generally understood as a profession, as a job, and arts and culture are “words associated with craftspeople or entertainers, whose morality is regarded as suspect.”¹⁷⁶ The women artists’ perception about being the majority in the field of culture and arts, especially in independent and collective forms, is that in Jordan arts are understood as something not serious so that, as Samah Hijawi said, “let them (women) do it”¹⁷⁷, let women do arts because it is not connected with politics and it is something they can do: “even if they decide to engage in non-traditional roles, they will not be seen as dangerous or punished for posing a threat to the community or undermining male authority.”¹⁷⁸ This is also testified by the facts that in the Royal family, since the 1970s, when arts started to be encouraged, the women were always

¹⁷² J. Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, p. 70.

¹⁷³ K. Laachir, *ibidem*.

¹⁷⁴ S. Duncombe, *ibidem*.

¹⁷⁵ D. Kandiyoti, “Gender, Power, Contestation. Rethinking ‘Bargaining with Patriarchy,’” in C. Jackson and R. Pearson, *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 135-151.

¹⁷⁶ J. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, p. 72.

¹⁷⁷ Samah Hijawi, interview in Amman, 21st April 2016.

¹⁷⁸ A. Almala, *ibidem*.

involved and this can also be ascribed to “Royal Feminism.”¹⁷⁹ In a way, Royal projects and involvements were – and it is – a way to control arts and culture fields, but leaving women to this space indicates the misinterpretation of the meanings of arts. However, women took up the space: in formal and informal spaces, in official and unofficial initiatives, in monitored or free domains where they could intervene artistically and practice their creative agency. Women show through arts their dissent and disaffection with the system of patriarchy.

Another specific circumstance which characterized women artists is being in the independent field and not becoming famous like men usually are in the official narrative and making of the city, cultures and arts. Hanan Toukan described the way contemporary artists in Lebanon try to build an independent cultural scene in Beirut and the same attempt is made by Jordanian women of the arts scene in Amman:

“by bypassing established cultural institutions and the commercial gallery system in the creation of art by working through alternative channels and foraying in to public spaces – both physically as well as conceptually – to exhibit their works. Secondly, by attempting to subvert prevalent conceptions of how the history of the civil war should be narrated by experimenting with ways of how it could be done, introducing new forms of conceptual art. Thirdly, they did so by interrogating established understandings of the identity of the nation and the institutions of cultures tied to it.”¹⁸⁰

Their aesthetic practices do not fit the “traditional” aesthetic and politics, the “national” narrative of history, the “nation-state” sense of arts, which has been celebrative more than critical, and does not produce only crafts and statues, but tries to delineate new aesthetic definitions that challenge imaginations. Samah Hijawi, for example, did her own research about arts and the history of arts in Jordan and she remarked, for example, that the paintings in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Jordan tend to be celebrative more than innovative. Especially after 2011, they have started to question Jordanian history and mark problematically the absence of episodes in the official narrative such as, for example, Black September in 1970, when a civil battle between the army and the Palestinian fighters took place.¹⁸¹ artists feel it is the moment to start reckoning with the taboo and memory in the failed postcolonial nations of the Middle East. Visual cultures, their aesthetics and their agency are assuming a central role in these reckonings,

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter Three and Four for more explications about the expression.

¹⁸⁰ H. Toukan, *ibidem*.

¹⁸¹ More details about Black September will be found in Chapter Three.

while the state is still reticent on opening up questions about the past and future: it only recognizes the leading role of the Hashemite dynasty as an intransigent certainty.

As we have always underlined, the class of these women has to be noticed as one of the factors determining their work and their possibility of enacting creative agency. Middle or upper class women have defined themselves and the arts scene as a “bubble” in Amman, but at the same time, trying to problematize their belonging to a privileged class, in the last ten years a generation of women artists wanted and managed to push outside the boundaries, going outside the galleries and going outside the capital. They have also often been dealing with the intelligence service, public space, authoritarian state and social/political taboo. As privileged women they could have simply avoided this by not being involved and by not engaging critically. Some of them had the opportunity to study and work abroad, while others could not because even being middle-class or educated women, it is not easy to obtain a visa or a scholarship for a Western country, except for those who studied in Beirut or Cairo. The gender–class boundary could have blocked or still might block their artistic aspirations: the ambitious family plans for their daughters could have impeded their artistic careers; their individual paths are sometimes contorted by having family members in institutional or governmental positions; or even if they enjoy greater personal freedom, “stepping outside the normative framework risks reputational damage.”¹⁸² Their class privilege is often perceived as an impediment more than a privilege: sometimes they feel that being in their country, it is important for them to contribute to building individually and collectively the arts scene; at the same time, they experience the frustration of being in a city and a country where there is no engagement with arts criticism and they often find themselves writing about their works, especially because it is performed in the informal and unofficial domains, and do not always traverse mainstream channels. Even their label as artists is challenged by the lack of a vibrant internal environment of arts criticism, and there are no important awards and opportunities that could be granted to them. Simultaneously they have to measure themselves against artistic hubs and capitals such as Beirut and Cairo or Sharjah and Dubai in the Emirates,¹⁸³ while trying to let flourish the emerging cultural scene of

¹⁸² A. Almala, *ibidem*.

¹⁸³ The closer Ramallah cannot be considered a hub due to the country’s border limitations.

Amman, with less rooted prerogatives behind them and less capital than the Gulf, but a regional and internal artistic, cultural, historical background from which to build.

Under all these conditions, women's creative agency is that modality of agency which allows women to reframe their gender roles in the neoliberal and patriarchal challenges of their society, attempting to intervene artistically and re-inventing their families, professional and societal positions, and gender, class-bound and capitalist constraints. This was true in my research for many women who could not easily choose to study or practice arts because of family constraints; so they have either rebelled against their families or chosen a faculty, such as architecture, which allows them to study anyway in the field and they are now practicing both arts and architecture professionally, such as Saba Innab and Dina Haddadin (see Chapter 4.3). Or on the contrary, some of them like Dima Maurice (see Chapter 4.2) chose freely to study architecture and now practices it, but she has struggled to be an independent architect and create her own space, instead practicing in studios which are mostly opened and managed by men. It is particularly challenging to enact creative agency in male-dominated professions such as architecture in the neoliberal economy of Jordan, but women continuously destabilize dominant norms and positions, choosing to enact it or to escape the norms by developing their own creative way of operating. Furthermore, women are dealing with a crisis and transition which involves all Middle Eastern countries: the failure of the postcolonial nation-state and the violent and slow reconstruction of post-ideologies states.¹⁸⁴ Dabashi critiques the postcolonial nation-state and its ideologies, which have not built true possibilities for democracy and the people:

“Islamism, nationalism, and socialism, as a triumvirate of ideological desperation, offered much in revolutionary mobilization against colonialism but very little in discursive possibilities of critically confronting colonial modernity because they have been, ipso facto, partaking in the very same Enlightenment project that has abnegated the colonial subject.”¹⁸⁵

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan maintains a secure and peaceful environment but is still dominated by authoritarianism's mode of governing and assuring security. The Kingdom is implicated differently from this transition and change in the region. First of all, it has historically

¹⁸⁴ N. Ayub, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, St Martin's Press, New York 1995; A. Abbas, *Azma Bina' al-dawlat al-'arabiyya al-mu'aseera: muqareebanaqdiyye al-islam wa eshkaliyya al-takamol al-'eqlani*, Markaz dirasat al-wahda al-'arabiyya, Beirut 2016; H. Barakat, *Al-Ightirab fi thaqafa al-'arabiyya: mitahat al-insan bayna al-hilm wa al-waqe'a*, Markaz dirasat al-wahda al-'arabiyya, Beirut 2006.

¹⁸⁵ H. Dabashi, *ibidem*.

been the receiving country of refugees in the last century and a half, if we think about Circassians at the end of nineteenth century and, more recently, refugees from Palestine, Iraq, and Syria and Yemen. It has also been for many of these refugees a transit country; it continues to be a transit place for many Palestinians who can leave the West Bank and who only window out into the world is through Jordan. Women's creative agency tries responsibly to react to this multiple crisis and the constant threat of wars in neighboring countries, the neoliberal political economy and the readjustments of the city, in an intertwined relationship between cultural and geographical reflections, artistic interventions, and political and societal changes. The positive absence of violent conflicts, such as those currently in Palestine, Syria and Iraq, is paradoxically a small disadvantage for the arts scene, which is not at the center of mainstream Western discussions. While gradually growing as an emergent arts capital, where women are protagonists of this process and progress, the artists complain ironically that it is not a "sexy" destination for the arts market or not an attraction, as in neighboring countries where there are military occupations, civil wars and crises. However, they truly believe in the gradual change and the evolving process, investing in their country Jordan, and they took part in it by appropriating the terms of postcolonial critical discourse. In fact, as Dabashi asserts, "Post-ideological here means postcolonial, the end of coloniality as a condition of knowledge production."¹⁸⁶ The involvement in the creative cultural field means in fact participation and leading positions in the knowledge and visual production in the Middle East. In this post-ideologies generation of women artists, one of the consequences of radical criticism towards the Arab state nationalist and leftist ideologies of postcolonial nation-states, has been the rejection of some thoughts strategically adopted by the state, such as women's questions, which have become "State feminism,"¹⁸⁷ "pseudo-feminist discourse" and politics.¹⁸⁸ The rejection of the State feminism – as a deterioration of true feminist discourse – and the refusal of NGOized women's rights – flattening transnational feminisms and grassroots' solidarity – has led women artists to reject the feminist artists label. As a possible effect, only a few women artists and cultural practitioners in Jordan are deeply engaged with feminist literature, texts and critics. The post-label era and generation of artists have the right to refuse this as part of the post-nationalist culture they are required to build,

¹⁸⁶ H. Dabashi, *ibidem*.

¹⁸⁷On the origin of the expression "State Feminism," see L. Sorbera, "Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014", in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 63-75.

¹⁸⁸ S. Abouelnaga, "Reconstructing Gender in Post-Revolution Egypt," in M. E. Said, L. Mehari, and N. Pratt (eds.) *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions and Resistance: Lessons from the Arab World*, Zed Books, London 2015.

making an empirical experience of feminism. One of the positive outcomes is or might be re-addressing feminist questions through women's aesthetic practices, initiatives, and interventions; and their reclaiming of public spaces as women in the city rejecting gender's limitations, as many have already done and continue to do; and so distancing the monitoring State Feminism and neoliberal version of women's rights by intersecting creative agency with autonomous initiatives that operate successfully, using a mixed funding model; and informally expresses and reverberates old and new feminist narratives, languages and spaces.

Chapter 3

“Something” happened in Jordan. Politics and Women’s Movement(s) before/beyond 2011



Fig. 1: The Jordanian caricaturist Abu Mahjoob's last caricature was spread on social networks on the 17th April 2016 referring to the cancellation of the clause in Article 308 for incidents involving minors.

On the 17th April 2016, whilst in Jordan writing this chapter, that I read the news¹⁸⁹ about the cancellation of a clause in Article 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code that allows sexual predators to escape punishment if they marry their victim. At that moment I immediately thought of all women, particularly the activists and artists who had been fighting against this article for many years, many of whom I have met during these years in Jordan. I enthusiastically spread the news via social networks, however, my enthusiasm waned after reading further articles and news coverage: the minister of justice Bassam Talhouni announced that the one clause that remained in Article 308 for incidents involving female minors aged 15 to 18 depended on whether or not the

¹⁸⁹ “Ilgha’ al-madda 308 min qanun al-‘uqubat al-mu’adal wa al-abqa’ ‘ala jarima (zina), in “Saheh khabarak”, 17/04/2016, <http://www.sahehkhabarak.com/NewsDetails;>

sexual activity was consensual¹⁹⁰ and that the government had passed this draft on to the approval of the Parliament, so it still needed to be discussed.¹⁹¹ This immediately provoked the reaction of women activists and lawyers, as well as women's rights organisations; who were advocating for the full cancellation of the article. They do not accept the terminology and definition of consensual sex for minors because they are in the most vulnerable category that indeed needs more protection, thus they do not feel satisfied because it was only half a victory and so the struggle continues. The cancellation of this clause was part of an endorsement, by the Cabinet, of a new version of the Penal Code, inserting provisions that "would curb crime and enforce" the state's authority. This was announced at a joint press conference held with Minister of Justice Bassam Talhouni and Government Spokesperson Mohammad Momani who said the bill offers "social tools for correction, opening the way for alternative penalties" instead of prison sentences.¹⁹² While this "half victory" disappointed the movement, my further preoccupation after reading the news and amendments turned immediately to the political meaning of this bill and the proposed change. Some of the penalties and concepts provided by this draft penal code, such as preventing and punishing community violence which often takes the form of tribal clashes, may result as a positive move. The problem is enforcing of the law with these penalties. This is not new to Jordanian nationals; enforcing the state's authority by enforcing the law and control of the state over citizens is part of a historical "process of the production of the national identity and national culture in a postcolonial nation-state."¹⁹³ In this specific historical and regional context, whilst some of the amendments in this last draft of the Penal Code are

¹⁹⁰ "Khader: ta'dil al-mada 308 ghayrkafwa al-isalilghhoha", in *Shams News*, 17/04/2016, http://www.shamsnews.net/news/get_news_det/1/16900.html; R. Al- Sarayra, "Tarhibmahdod min munazzamat al-mujtama' bi-ilgha' al-madda 308", in *Al-Ghad*, 18/04/2016, <http://www.alghad.com/articles/932743>; R. Hussein, "Cabinet scraps provision allowing rapists to escape punishment by marrying victims", in *The Jordan Times*, 17/04/2016, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/cabinet-scraps-provision-allowing-rapists-escape-punishment-marrying-victims>.

¹⁹¹ According to the lawyer, women and human rights activist Asma Khader who I interviewed a week after the government's announcement, on 26th April 2016 in Amman, if the law is passed under this Parliament (2016), the amendment will not be accepted because the parliament does not have a good relationship with the government and so they may disobey them: and women's rights are always the weakest part at play. If, these amendments are discussed in Parliament after the next elections in September 2016, there is more of a chance it will be successful.

¹⁹² "Draft penal code stiffens penalties for assaults on employees, natural resources", 18/04/2016, in *The Jordan Times*, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/draft-penal-code-stiffens-penalties-assaults-employees-natural-resources>.

¹⁹³ J. Massad, *Colonial Effects: the making of national identity in Jordan*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001, p. 1.

considered good and necessary,¹⁹⁴ the Jordanian political environment is following the general crisis-trend by putting more restrictions on public freedoms¹⁹⁵ in the name of the security of the region, refugees, terrorist attacks, and borders control. There are many different points of view between human and women rights' activists and the government. , AsmaKhader defines it thus "more justice, more freedom and more social justice will be more effective in protecting our society, will help to prevent terrorist attacks. Our activism in the legal framework is for more respect for human rights, more respect for public freedoms, more respect or guarantees of democracy liberties: this will be the freedom and satisfaction of our society. Local issues such as dealing with high level of unemployment and economic difficulties are more important to prevent terrorism. We should be sure that laws will amend to this direction."¹⁹⁶

To understand the significance of current debates and conflicts such as this and to better locate the field of artists and cultural production it is critical to understand "the historical trajectories and shifts in Jordan and in the region"¹⁹⁷. Here I wish to comprehend the construction of the nation, the role of women and the discourse behind their nationality, as well as acknowledging its stability and "exceptionalism" in comparison to its neighboring countries which are troubled by conflicts inflicted on them by Islamists' presence elsewhere. Lastly I wish to take into consideration their internal unstable politics. In this chapter I intend to travel into Jordanian politics examining the history of women's movements and the history of modern and contemporary arts which were included, assimilated, encouraged and controlled by the authoritarian state, besieging the production of a national identity and a national culture. I want to show the continuity of present debates in women's movements and women artists within their early formations to the present as well as the types of resistance to the state, focusing on a key moment in the whole Middle East and in Jordan from 2011 to 2012.

¹⁹⁴ In the new draft of the Penal Code, the proposed amendment is arguing for the abolition of hard labor which even if not at use, was still in the law. Other very light sentences became tougher, generally to criminalize violence. The death penalty is legal and was enacted in December 2014, ending an eight year de facto moratorium of the death penalty. In February 2015, when the extremist group ISIS announced the execution of the Jordanian pilot Mu'ath al-Kassasbeh, Jordan executed two Iraqis, both two long term death-row inmates of al-Qaeda.

¹⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch Report 2016 about 2015: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/jordan>.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with AsmaKhader, lawyer and women and human rights' activist, president of "Sisterhood is a Global Institute/Jordan", 26th April 2016, Amman.

¹⁹⁷ F. Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith and Progress*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2012, p. 33.

3.1 Jordan, history of a nation-state built country

Jordan's founding myth goes back to the 1916 Arab Revolt in which a coalition of tribes led by the Hashemite family fought against the rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹⁸ It is often said and it is understandable from its map that Jordan was created "with a stroke of a pen"¹⁹⁹ in a map overnight by British officials. Before 1921, there was no territory, people, or nationalist movements that were designated as Transjordanian or Jordanian.²⁰⁰ In fact, Transjordan as a nation-state was established in the wake of World War I, in 1921, by the British and the recently arrived Amir 'Abdullah from Hijaz, the area in the Arabian Peninsula, which is today the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This was Transjordan's colonial moment, its very inaugural moment. When this territory was established under British control, the population of Jordan's borders was less than 225,000 and Amman was only a town with 20,000 inhabitants.



Fig.2 Amman in a picture taken in 1922 when it was a village with 20,000 inhabitants. The picture was restored for the exhibition *Fertile Crescent* in Amman in 2016.

¹⁹⁸ Y. Alon, *The making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State*, I.B. Tauris, London 2011.

¹⁹⁹ J. L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings, What everyone needs to know*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, p. 119.

²⁰⁰ J. Massad, *ibidem*.

Transjordan's first constitution was set up in 1928, as the "Organic Law". The territory was under the Ottomans' jurisdiction and Salt was the main city and a regional capital. During the Ottoman period, which collapsed at the end of the World War I, Jordan's territory was part of the provinces of the empire, Ottoman officials and institutions were in administration²⁰¹, dealing with local elites, peasants and the merchant class from Palestine and other trading provinces. However, it was not as central as Palestine, it was locally dismissed and, as Adely recalls in her ethnography on education at Jordanian women schools "Gendered Paradoxes", there was not even a government run school, only some *kuttab* (Quranic schools) and *madrese*, i.e. religious schools. After 1921, Jordan became an Emirate, the Emirate of Transjordan, under British mandate, and it acquired independence in 1946 when the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was founded and established by King Abdullah. Yet, until 1956, British military officials were still in the country controlling the Army. During the British mandate, native people tried to resist the colonizers, revolts are attested to in 1936, the same years when Palestinians were revolting against the British Mandate and against the first Zionist settlements that had been increasing since the beginning of the twentieth century in Palestine. Jordan's history has shown how a population, formed of "self developed Jordanian natives who were opposed to an assortment of non-native others (the British, the Amir, and the Hijazi, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi bureaucrats and politicians)", tried to resist the order of the nation-state, which was organized and transformed "through repressive and productive techniques, not only to obedient national-citizens, but also into the defenders of the new order."²⁰²The premise of this order has been evident since the initial start of the Kingdom. In March 1956 General Gubb, the British head of the Army was expelled and the Jordanian Army started becoming "Arabized" and only male Transjordanian original settlers were included. The anti-colonial movement, strengthened by the departure of the British, put forward an agenda of democratic reforms aligning with international politics. It was when the royal family feared of an overthrow of the monarchy²⁰³ that a coup backed by the British and the Americans took place in 1957 and a politics of repression started for the next three decades, "if not until now." Aiming to provide security and services through the extension of state institutions, and creating a national history and tradition through the

²⁰¹E. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999.

²⁰²J. Massad, *ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁰³The first King of Jordan, Abdullah I, was assassinated in 1951 in Jerusalem at al-Aqsa Mosque by a Palestinian man.

ideological work of these institutions, “it was after 1956 that the project of creating a national identity began in earnest,” and the state started to act as a “supratribes.”²⁰⁴ Joseph Massad in *Colonial Effects* analyzes this passage between the colonial and postcolonial state in Jordan and the role of the courts and the military in the construction of the nation. The courts and the military are both institutions set up and managed by the colonial force in Jordan as in many other countries and “they replaced existing juridical and military structures, or introduced them to societies that did not have [them] before.”²⁰⁵ Once the Emirate of Transjordan had gained its formal independence and become a Kingdom (as Fanon stated speaking about postcolonial nations) the new nation-states elites replaced their colonial masters by administering the same institutions that were used to control them.²⁰⁶ As Chatterjee puts it, the postcolonial states have “expanded and not transformed the basic institutional arrangement of colonial law and administration.”²⁰⁷ The control of the nation starts when the newly created nation-state formulates “the *new* as that which has always *been*”, making new institutions and producers of the national identity and national culture.²⁰⁸ This postcolonial nation-state is a project of production, of nation and nationalist loyalty which grew, particularly in Jordan throughout its history due to the shaken demography of the country from its formation and:

“Although Jordan is not unique in the postcolonial world, it is one of the less common cases: “Outsiders” conceived of its borders and identity; they led its national army well after independence; people whose roots within existing memory lie outside the new borders of the country ruled and continue to rule it; its population consists in its majority of people whose geographic origins within living memory are located outside the borders of the nation-state (this does not refer only to Palestinian-Jordanians, but also to Syrian-Jordanians, Hijazi-Jordanians, Egyptian-Jordanians, Iraqi-Jordanians, Lebanese-Jordanians, Turkish-Jordanians, Circassian-Jordanians, Kurdish-Jordanians, Chechen-Jordanians, and Armenian-Jordanians).”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ F. Adely, *ibidem*, p. 31.

²⁰⁵ J. Massad, *ibidem*, p. 2.

²⁰⁶ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, New York 2004 (first published as *Les damnés de la terre*, Editions Maspero, Paris 1961), p. 148.

²⁰⁷ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1993, p. 15.

²⁰⁸ This is important to understand its later role in the production of culture.

²⁰⁹ J. Massad, *ibidem*, p. 15.

The outsiders ruled the country, other foreigners and the original settlers of the land.. However as this progressed the rulers started to strictly control and worry about the country's demographic changes in different phases. The demography of Jordan was shaped by its neighbors' troubles since the start of the Kingdom and these changes undermined the project of a national identity. In fact, the population of the newly-formed Kingdom almost doubled in 1948 when the Palestinians from the West Bank of the river Jordan, arrived in Jordan and settled in villages and camps. The Palestinians were escaping from Zionist militias destroying their villages and taking their houses in Palestine in the so-called *Nakba*, which means catastrophe. The Jordanian population grew by 42%. The same happened again in 1967 when the Israeli army occupied Palestinian Territories. This resulted not only in the loss of the Jordanian West Bank to Israeli Occupation Forces but to another wave of Palestinian refugees in Jordan and other countries: a considerable increase in the proportion of Palestinians within the Jordanian population. Recent history witnessed another strong demographic change: in 1990-1991 during the first Gulf War due to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, Palestinians living or born in Kuwait became refugees for the first, second or third time and went back to Jordan or fled to other countries, there was also an influx of thousands of Iraqi refugees into Jordan. Jordan was the only legal country of exit for Iraqis, and although they intended to use it as a country of transit, they often ended up staying there, as they were unable to attain visas for other countries. After the Iraqi authorities opened up the border with Jordan in May 1991, an estimated 200,000 Iraqis took refuge in Jordan.²¹⁰ By the end of the 1990s, Jordan had learned to live with the consequences of the Gulf War and the ensuing sanctions against Iraq for its politics and economy. Then the number of Iraqi refugees grew after the 2003 Us-led invasion of Iraq which sent a third stream of refugees into Jordan, increasing the population by 15 percent. Now, due to the consequences of ISIS's occupation of Mosul and ethnic-based massacres in these countries and the last six years' of war in Syria, has brought Jordan almost one million and half Syrian people.

This historical background and recent developments has led me to choose not to ask the participants in my research; women artists, about their origins; not simply to smooth out differences, but on the contrary to practice a transnational, instead of national-origin, attitude in

²¹⁰G. Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq between the Gulf and the Iraq wars (1990-2003): Historical and socio-spatial dimensions", in *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford*, 68 (2009), p. 1-51.

this research. In spite of this, as exemplified earlier through the example of Deema Dabis (see Chapter 1.2), the life stories of the protagonists often reveal their origins since the artistic trajectory of many women is strongly influenced by the fact that they are Palestinian and not fully or originally Jordanian. Many women started saying that they do not know if they are Jordanian since nobody is fully Jordanian. Architect and visual artist Saba Innab was born in Kuwait and she is one of the Palestinians who came to Jordan when she was eleven when her family decided that the only place where they could go after the war was Jordan: “In Kuwait my identity was very clear: I was Palestinian, we were all Palestinians, without doubts; in Jordan I grew up and I did not know any more if I was still a Palestinian while I was becoming Jordanian.”²¹¹ She feels attached to Jordan since her family lives there and feels as if it were her birthplace despite the fact she was born in Kuwait. Her identity as a Palestinian is linked with being Jordanian at the same time. This question has featured in her artistic path since the beginning and her attachment to Jordan remains in her art and her practice as an architect.²¹²

Throughout its history, influenced by the regions events, Jordanian political life has been characterized by the “domination by the state.”²¹³ Jordan is today a constitutional monarchy: “since independence, the powers of the monarchy have predominated over other constitutional actors in the political sphere. This domination is manifest in the powers of the King, which include the selection of the Prime Minister and the members of the Upper House of parliament: the royal-appointed Prime Minister introduces new legislation, which must be approved by the royal-appointed Upper House, and which is subject to ultimate approval (or rejection) by the King. Royal domination is also evident in the legal restrictions on the formation of political parties and charitable and social service organizations; in the creation of top-down institutions, as in the case of women’s organizations; and in the strategically designed election law.”²¹⁴ King Hussein reigned from 1953 to 1999: most of the time under martial law from 1957 to 1989, in which a fragile decade of liberalization was inaugurated. During this tough and hard period,

²¹¹Interview with Saba Innab, architect and visual artist, 21st April 2016, Amman.

²¹² Saba Innab, architect and visual artist, as well as other artists ‘paths, will be better encountered in the following chapter.

²¹³C.Warrick, *Law in the Service of Legitimacy. Gender and Politics in Jordan*, Ashgate Publishing, Surrey 2009, p.11.

²¹⁴M. Pietrobelli, *In whose interests? The politics of Gender Equality in Jordan*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2013, p. 72.

Jordan's political life was reduced to a small stage and a civil war between the State and the Palestinians took place (Black September 1970). Any public gathering of more than five people was forbidden and many civil society's were banned, including, of course as we will see later on this chapter, women's ones. Freedom of speech was seriously compromised and restricted by the authorities. King Hussein's forty years reign was characterized by this long period of repression, while the last decade showed a relative change (1989-1999) although influenced by the First Intifada and the first Gulf War. He was internationally recognized as one of the interlocutors and actors in international conflicts such as the Cold War (1946-1989) and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts (1948 onwards). While internationally his stabilizing and exceptional mediator role was recognized as positive, demonstrating "a considerable degree of skills both in cultivating external patrons and in riding the waves of regional (and occasionally domestic) turmoil,"²¹⁵ in Jordan he is as well regarded as a dear King, even if most of his reign was under martial law, where any political liberty was denied. In September 1970, known as "Black September", a brief civil war took place between King Hussein's armed forces and the Palestinian population led by PLO and the subsequent defeat and expulsion of Yasser Arafat and his followers.²¹⁶ These facts put the monarchy in a point of precariousness and facts are still censured; the exact number of people who were killed by Jordanian forces is still unclear: it is estimated between seven and twenty thousand²¹⁷ amongst them, Palestinians, part of the military and civil forces, with some Jordanians among them. Even now, it is a big political taboo that artists shyly approach.²¹⁸ Under King Hussein, one of the big areas of the national identity's constitution relied on the Bedouin's presence and the tribal allegiances, persisting and having a major political role until today. Massad defined Bedouins in Jordan's colonial and postcolonial nation as a different species of citizens, together with women, with separate laws concerning them. The Law of Supervising the Bedouins (or the Bedouin Control Law), was made in 1929, and updated until 1936. They governed the Bedouins as "a separate category of nationals and citizens" and were conceived as "transitional, facilitating the integration of the Bedouins within the framework of the juridical nation-state". This, the Jordanian government felt, was achieved in 1976. "That year, a law canceling all previous tribal laws including the Law of Supervising the Bedouins was

²¹⁵ L. Brand, *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization*, Columbia University Press, New York 1998, p. 95.

²¹⁶ B. Milton-Edwards and P. Hinchliffe, *Jordan: A Hashemite Legacy*, Routledge, London 2009, p. 40.

²¹⁷ J. Massad, *ibidem*, p. 245.

²¹⁸ The two artists who mentioned the Black September as political taboo during our encounter were Saba Innab and Samia Zaru, who lived personally that moment (see Chapter Four).

enacted, thus ushering the Bedouins into the world of the nation-state as equal to and no longer a distinct category of citizen-nationals.”²¹⁹What remains of this is that now the Bedouin are the symbol of the traditional and original nation-state, using Petra as the touristic paradise where the Bedouins live and “perform”, and the “tendency to market the Bedouin, as the exotic part of Jordan.”²²⁰ Jordan began its most recent experiment with democratization under the late King Hussein in 1989 following a series of riots which began in Ma’an (South Jordan) and extended to the country’s other big cities. The riots came as a result of the removal of government subsidies soon after Jordan got on the IMF structural adjustment program. Under these circumstances the regime chose political liberalization as a means of channeling and reducing the resulting opposition. But democratization “does not always lead to democracy.”²²¹ The initial political openings were quite promising. Diverse civil society organizations and movements began to emerge with a wide range of civil liberties and rights being freely practiced. Yet, the promising liberalization process, which also included a wide range of opposition, began to gradually face serious challenges in 1994 when Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel. Moreover, the increased role of religious movements and religious sentiments posed some challenges to the Hashemite family who had always based its legitimization on religious credentials.²²² Like other countries in the region, religious movements transformed to political parties, pushing religious Islamic views to the forefront of public life. Jordan has been characterized by political analysts as the nation in the region that has best managed its relationship with political Islam and this resulted in Mansoor Moaddel’s definition of “Jordanian Exceptionalism”.²²³

King Hussein passed away from cancer in 1999 and was succeeded by his elder son: the new King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Abdallah II bin Hussein. The ascent of the new king to the throne was accompanied by diverse national, regional and international events, which have also had a negative impact on the development of the genuine democratization process which

²¹⁹J. Massad,*ibidem*, p. 52.

²²⁰J. Massad,*ibidem*, p. 75.

²²¹R. E. Lucas, *Institutions and the politics of survival in Jordan: domestic responses to External Challenges, 1988-2001*, Albany, State University of New York 2005.

²²²The actual Hashemite family who had ruled Jordan since 1921 is believed to be forty-third generation direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. His family ruled the holy city of Mecca for more than eight hundred years.

²²³ Different authors treat the topic of Political Islam, Muslim Brotherhood and its political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front, which role better emerged during King Hussein’s son reign, Abdullah II (1999- to present). Further analysis: L. Brand, 1998; M. Moaddel, 2002; J. Schwedler, 2006; D. Atzori, 2015.

Abdullah II wanted to enforce.²²⁴ The outbreak of the Second Intifada in late September 2000, was supported by the Jordanian people and aided by vocal bodies such as Jordan's Anti-Normalisation Committee, an informal group that protests against any contact – political, social or cultural – with Israel or Israelis. After September the 11th, the war on Afghanistan and the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, Jordan limited its involvement in these events, refusing to open its airspace to coalition aircrafts and staying out of the ground war. These were the main determining factors defining the course of further political development in Jordan.²²⁵ In light of these events, diverse political measurements have been undertaken. In June 2001, the parliament was dissolved, elections (normally taking place in November of every fourth year) were postponed, and a series of temporary laws related to state security were put into practice. In relation to the discussion on national identity, King Abdullah II had to face some challenges that his father had not:²²⁶ He had to work to be perceived as a 'real' Jordanian, since his British mother and his foreign education moderated the legacy of his father. However, his image as a practical professional through his prominent role in the Jordanian military – which ensured the support of East Bankers – and the fact that his wife, Queen Rania, comes from a notable Palestinian family from the West Bank safeguarded his reputation, not only among Jordanians but also among those of Palestinian origin. The Royal family is claiming a new process of democratization which has been progressing over the past years. The strong relationship that Jordan has with the US in particular has helped to maintain its stability even if neighboring countries are still in turmoil. However, the frustration connected to the precariousness of economic conditions is always present. Protests regarding economic reforms were already happening converged and emerged particularly during the uprisings in 2011 and 2012. One question needs to be raised and addressed though: did something else happen in Jordan during these uprisings in the region?

²²⁴ R. E. Lucas, *ibidem*.

²²⁵ I want to recall other events which have a direct or indirect influence on Jordan's politics: the Israel 's thirty-three -days attack on Lebanon in July-August 2006; three Israel strong attacks on Gaza(December 2008- January 2009; November 2012, and July- August 2014) and all the consequences of late developments in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

²²⁶ C.Warrick, *ibidem*, p. 14.

3.2 Nothing happened because “something” happened: Jordan in 2011, before and beyond

Among the open-questions of the interviews I conducted in Amman in 2015 and 2016, one was related to 2010-2011-2012 uprisings. It was a very general question: What happened in 2011? Or more specifically, what happened in Jordan in 2011? My question did not focus on the causes, the effects or the outcomes; I was interested in observing their first reactions in order to better understand their involvement. This is the reason why I did not use the words “uprisings”, “revolts”, “upheavals” or “revolution”, instead I intended to capture the first (spontaneous) perception and their personal narrative. Unsurprisingly, their reactions were very different. Some of the women were immediately enthusiastic about the question, just saying: “It was amazing!” While others started to describe where they were, what they were doing, how they were feeling during those months and how the events influenced their personal lives. Some declared without any doubts that nothing happened in Jordan, while others began to list all the events, the changes, the connections with other countries and the presence of a specific “Jordanian Spring.” Only one of the women reacted strongly claiming that she did not know about the events of 2011. In one of the interviewees, I realised during our conversation, that she is the daughter of one of the Prime Ministers who was appointed by the King in 2011. Someone recalls the ongoing tragedy happening in Syria and the consequences of 2011. In this paragraph I am going to report the accounts of how the women participants of my research felt during the Arab uprisings. These women are Deema Dabis, Dima Haddadin, Mais Darwazeh, Melika Qutishat, Sally Shallabiyye, and Toleen Touq. Through their words and their narrative, I would like to underline again how 2011 was at the same time in continuity with the past and a catalyst, constituting a new divide, as Toleen explains. What was already in the minds of these women? We see the need for change, an explosion of feeling (Deema), and opening a space of possibilities, as Sally suggests. I have also added the narrative of Dima Haddadin who commented on the events with her perception as an architect and an artist of the space and the power of a visual connection to the events with her profession. On the contrary, Melika felt disconnected from all the events even though she knew there was something important happening. The most saddening, realistic, actual and needed thoughts are Mais’s. From the enthusiasm of that moment to the depression of the catastrophe of the present, in the context of the biography of her life, as a Palestinian, Jordanian and Syrian. The inclusion of these voices at the beginning of this paragraph aims at deeply connecting

politics and political analysis to the people, to the women who are today as in 2011 the protagonists of change.

DeemaDabis

Before 2011 we all had a common feeling that there was a voice saying: Do not worry, do not think, and do not feel...khalas (enough), we exploded. We had just been repressed for so long, it was not bearable anymore, it was intolerable. I think it is happening within myself: I get to a point I have to express it, I really feel it is part of my vulnerability. We as humanity are moving towards that point: we need to express and let it explode. Our need is to be connected, to be safe, and to have equal rights. It is not bearable to be separated, unequal. People are living uncomfortably. There is a dichotomy between those who have money and those who have not...I still feel guilty. I am a Palestinian, but I have an American passport. Why doesn't everybody have this? We cannot tolerate this world as it is. We just desire a new kind of society and system. Even our bodies cannot sustain anymore. There is a need for a change. And I feel so strong, so strong collectively.

DimaHaddadin

2011 shed light on the relationship between the public and power. Examples were manifested in spaces: how the police gated all areas where people were demonstrating. In Amman the Fourth circle was open, but in front of the parliament it was gated. There were simple actions that show what is really for you. There are limited conditions. It is very ironic.

MaisDarwazeh

2011 was an amazing moment, unbelievable. I felt the Arab world is going to solve all its problems. Wow! Now we can start dealing with the issues, we can start feeling, we can have a relationship with the public, and we can talk about education, sex, violence and changing the Arab world. For me there is no liberation of Palestine without liberation of the Arab region and there is no liberation of the Arab region without stopping the Zionism in the region. The Syrian and Egyptian regimes have their faults due to having Zionism in the region. Zionism in the region has caused political instability, manipulation and interference. I felt with the revolution that everything might stop. And now...It was always ok... until Syria. With the Syria story the

price of life is very high. Very high, the feeling is very, very high. A catastrophe. I feel as if sometimes I am walking, and I do not want to face the pain. I am half Syrian. To realize that my grandmother, a Palestinian Syrian, is a Palestinian refugee for the second time and to know that there is much ... that there is something about Syria that really pissed me off and I let it down. You try to experience something visually; you do not know how it looks like. I do not know, in a way we ignore it and now we have Iraq here. (...) Israel saying we have never done something like Bashar Assad...yes so I hate them and Bashar. It is a human catastrophe. All my friends are outside Syria. I never imagined it could happen, it was so quick. Too soon, no build up...Bashar is a fascist dictator. But overnight Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and then Syria turned... The idea of immigration and asylum. Most of my friends went to Beirut, and now they are leaving ...neither Jordan nor the other countries accepted these people to come and stay. Jordan has no plans. No economy to sustain. And in Lebanon, governments are watching as people become racists.

MelikaQutishat

My instinct told me there was something huge happening but I did not connect to it personally, it became something to promote and to connect to the events. I do not know anyone who was there over the process. I don't have anybody to speak about. It seems very distant to me.

Sally Shallabiyye

It was a very important historical moment and I remember being at home without any TV at a friends' house and I needed to go out. It was very inspiring. I was in Egypt; it was that moment when Mobarak fell, it was the moment of possibilities. I was training activists in social change and gender and sexuality. The work has to be sensitive. The people were so happy in the streets. It was a moment of possibilities; hope for all of us, the big lesson is not about the moment you overthrow a system, but about what you do afterwards. There are long term strategies to plan. In 2011 events indicated that we were ready for change, but that our systems have failed us, power has disempowered us intentionally and it succeeds in that; power has failed us. We do not have political parties in Jordan that are strong. We have been decommissioned as a people; we have been decommissioned as political people with a will across the region. When it came to the moment where we could have practiced democracy here in Jordan, we had been so removed from the decision-making process, from the political process and from the system. Our rulers

were far away in a high tower and once the tower crumbled, we did not know what to do, we regressed into the children that we have been infantilized to be. We are ready for change, we want change, we are thirsty for change, but we need to build it as well. And I think the most important thing is to tackle how we build collaborative participatory systems of engagement, community engagement, at all levels, at community levels and at neighborhood levels. Then we can start to involve ourselves at our levels. (...) It needs years to rebuild because we have been disadvantaged by years of dictatorships across the region. It was an inspirational moment and its effect continues. Some people have been weakened and disappointed. But it is a great learning moment. We still have an opportunity.

ToleenTouq

My work became more political in 2011 because I became more politically involved, something to engage with, at least for my generation. In Jordan it did not change everything, however it felt as if a small door was opened in our brains, it made us able to think in a much more political way and be able to be brave in our political actions. Looking back I have the feeling that it all started in 2010 and then things took off in 2011. There was this kind of empathy. The Arab Spring failed and we are now enduring a miserable time in history and our lives, but I still think that 2011 was an incredibly important moment. I can observe how things are different before and after 2011. Many things have changed some things for the better and others for the worse. There were events that had political meaning before and after this people became more enthusiastic... The door that opened made me realize that I am not political then I am not relevant to myself or the world. Not in the sense that I have to speak about politics. It is about understanding, exploding the bubble and being realistic, relevant and trusting of myself, the people and to the issues that we were raising. I have not thought about politics in 2011 for a long time. 2013 was depressing but in 2012 we still felt there was hope (...). It is interesting to start to question it again. I think that now in 2015 we are more depressed and we have lost hope, the energy of 2011 is gone and I feel myself being more cynical... I think projects like "Israeli apartheid week" and "The River has two banks" need to do something very relevant and on the ground. Something on the ground with people to harness this energy.

What the women witnessed was more than their enthusiastic participation in the change. The possibility of change and of changing spaces fascinated their minds and their work was affected

by the uprisings. The diverse puzzle of women artists' point of view, memories and feelings sums up the meaning of their revolutionary creative agency. This is made by the necessity of mobilizing their bodies to enact a change, like Deema Dabis, it is also seen in the intellectual and political experience of the need to change of Toleen Touq. It also reveals the vulnerability and fragility of their creative agency, as with Melika's feeling disconnected, or Mais looking at the human catastrophe without any solutions. Creative agency is a process and there is no acquired sense of stability in their paths. I underline the continuity and the long-term perspective of their imagination of the change. I analyze this continuity using gender to look at a lasting change in the women's history²²⁷ as opposed to concentrating on the momentum of revolutionary instances.

The ongoing changes and transformations in many Arab countries did not happen or depend solely on the revolts and uprisings that took place in 2011. The events of 2011 were part of a process with many steps, hopefully, in a long, continuous, and still ongoing process. It is a process of change in the innate identities of societies, inter-generational transformations, a need for the State's restructure, and a desire to decolonize the Eurocentric and Western-centric set of the world. Part of the decolonization of their minds and lives is achieved by ridding them of the male-narrative. There is a continuity to events that happened before 2011, however new elements have surfaced that appeared during and after the 2011 upheavals. This gives value to previous and new experiences, as well as producing non-distorted narratives of facts, people, societies, and changes. In this sense, Jordan is an important case-study as it has not experienced the same levels of upheaval as in Tunisia or Egypt, but it has, in its own way, participated and "something"²²⁸ has happened. Jordan has, in other words, been experiencing a revolution just as much any of the other countries, both geographically and politically placed in the region, yet it is following its own path. As Hamid Dabashi has claimed:

²²⁷ L. Sorbera and L. al-Houssi, "Introduzione", *Genesis*, 12(1), 2013; L. Sorbera, "Early Reflections of an Historian of Feminism in Egypt in Time of Revolution", in *Genesis*, 12(1), 2013; L. Casini, M. Paniconi, L. Sorbera, *ModernitaArabe: Nazione, narrazione e nuovisoggettinelromanzoegiziano*, Mesogea, Messina 2012.

²²⁸F. Adely, "When is Something, Something?", *Jadaliyya*, November 17, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8451/when-is-something-something-jordan%E2%80%99s-arab-uprising>.

“The world we have known as “the Middle east” or “North Africa” or “the Arab and Muslim World”, all part and parcel of a colonial geography we had inherited, is changing, and fast. We have now entered the phase of documenting in what particular terms that world is transcending itself, overcoming the mystified consciousness into which it was colonially cast and post-colonially fixed.”²²⁹

In this sense, most of the existing narratives concerning the so-called Arab Spring in Jordan almost uniformly claimed that Jordan was supposed to be the next in line to rebel. However it remained immune to change and upheavals, ²³⁰aside from holding a number of demonstrations. Nevertheless, Jordan, in its way, transcends its colonial geography tending to separate more than to unify. This aspiration for freedom and social justice is placed in a regional, trans-regional, national and transnational context. It is interesting how FidaAdely, a Jordanian-American anthropologist, who has conducted ethnographic research in Jordan for over ten years. She explained that the events in 2011 Jordan were underestimated when recalling the categories and dichotomies applied to Jordan by political analysts, commentators and regional experts before the events, as a sign of perpetual misconception of Jordan as a passive and absent country:

“I have found the terms of analysis continually reproduced for Jordan deeply problematic on two key fronts. Firstly, the reversion to a set of categories and binaries significantly simplifies the realities of Jordanian sociopolitical life. These simplifications stem in large part from the reliance on vague notions of *tribes and tribalism*, upon which the most significant binary, that between so called “East Jordanian Jordanians” who are typically defined as “the tribes” and Palestinian Jordanians—who are then by default in this configuration “nontribal”—is built. Liberal usage of “tribes and tribalism” to characterize Jordan evades the real work of understanding how kin relations function in people’s lives and how this has changed and continues to change.”²³¹

However Adely makes the problem larger and it does not only concern misinterpretations of Jordan as an isolated case. Adeley explains that political and social analysis frames the

²²⁹H. Dabashi, *The Arab Spring. The End of Postcolonialism*, Zedbooks, London 2012, p. xvii.

²³⁰O. Eran, "Is Jordan Next?" in *Haaretz*, February 7, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/is-jordan-next-1.341727> ; J. Rosenberg, "Revolution in Egypt? And Could Jordan Be Next?", in *National Review*, January, 28, 2011, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/258304/revolution-egypt-and-could-jordan-be-next-joel-c-rosenberg/>; I. Watson, A. Hybels, "Jordan Protestors Inspired by Tunisian Ripple," in CNN, January 24, 2011; <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/19/jordan.ripple/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>. See more: S. Tobin, 2012; H. Bustani, 2011; P. Moore 2012; Z. Abu-Rish, 2011; J. L. Gelvin, 2012.

²³¹F. Adely, *ibidem*.

processes of change and how we are reading and evaluating the continuity of the history of movements and the making of changes in the everyday:

“The second issue that emerges in the discourse on Jordan is the norm by which meaningful political change is measured—and this is an issue much broader than Jordan and scholarship on Jordan. It seems to me that an assumption persists within political analysis of developments in the region that, absent revolt and regime change, nothing of any significance is happening. Have we learned nothing from the events of the past two years? Social scientists currently scramble to understand how and why uprisings unfolded in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and other places. But what happened in Egypt and in Tahrir Square in Cairo did not emerge out of a vacuum. The work of creating organizational mechanisms, of building courage in the face of repression, of building networks had been long in the making, as scholars such as Joel Beinin and Asef Bayat pointed to even as theories of persistent authoritarianism—that has now morphed into the persistence of monarchy—dominated political analysis.”²³²

Thousands of people in Jordan in 2011 and 2012 have taken to the streets in protest, demanding that the country's Prime Minister to step down, and for the government to curb rising prices, inflation, and unemployment. Opposition activists from Jordan's main Islamist opposition group, trade unions, and leftist organizations gathered in the capital on Friday demonstrations. Jordan has witnessed the rise of workers' strikes, government protests, civil and political initiatives, and weekly protests throughout the country, all of which are commonly referred to as the *Hirak*,²³³ the Arabic name for Movement. After the first few months, most importantly, they were all demanding an end to corruption and the establishment of a more independent judiciary. They were also calling for fewer restrictions on the media, press and other publications, and an end to *mukhabarat* (intelligence service) interference in public life in general. Ababneh,²³⁴ who has also been involved as participant and ethnographer, describes the *Hirak* as follows:

“The *Hirak* encompasses workers' groups, youth and governorate-based groups that emerged during the period of the Arab Spring, and political parties. It was most active between January 2011 and the end of

²³²F. Adely, “When is Something, Something? Jordan's Arab Spring”, in *Jadaliyya*, 17 Nov 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8451/whenissomethingsomethingjordan%E2%80%99sarabuprisig>.

²³³*al-Hirak al-Sha'bi al-Urduni*, or *Hirak* for short, or in English the Jordanian Popular Movement.

²³⁴ Sarah Ababneh is assistant professor and researcher at the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan.

2012, a period in which it organized weekly Friday protests, workers' strikes, and civil initiatives. Starting in 2012 *Hirak* activism was conducted largely outside of Amman in the governorates. *Hirak* activists made varied demands, but they tended to emphasize social justice, critiques of neoliberal economics, nationalization of previously privatized industries and resources, the need to fight corruption, and constitutional and legal reform."²³⁵

The so-called "managed protests"²³⁶ in Jordan have not brought the country larger political change, nor have they overthrown the regime, there was no war nor chaos as had been seen in neighboring countries. People's denunciation of the government's corruption led King Abdallah II, to replace the Prime Minister Samir Rifai' with Marouf Bakhit, and to later appoint a new government. On October 17, 2011, the King sacked the Prime Minister again, appointing Awn Shawkat al-Khasawneh, formerly a judge of the International Court of Justice, in his place.²³⁷ When this noted legal expert submitted his resignation on the 22 April, 2012, the King accepted the resignation and Fayez al-Tarawneh succeeded as prime minister until October, 2012 when Abdullah Ensour was appointed. Abdallah Ensour actually governed until the 1st of June, 2016 when the actual Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki was asked by the monarch to step in. Demonstrations and discontent did not stop until the particularly violent events in November 2012, when the uprising, called "the November Revolt"²³⁸ by Jordanians, repeatedly rose up in protest:

"Since at least 2008, I have sensed a palpable shift in the anger directed at the regime. There, of course, were always those who were anti-regime and against monarchs and monarchy, but what coalesced in 2008 was a growing sense that a class of elites closely tied to the regime were robbing the country's resources under the guise of privatization, while the majority of Jordanians were struggling under the

²³⁵ S. Ababneh, "Troubling the political: women in the Jordanian day-waged labor movement", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 48, 2016, pp. 87-112.

²³⁶ R. Brynen, P. W. Moore, B. F. Salloukh, M.-J. Zahar, *Beyond the Arab Spring: Authoritarianism and Democratization in the Arab World*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder CO 2012, p. 47.

²³⁷ S. Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring, the Middle Class and the Anti-Revolution", in *Middle East Policy Council*, 19(1), 2012.

²³⁸ In November 2012, some demonstrators started to demand regime change in Jordan too, with slogans like 'people want the fall of the regime' (*al-sha'byuridisqatal-nizam*). For examples of other slogans see Z. Abu-Rish, "Getting Past the Brink: Protests and the Possibilities of Change in Jordan", in *Jadaliyya*, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8375/getting-pastthe-brink_protests-and-the-possibilit, 15 November 2012: '*haza al-urdunurdunnawa-al-khayinyab'id 'anna*(this Jordan is our Jordan and the traitor should get away from us); *hurriyyeh, hurriyyeh, mish makarimmalakiyyah*(freedom, freedom, not royal handouts); *yabitsalih al-hin, ya bitilhaq al-Abidine*(either fix it now, or follow Abidine [Ben Ali])'. Not all people in the political parties, such as the Islamic Action Front, agreed on these slogans.

weight of increased prices in food, fuel, and basic commodities. The combination of this deepening economic crisis and the growing anger with corruption was tangible in 2008. Significant labor actions beginning in 2006, which have grown exponentially since January 2011, were also part of this picture. Jordan was also witnessing increased incidents of violence on university campuses, among clans in different regions, and incidents of violence directed at the police. And then came the Arab uprisings. These events of 2011 propelled and accelerated forces that were already at work in Jordan and had been for some time. Jordanians were no longer afraid to protest, and no longer asked permission to rally, march, or strike. Citizens were no longer afraid to criticize the government and were increasingly no longer deterred by red lines surrounding criticism of the royal family, despite arrests aimed at policing these red lines.”²³⁹

It is interesting to mark that the “revolution” in Jordan demonstrated by how changes in revolutionary upheavals are not determined by the upheaval itself, but rather by a broader societal and generational need of change, which emerges nonetheless, in the name of a revolution, a continuing²⁴⁰ revolution or no revolution at all. Many people I have interviewed claimed that something had happened and that it had already happened earlier, as I have reported in Toleen’s words referring to 2010:

“In Jordan, many things happened, new newspapers emerged, the government was being criticized, and this was not totalitarian as with the Syrians, but there were, and still are many taboos. You are not supposed to criticize, but you do, and you discuss. I am not comfortable with speaking about this with you, but I am doing so. There were protests. My father was Prime Minister for six months (Awn Shawkat al-Khasawneh, *ndr*). So I have lived this change and seen the discussions, even at home. A different kind of criticism was born, even if people are still afraid. It changed a lot.”²⁴¹

As Ababneh and Adely attest, the combination of a deepening economic crisis and the growing anger over corruption was already tangible in 2008 and it continued until the end of 2012. The revolution of 2011, the so-called Arab Spring of some countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, and the rhetoric that “nothing happened” in other countries like

²³⁹F. Adely, *ibidem*.

²⁴⁰Revolution in Egypt at some point was called *athawramustamirra*, meaning continuous/continuing revolution, in order to underline that after the eighteen Tahrir days and the overthrow of the regime, the process was continuing. There is a broader literature about it, we refer here in the to afterword of a special issue about Arab revolution: L. Sorbera, “Afterword: Writing revolution: new inspirations, new questions,” in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 104-108.

²⁴¹Interview with Mariam Khawsaneh, researcher in History and in film productions, Amman, 16th July 2015.

Jordan and Lebanon, as well as Morocco and Algeria, ignores and mystifies history. In Jordan, what seems evident to different scholars is that the role and position of King Abdullah II was not under discussion. As other scholars like Hudson and Abu-Rish have suggested,²⁴² at the beginning the protests questioned the role of the government, not that of the King. However people were demanding political and economic reforms as had happened before in Jordan's history. To briefly cite some examples, it is enough to recall Jordan's Black September in 1970, the popular uprisings in 1989 in Ma'an which then spread over all the country and the protests of the Day-Waged-Labor-Movement throughout many years in the 2000s. Another country near Jordan, Lebanon, has not been included in the narrative of 2011 revolutions, as if nothing happened there. Instead, Lebanon witnessed the 2005 uprising, *le printemps de Beyrouth* or *révolution du Cèdre*; or the 2015 anti-corruption protests in Lebanon.²⁴³ "Beirut in 2011 remains strangely quiet while the region is in great turmoil"²⁴⁴: but contrarily to the rhetoric of the "nothing happened", people were meeting, creating, organizing, and mobilizing political groups,²⁴⁵ but the movements and this apparent quietness co-existed alongside "anxieties of political instability and the fear of a devastating war;"²⁴⁶ anxiety increased most recently during the Syrian Civil War's last year, which carried along developments in Lebanon and the rise of the group ISIS, among other violent and extremist groups operating in Syria and Iraq as well as abroad.

The Jordanian regime responded to the first protests in different ways and, according to Pietrobelli, only with rather 'cosmetic' changes. The regime allowed the demonstrations and worked towards their peaceful resolution, offering only short-term relief. So, if a true political and economic change today in 2016 does not seem to have happened, it has changed something in the minds of people, in the creative people, who are permanently changed. Instead,

²⁴²M. Hudson, "Awakening, Cataclysm, or Just a Series of Events? Reflections on the Current Wave of Protest in the Arab World." in Haddad et al. (ed.), *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?*, Pluto Press, London 2012, pp. 17-27; Abu Rish, *ibidem*.

²⁴³"You stink" or "Tol3et Re7etkom" is a *Lebanese* grassroots movement created in response to the government's inability to solve the trash crisis in a sustainable way: <http://www.youstink.org/>.

²⁴⁴Lamia Joreige, whom I have interviewed in August 2014 in Beirut, is a visual artist and director, co-founder and director of Beirut Art Center. This quote comes from her last documentary film's sum up, *And the living is easy*, Lebanon/France, 2015.

²⁴⁵Reflections of 2011's uprising and Lebanon's movements come from the twelve interviews I have conducted during the summer of 2014 with women artists in Beirut, and especially with Rajwe Tomeh, activist and artist, Beirut, 20th August 2014.

²⁴⁶Lamia Joreige, *And the living is easy*, Lebanon/France, 2015.

governments in Jordan as elsewhere have showed their tendency to maintain the status quo, not interrogating their police too deeply and trying to maintain security as the priority issue of policy and living in fear of the neighbors countries' turmoil. Over the last two years, with the increase of the militant extremist group ISIS, the threat and challenge in Jordan is more critical than it was before "Security in Jordan is more important than eating" has concluded Dima Maurice. In fact, In February 2015 a Jordanian pilot of the National Forces, fighting against extremist groups such as ISIS in the Us- led coalition in Syria and Iraq, was brutally killed and burned alive. This event led the Jordanian government to the decision it should execute prisoners involved in precedents terrorist al-Qaeda attacks. The brutal event caused a strong feeling against ISIS and as well a more involvement of Jordan in the field. As well as in June 2016, a car explosion claimed by ISIS killed seven soldiers at Raqban, where nearly seventy thousands Syrian refugees are stranded, at the Syria-Jordan northeast border. So unfortunately for now, if it is not through the active role of people in their associations, movements, entrepreneurships and their independent cultural and artistic fields, it is possible that something could and will happen again to question powers, but probably not any sort of revolution.

3.3 In the Name of Continuity: Women's Movement(s) in Jordan

During the past five years there has been a mainstream tendency to present Arab uprisings as the beginning of a discussion about gender and feminism in the Arab World. This tendency has often forgotten, complexly ignored, erased or neglected "a long history of women's resistance activities and involvement in civil society, dissent and anti-colonial movements in general."²⁴⁷ This has been challenged by current feminist scholarships who have always underlined the active revolutionary role, the continuity and the lasting change of women movements throughout the Middle East and North Africa.²⁴⁸ Long before 2011, a new kind of women's activism and

²⁴⁷M. El Said, L. Meari, N. Pratt (ed.), *Rethinking Gender in Revolutions, lessons from the Arab World*, Zed Books, London, 2015, p. 2.

²⁴⁸ L. Sorbera, "Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014", in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 63-75; "Writing revolution: new inspirations, new questions", in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 104-108; "Early Reflections of an Historian of Feminism in Egypt in Time of Revolution", in *Genesis*, 12(1), 2013; L. Sorbera, and L. al-Houssi, "Introduzione", in *Genesis*, 12(1), 2013.

consciousness started to appear in Jordan, as in many other countries in the region. This activism and movement concerned politics and political demands at different levels (as the grassroots women's movement and public campaign for the abolition of article 340 and 308 of the Jordanian Penal Code). They can also be connected to economic rights (the example in this paragraph regards women's presence in the Day-Waged Labor Movement, the original name in Arabic is *Hirak Ummal al-Muyawama*); it also involves education (female students attending feminist theory courses at the University of Jordan and engaging with feminisms in their studies and in their practices), and arts and culture reverberations of political and gender issues (as showed by the 2010-2013 *Aat* collective for the celebration of the International Women Day and as I try to present in the entire development of research as the main argument through women artists' practices and their cultural resistance). At the end, all these "movements," even if they are not all canonized in the women's history in Jordan, they can be seen and analyzed as a full part of feminisms in Jordan. In women's movement history there is a foundation moment, when an intellectual recognition of feminism that happens at the moment of change. This corresponds to the fundamental moment when women in Jordan, from the 1920s onward, started a mental awakening which brought them to spread and raise awareness in different ways and fields. So before acknowledging the different movements in current feminisms, it is important to recognize the infrastructure from where women's consciousness came and its historical paths. Different feminisms movements can be considered as an intersectional reading of a reality where political, economic and arts and culture trends cannot be separated in any country's female history. This is the reason why I prefer to refer in this chapter, not only to a unique Jordanian women's historical movement, but to the multiplicity of shapes which formed many movements and the polyphony of their presence in the society. This special analysis of women's presences in movements, the considerations of historical trajectories, and the continuity of this social and politically active women's history in Jordan up to the 2011-2012 uprisings aim to shake or "detraditionalize" Jordanian society. They should, in my view, be considered feminisms irruption into women's lives in the history and in Jordan. Historicizing Jordanian feminism in this perspective, helps to shed light on aspects of continuity and further evolution until the 2010 launch of the *Aat* collective. This example can be used to underline the continuity of changes, creative women's agency, and happening — or not happening — revolutions. Furthermore, this kind of analysis, enlightening continuity, irruptions and evolutions, try to minimize the secular-religious divide

which has often portrayed women in a dichotomous society where individual and collective personal modes of living and disrupting politics are categorically annulled. In retracing a story of feminism in Jordan till recent developments, - I wish to disarticulate that “narratives about gender and the ‘Arab Spring’ (that) tend to homogenize women’s experiences across time and space, ignoring issues of class, nationality and other axes of social difference.”²⁴⁹ Moreover, this particular intersectional conception of *wo-vements* in Jordan seeks to reunite a feminine presence in the field of arts and culture with what has been considered the distant womens and human rights activists’ counterparts. Celebrating women artists as enacting a cultural resistance to the authoritarian status quo in addition to the particular kinds of social, political, historical, and cultural taboos tries to shorten the distance between “sophisticated politics” or political campaigns, which are then often supported by NGO’s and royal foundations. Instead, I hope to highlight the efforts and pressure that women rights’ activists and artists in their different fields, as well as other actors or simple citizen or employees, can make, by also proposing a unification of intents as parts of Jordan's unique feminist history.

The women’s movement(s) in Jordan, as Ibtisem al-Atiyat claims in her dissertation in 2003, was the subject of only a limited number of studies²⁵⁰ and in a recent update of her previous book, SuhairSalti al-Tall’s full-blown book, *Tarikh al-haraka al-nisa’iya al-urdunniya, 1944-2008*,²⁵¹ published in 2014.²⁵² The New International scholarship is today more aware of feminist history in Jordan, thanks to their having access to scholarships in Arabic, as Nicola Pratt’s work shows. This lack of studies and images shows us that the presence of women as well as their contribution to political and social transformation in Jordan is almost completely ignored. One exception is the famous *feda’een*, who were more connected with the long and continuous struggle for Palestine’s freedom and not as much to the history of feminisms and women in Jordan. The well-known fighter and later activist Leila Khaled, lived in Amman in the 1970s and returned again 1989, where she still resides today. Her life and struggles are well

²⁴⁹M. El Said, L. Meari, N. Pratt (ed.), *ibidem*.

²⁵⁰Department of Publications and Press, 1979; al-Tall, 1989; Nafa’, 1999; Brand, 1998; and Hammad, 1999.

²⁵¹The translation from Arabic of the title is: “History of Jordanian women’s movement, 1944-2008”.

²⁵²This book was quoted by Nicola Pratt in her recent lecture in Amman about “Women’s activism in Jordan from 1946 to 1989”. Nicola Pratt’s lecture is available at: https://soundcloud.com/cbrl_sound/womens-activism-in-jordan-from-1946-untill-1989-nicola-pratt-may-2015. Her current studies about women activists in Jordan, as well as in Egypt and Lebanon, will be the topic of her forthcoming publication.

documented.²⁵³ Other women activists' lives, are not well documented as well as part as Jordan's history and feminisms history. The the presence of women as well as their contribution to political and social transformation in Jordan is almost completely ignored. During Jordan's long history, even before the founding of the state in 1920, women in public work have played a crucial role, and have established their presence in all marking events of its history. This includes Women's involvement in charitable and welfare activities to the founding of the Women's Social Solidarity Society in 1944, and the Society of the Jordanian Women's Union in 1945; from the Palestinian Nakbah of 1948 to the growth in the popularity of ideological parties, such as, the Communist Party, the Ba`thists, and other Arab nationalist parties and their activities and advocacy for reforms in the 1950s and 1960s; until the war in 1967 and the "Black September" in 1970. Huda Sha'rawi, a pioneer in Egyptian and Arab feminism and the founder of the EFU, paid Jordan a visit in 1944. While meeting with King Abdullah I, she asked to establish a women's union branch in Jordan²⁵⁴ following along the footsteps of women in Egypt and many other Arab countries. The first "Women's Union Society" was established directly hereafter in 1945, with Princess Zain Al Sharafas as the active president. The emergence of women's action in other countries in the region such as Egypt, and of transnational movements, also influenced women's activism in Jordan. As Nicola Pratt recalls the events, in 1954, "the Arab Women's Union was founded by women sympathetic to the Jordanian National Movement, under the leadership of Jordan's first female lawyer Emily Bisharat." Al-Tall describes a meeting in Amman where Emily Bisharat was elected as president and where eight hundred women attended the event.²⁵⁵ In addition to welfare and social work, which included the especially immediate needs of Nakba's Palestinian refugees in the 1950s, it also campaigned vigorously for women's right to vote", which was achieved only in 1974 and exercised the right to vote for the first time in 1989.²⁵⁶ In Pratt's view, "moments of national crisis create opportunities for women to transgress dominant gender norms," as we can witness during "the huge shock of the defeat of the Arab armies in the war of 1967 (which) created another national crisis that politicized women

²⁵³S. Irving, *Leila Khaled. Icon of Palestinian liberation*, Paperback, London 2012.

²⁵⁴ Huda Sha'rawi was also a fine diplomat who knew how to address a monarch, but she always used this skill to reinforce her feminism.

²⁵⁵ S. Salti al-Tal, *Tarikh al-haraka al-nisa'iyah al-urdunniya, 1944-2008*, Azmina Li-l- nashrwa-l- tawzi'a, Amman 2014.

²⁵⁶ In 1954 the right to vote was established only for educated women, raising the anger of women involved in the political battle to vote not only because all men, even if illiterate, were allowed to vote, but especially because this put a class divide which women wanted to erase, not to underline.

and empowered them to push the boundaries of socially acceptable gender behavior”; and it remains true for contemporary developments on the feminist path. As a consequence of the 1970’s Civil War.

“Jordan experienced a growing social conservatism as a reaction against the relatively liberal gender norms of the PLO. Although some women continued to work underground, nevertheless, many were deterred from political activism, not only afraid of harassment by the authorities but also by risks to their reputation, as ‘honor’ was used as moral weapon to discredit women’s political involvement. Meanwhile, during this period, the number of women joining the Muslim Brotherhood organization, which was allowed to operate openly, began to grow.”²⁵⁷

Women continued to struggle, and 1974 witnessed the rise of the Arab Women’s Union, in the same year when the late King decided finally to give the right to vote to women. The movement grew strong and more internationally connected, but due to the repression of the 1970s and 1980s women’s presence during 1989 popular uprising was discrete. The lack of any democratic liberty in the countries for decades left a trace in the movement, but some women worked secretly, for example those women who joined the Communist Party.²⁵⁸ The last two decades witnessed a shift in the Women’s Movement. The feminist agenda of political and social organization included issues such as so-called crimes of honor, violence against women and especially domestic violence, abortion, the change of the nationality law and women in politics “after such a long time having been hampered by cultural limits and control by a masculine political culture.”²⁵⁹ This shift into more international and political goals was also characterized by a strong governmental, semi-governmental, or NGO-type organizations’ presence. According to al-Atiyat, Jordan’s women’s movement has seen three main development phases. The beginning and the end correspond to a major political crisis (1944-1973; 1973-1989; and 1989-2003). Seeing the developments today, I might for now restrict Jordan women’s movements to only two phases (1944-1989 and 1989-2011) and ask a question about movements that sprung up after 2011. -These movements were of a different type and not comparable to the previous ones which

²⁵⁷N. Pratt, “Women activism in Jordan from 1946 to 1989”, *7iber*, <http://www.7iber.com/event/public-lecture-womens-activism-in-jordan-by-dr-nicola-pratt/>.

²⁵⁸I. al-Atiyat, *The Women’s Movement in Jordan, Activism, Discourses, and Strategies*, Dissertation Zur Erlangung des Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie der Freien Universität, Berlin 2003.

²⁵⁹I. al-Atiyat, *ibidem*, 2003.

were more structured and explicit about their feminist role. These were present in Jordan as in the whole region of the Middle East. The first phase represents the early formation of women's organizations. This phase starts with the establishment of the first women's organization in 1944 and ends with the application of the martial laws in 1989. Women's organizations during this phase were merely small societies, which were active in providing social services. What can be generally said about women's action during this phase is that despite the active demands of women's political rights, no real mobilization of other women's concerns were available. In fact, women's and other socially related issues were considered less important, when compared to the main goals of the nationalist movement, or to the Palestinian question. The second phase, in al-Atiyat's eyes, who completed writing her dissertation in 2003, represents a transformation phase at the level of women's organizations and actions. This phase characterizes women's action in the period between 1973 and 1989. While recognizing the differences and the process of transformation in these repressive years, we may describe this phase as being of a transformational form, and I would still consider it as part of a first phase, which also witnessed the first intervention attempts from the state into women's actions. The post liberalization phase (the phase after 1989), which was the third in al-Atiyat's dissertation, opened the door for diverse changes at the level of women's interests and organizations. At the level of activism, this phase has witnessed an active role from the state in women's issues and actions. The state's intervention during this phase was represented by the active involvement of Princess Basma and her initiatives in the realm of women's concern. This form of state feminism has provided a relatively conservative approach to women's advancement. The post-1989 phase has been characterized by the official final entry of women in politics, not only for practicing their right to vote and elect, but also the right to be elected. In fact, in this phase women's movements witness the first woman in the Parliament, Toujan al-Faisal. She was a TV journalist for eighteen years and has been in politics for ten years: the first female member of Parliament. Her story of fighting is not only important for the innovation and courageous thinking in that moment and context, but also because the same phase is important for women's rights' developments. It also records the presence of religious groups emerging, such as the Muslim Brotherhood reclaiming more political space, and organizing as a political party and the Islamic Action Front (IAF). In spite of this, the most significant development during this phase to be registered is the fact that diverse new issues have openly been discussed, such as violence and abortion, which have

always been social taboos, continuously controverted by the religious front. However, these years have carried out diverse and promising changes in respect to the women's status and action in the country. This is a result of local and international NGO's working together in campaigns. What can we state today, and what we can also discuss during the development of this research, is how the struggle of the movement in the decade before 2011 set the scene for the events to come. What are the current or more recent shifts in the movement today? Before trying to answer this open question, some arguments need to be made.

As attested in other ethnographic research about women and gender in Jordan,²⁶⁰ often many women enact in their purposes, intentions, goals, actions, resistances as a feminist agenda, but they refuse to be labeled as "Feminist". This is what happened to me approaching women artists as I already mentioned in chapter One. The general refusal of the term "feminist" derives from the misinterpretation, not ideologically neutral, of the word "feminism" itself. Most people and politicians, as well as women, have portrayed feminism as a Western idea and a phenomenon which aims to infect a genuine and authentic vision of religion, tradition and values in Muslim countries or simply to "represent the continuation of colonialism."²⁶¹ Feminists – in women's view- are being defined in the national discourses as: men hating, aggressive, westernized women (or tools of western projects), and most likely obsessed with sex in terms of seeking sexual liberty (which is widely viewed as being immoral and anti-Arab-Islamic in terms of norms and traditions). The women's movements briefly described above represent dynamic agents of social and political transformations, although they have been forgotten in the national narration of the country. The essential project, which I believe continues until today, has been "detraditionalizing the state and social institutions"²⁶² in the fight for an equal and just legal framework as well as in the field of cultures and arts. Throughout the last two decades in Jordan, women's movements were supported by the international attention of NGO's, UN initiatives and large investments of funds. However, in Jordan, women's movements have benefited from a double blessing, i.e. State feminism, or as al-Atiyat called it, the Royal feminism.

²⁶⁰ I have read three PhD research papers about women in Jordan and the three of them helped me in the process of my research to find confirmation and support for my reflections, but also they brought up new ones which I had not thought of: I. al-Atiyat, *ibidem*, 2003; M. Pietrobelli, 2013; A. Almala, *Gender and guardianship in Jordan: Femininity, compliance, and resistance*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London 2014.

²⁶¹ C. Malt, *Women's voices in Middle East Museums. Case studies in Jordan*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse (USA) 2004, p. 19.

²⁶² al-Atiyat, *ibidem*.

The women's movement has benefited from the state's interest in women's issues as well as from the contribution of the royal family in this respect. In fact, seeking to be portrayed as liberal and open, the royal family has sported most of the actions targeting the enhancement of the women's issues. The interest of Prince Basma and for the last fifteen years of Queen Rania can be open to discussion and the real intention behind such support can be doubted. Intervention and funding by the royal foundations undoubtedly brought about important results for the legal frameworks for which associations and the movements have lobbied for. But it is also seen as "a mechanism developed by the state to de-politicize and control women's actions."²⁶³ In fact, some independent women's activists have complained that royal organizations run by the princesses, as is the case of those run by the royal family, are privileged, in financial matters as well as in governmental protection. While this royal feminism has surely fed and developed the movements in a way, it is interesting for me to notice, in order to understand the current events of the movements and the role of the artists, is there a presence of grassroots women or is there a different kind of involvement of women in the country's political life. One of the cases in matters of politics and political demands I want to bring here is that of independent women's actions represented here by the national campaign to eliminate so-called "honor crimes." The campaign has a nonhierarchical organizational form. In fact, the campaign's committee decided not to go formal as well as deciding against NGO-nization. According to a section of article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code (1960), "he who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery and kills, wounds or injures one or both of them is exempted from any penalty."²⁶⁴ Also of concern is the way in which other articles of the Penal Code, which provide for a reduction in penalty for cases where there has been "provocation," have been used to reduce sentences in many cases of so-called "honor crimes." Of course, if the situation is reversed, the woman receives no special consideration. In most cases, those who commit the murders are sentenced to only few months in jail, and generally serve only a portion of that time. The National Campaign to Eliminate the So-Called Crimes of Honor has been campaigning actively to stop these crimes and to abolish (or first amend) this article of the Penal Code. One of the most prominent figures of the campaign was the journalist of The Jordan Times and human

²⁶³ al-Atiyat, *ibidem*

²⁶⁴ L. Brand, *ibidem*, p. 133.

rights' activist Rana Husseini who authored a book²⁶⁵ which gave international attention to the subject in Jordan. More than fifteen thousand signatures were collected in a petition, calling for the passage of a draft amendment to the Penal Code abolishing Article 340. The petition was presented to Parliament by the campaign on August 21, 1999, following a public march and rally. Members of the Jordanian royal family, including Queen Noor and Queen Rania as well as high-ranking government ministers, have condemned "honor killings" and have also called for passage of the draft amendment. Until now, even if there were in 2001 and 2007 some amendments to the article 340, still the article is not completely abolished and the so-called honor crimes²⁶⁶ are still happening. The battle is still ongoing. What has differentiated this campaign, whose topic also other organizations have started to approach and lobby for, is not only the independent and grassroots nature of the campaign, but the burst in the public opinion of a subject which is considered a taboo. The same happened with the campaign for the abolition of the article 308 which we were introduced to at the beginning of this chapter: lawyers and human rights' activists have been long advocating for the change through pressure on legal and public opinion. . They have recently been accompanied by a stronger societal reaction which indicates a change in the society where the taboo is ready to be broken. We will better examine the case with the painter Rand Abdelnur who dedicated her paintings and exhibition to the campaign, portraying young women victims of rape and victims of the article which indirectly oblige them to marry the rapist (See Chapter Five).

The second case I want to talk about is the multiplicity of women's presence and today's shifts in the context of Jordanian politics is the Day-Waged Labor Movement in Jordan between 2006 and 2013. I wanted to use it because it was highlighted in a recent article by Sara Ababneh, *Troubling the Political: Women in the Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement*.²⁶⁷ This illuminating article is critical to understanding both the previous question about 2011's movement in Jordan, as well as women's presence in politics in Jordan. Her precise description

²⁶⁵ R. Husseini, *Murder in the Name of Honor: The True Story of one Woman's Heroic Fight against an Unbelievable Crime*, Oneworld Publications, London 2009.

²⁶⁶ I will explore the issue of honor crimes more in Chapter Five, explaining them as a diverse form of domestic violence, which must be contextualized and not separated by social and economic factors.

²⁶⁷ S. Ababneh, "Troubling the Political: Women in the Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement", in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 48, 2016, pp. 87-112.

of the Day-Waged Labor Movement (DWLM)²⁶⁸ aims to define the political and economic spheres together: as scholars who did not see a “spring” happening in Jordan tend to separate the political and economic sphere. In fact, due to the political nature of neoliberal economic policies, which are the major challenge in Jordan and one of the reasons for the contestations in 2011-2012 as well as beforehand. If economic protests are not viewed as political it is because economic policies are depoliticized. According to Ababneh, “socioeconomic struggles are understood as a matter of distribution rather than as a resistance to neoliberal economic policies and structures” which makes a “patriarchal definition of policy (which) excludes the personal from the category of the political.”²⁶⁹ In this sense, DWLM constitutes a practical and grounded example of political work in which men and women cooperate in an egalitarian way in non-patriarchal structures. To which extent then, are women a formidable part of this movement, and why? Ababneh individuates many reasons: first of all, the concentration of one issue, which is one of the most urgent in Jordan in regards to employment and economic rights, especially regarding the economic hardship of the rural background; secondly, the flexible structure of the movements, which allow female members to fulfill their duties in the daily life and be present at essential moments; third, the involvement of female participants’ (male) family members who were in contact with the coordinator of the movement, and who were conscious of the common importance of the struggle. In this ethnographic work, Ababneh shows how women who were taking this position, were brave to challenge social taboos as demonstrating in the night and sleeping outside in organized camps together with men, and more importantly, how they were determined to demand their rights. In conclusion, this experience testifies to how women conceptualized new roles for themselves, taking action in the “politics of every day.”²⁷⁰ What I have found fundamental in Ababneh’s publication is the intersectional analysis of gender and politics where women’s presence, even if they are denied a political engagement in their steadfast presence in the movement, challenge “androcentric, classist and patriarchal institutions” with a different understanding of politics in asking for full economic and employment rights.

²⁶⁸Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement was formed by many women from different cities in Jordan, and constituted the two-thirds of the whole movement.

²⁶⁹S. Ababneh, *ibidem*.

²⁷⁰ S. Ababneh, *ibidem*.

What I would like to hypothesize here is that women's actions and women's presence, independent from political parties, NGO's or governmental or Royal foundations, is the result and manifestation of a new feminist wave where the lack of trust towards institutions or organizations lead women to express their concerns and to show their presence in different ways. Here they are protagonists, bargaining their presence for the just cause they carry. And if it regards social, political and economic battles, it does not exclude women's movements in the field of education, environment, arts and cultures and it goes in an intersectional way; refusing to name themselves as only political or gender-oriented activists. It is in this kind of feminisms' new dimension, that young female students of the University of Jordan started to be engaged when they chose the feminist theory course in the English Literature Department with Professor Rula Quawas. This engagement at University "transcends the boundary of the classrooms and shares its resilient momentum with other young women in different realms"²⁷¹ as the video on sexual harassment made by four of her students on campus has demonstrated. The video provoked a national and international debate, and a campaign to support both academic freedom and the Professor who gave the course.²⁷² This is the reason why, Rula Quawas considers her class as a site of resistance and not only a place of teaching and learning, acknowledging that being an educated woman not only gives a different status but also engages in self-reflection and critical thinking. This also happens on the line of a long historical trajectory of feminism. Intellectual work has always been the pillar of feminism in the Arab world, and, contrary to what has been generally said, I think that it transcends class boundaries. So while choosing the text for a Jordanian feminist class, Professor Rula is conscious of the taboos (politics, religion, and sexuality) she must not officially approach, but she cannot avoid touching them in the class as part of a feminism that "cultivates the courage" in a hostile and asymmetric gendered environment.

In conclusion, one of the characteristics of new associations, movements, and events is the search for independence from any structured institution and to seek a more holistic approach

²⁷¹ R. Quawas (ed.), *The Voice of Being Enough: Young Jordanian Women Break Through without Breaking Down*, Azminah, Amman 2016, p. 20.

²⁷² There are some blogs which reports the events, in an interview with Rula Quawas at *Radio France Internationale*. She was removed as Dean of the Faculty because she supported her students making the video, <https://forthe love of freedom.wordpress.com/tag/interview-video-of-dr-rula-quawas/>; and the news on the independent magazine *Jadaliyya*: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/8086/sexual-harassment-video-that-led-to-removal-of-rul>.

rather than only discussing women, gender, and feminism as topics, especially in the fields of independent arts and culture. It is at this point that I want to bring the case of a female collective, called the *Aat* collective founded by Shreen Zmout, Toleen Touq, Dima Bawab and Lana Nasser in 2010 that was launched in the spring of 2010. I will demonstrate through this example how a type of creative feminist activism, that we can call *femivism*, not only precedes the uprisings of 2011, but it is also telling of women's actions, which can be inscribed in a larger definition of women's movements, even though they would not describe themselves as strictly women rights' activists. The name *Aat* comes from the Arabic letters Alef and Ta, and it comes at the end of plural and feminine nouns. *Aat* is a collective of women artists, educators, activists, and supporting men, "who believe in the importance of self-expression, empowerment and well-being of women, youth, and society as a whole."²⁷³ One of the new elements appearing in this collective is art as a tool of representation and resistance in women's issues. The main goal of the collective was to launch a festival celebrating International Women Day, the 8th March: the first festival was held in 2010 and the last in 2013, an annual event held over the course of four years, which included local and international participation. As we can read from their web page: "*Aat* provides a platform to engage through the arts, by producing original performances, showcasing new works, encouraging collaborations, and leading workshops across Jordan. *Aat* aims to raise awareness on gender issues and human rights, by promoting symbolic and critical thinking, and celebrating creativity." Founded by four different kinds of artists, two actresses, and one visual artist, these women expressed and celebrated their creativity throughout the festival and the discussions, supporting artistic residency programs and aiming at challenging stereotypes about women, gender, sexuality, personhood, and society. Creativity becomes the new language, transferring new meanings and creating a safe space and women — unlike their long-life activists and predecessors- celebrate their presence through creative culture and arts. This led the Jordanian scholar and feminist activist Rula Quawas to pose an open question: "Is artistic and creative activism a third wave of feminism in Jordan today?" As women took advantage of the crisis in Jordan along with its contemporary artists, the year of 2011 constituted the new enthusiastic terrain to continue the celebration. Through all these different kinds of movements, from

²⁷³All the information and the vision about the collective can be found on the website <http://www.lananasser.com/index.php/aat-network>, they are from the interview with one of the co-founder, ToleenTouq, in Amman, 21st September 2015, and informal conversations with another co-founder, Shereen Zomout, in Amman in 2010 and 2015.

different fields, I aim at highlighting women's agency and showing how it is enacted in arts as creative resistance in continuity with the past and in the recent history of Jordan.

Chapter 4

Cartography of Creations and Creative Spaces in Amman

This chapter explores women artists' foundation of independent creative spaces, of certain independent cultural initiatives and of "archetists", architects and artists, not only as kind of cultural resistance to neoliberalism's invading and easy solutions, but also as a kind of cultural activism to act, intervene and re-adjust uncritical ways of operating, learning and thinking in the official narrative of the city. This kind of cultural, social and political resistance interests urban creative middle -and some upper-class women who, acknowledging their privilege in society, at least in terms of economic and educational opportunities, critically problematize their own class privilege, socializing their ideas, competences, arts skills, and cultural initiatives. Despite not reaching a vast audience and risking nurturing only the same entourage of artists and curious people, often among them foreigner researchers like me and/or other artists, the spaces, the artworks and the initiatives represent themselves their re-appropriation of the city and re-invention of traditional male-made professions in more mobile and interactive artworks, where they relate to gender issues in ways independent of any institutionalized thinking. Through a brief journey in the first paragraph with Samia Zaru, a pioneering artist in Jordan, and a historian of Jordanian art, I wish to enlighten the importance of historiography in the current interest in studying contemporary Arab art.²⁷⁴ At the same time, while predecessors often belong to a past generation of artists "who sought to situate themselves as nationalists or social pioneers,"²⁷⁵ I wish to narrate a new generation of female artists who emerged in the last decade, who, separating themselves from big State ideology, rely more on a culture of streets and independent spaces as the embodiment of their voices, and not only physical spaces. Female initiators or artists depend on a mixed funding system, which allows them to create an unaffiliated and free domain where they can express critical thinking in arts practices. Having played a prominent role in bringing attention to gender and class in the theory of space, feminist geography constitutes my framework for analyzing creative spaces, as well as the right to the (gendered) city. This cartography of creations and creative spaces seek to link the feminist gaze on space and on the

²⁷⁴ K. Scheid, "What We Do Not Know of Contemporary Arab Art", in *ISIM (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) Newsletter* 22, 2008, pp. 14-15.

²⁷⁵ K. Scheid, *ibidem*, p. 14.

city to the critical practice of Jordanian women artists in Amman, who view themselves as geographers of the creative arts and culture, who produce a space beyond the dichotomies of public/private or inside/outside or home/city, designing their own feminist cultural resistance in the city.

4.1 Samia Zaru *سامية زارو*

Art is a means to express your feeling, art is the visual. You create a picture to observe, and let people observe: it will stay in their mind. Art has been circled, and it is not to touch the emotions of the leaders. They have to be turned in another way. For example, I did an exhibition at the United Nations (UN), called "Tents and stones." I made all the work with crude real materials. Many people looked at the tent materials and they thought it was donated by the UN and they would cry instead because I painted all the real tents I collected from UN tent storage rooms. When a tent is broken, how do they get more money? They apply for money for other tents to support the torture that has been inflicted by other nations on certain people. So I went to the storerooms, I collected and I painted in there. And it was a very moving exhibition and it went from Amman to New York to Vienna to California to Canada. I started to do it in 1988 and it kept travelling until 1996. A man from the UN visited the exhibition here in Amman and he insisted, despite the meaning, that this exhibition should be at the UN in Vienna in 1989. And do you know why he insisted? Because he saw the exhibition not in a commercial gallery but in a half-demolished building in Shmeisani. Now it is a fenced area and they are building in it. So, imagine, the half-demolished building with the tents, no floors, no ceiling, no windows, and the tents were very important. I put children's shoes, clothes, I put fences: I have been living there in the refugee camps, it is not my imagination. This made a great reaction and I was interrogated (by the intelligence service, ndr). This is why this exhibition, why tents and why stones. We do not have weapons so they have to take stones. I exhibit on the streets, its name is Villa Rosa, and in 1988 it was a very lavish restaurant, opposite the current Haya Cultural Center, where there is now a statue I sculpted in front of it.

It was first my supervisor Rula Quawas who told me: "If you want to speak about women artists

as cultural resistance in Jordan, you have to interview Samia Zaru. She embodies the cultural resistance!” I kept in mind Rula’s words, but since she was from another generation of artists, I did not want to include her in my ethnography where I embrace more or less the last decade of arts and cultural practices of women aged between twenty-five and forty years old. So I only interviewed her in April 2016 when I was already writing the chapters of my thesis. Samia Zaru, born in Nablus, Palestine, in 1938 is one of the most well-known Palestinian–Jordanian artists. She has represented Jordan abroad at many international cultural conferences and her work was and is exhibited permanently worldwide. She has strongly contributed not only to the development of the modern Jordanian Art Movement, which is an amalgamation of both Jordanian and Palestinian movements, but also to the education of arts at schools and higher education institutions, writing an expert visual arts curriculum for the Minister of Education in 1976 to teach art to children, and she herself has taught at UNRWA centers as well as at higher education institutions. I can proudly say that I had the privilege to meet her personally and spend time with her during the longest interview I conducted in Jordan for my PhD research: two and a half hours, in her house, which could be also considered a museum, due to the immense number of artworks displayed in the living room, in the kitchen, in the garden, and of course in her atelier (see figure 3). Entering her house, I was immediately fascinated by all the paintings she had on the walls, but it was nothing compared to the sculptures of all forms, heights and materials in her garden. Painting, sculpture, book illustration, weaving, paper and fabric design, costume, woodcuts, badges, emblems, book covers, murals – little escapes her creative production. Yet, the most important thing for her remains to design; it is the concept at the basis of her artworks. This is the reason why she showed me many notebooks spanning her fifty-year artistic career: and still ongoing at seventy-eight years old.²⁷⁶ At the beginning, our interview was preceded by the power of her critical and angry words, which she used during a long invective about powers, wars, colonialism and neo-imperialism of past and modern times in the Middle East, especially connected to Palestine and Jordan. She told me the story of her Black September in 1970 where she was in a shelter for twenty days from where she could hear the bombings. But no cutting tongue could have been more telling than her work itself – the one she described during the

²⁷⁶ A book on her life and work is a forthcoming publication, *Samia. Stations and situations*, by the Syrian Journalist Fatima Ennadf, now living in Turkey, who spent a month with Samia. Her complete and rich curriculum can be found at this link: <http://wfinangallery.com/wfinan-artists/samia-zaru/>.

interview and which I put at the beginning of this chapter: “Tents and Stones.” As she underlined many times, “real tents and real stones, but not bombs – at the exhibition at the UN in Vienna they checked as if there were some”. The exhibition held for the first time in Amman configured a construction on an area



Fig. 3: Samia Zaru in her workshop in Amman, 21st April 2016.

2,000 meters squared. While Samia often worked in the Royal-sponsored artistic framework²⁷⁷, where the terms and conditions of any expression are set by state institutions and where the state is promoter and caretaker and controller at the same time, she was the first woman in Jordan to defy the public space, not only with the exhibition “Tents and stones” in 1988, but also ten years later during a street art performance in downtown Amman, as visual artist Sameh Hijjawi

²⁷⁷ She was one of the founders of the Royal Society of Fine Arts in 1973 and she co-worked with the princess Wijdan Ali, King Hussein’s cousin, who is an active professional and a leader in the arts. Samia told me they were classmates, they have worked together all their lives and she even taught her children.

recalls.²⁷⁸ She was a critical and rebellious artist, understanding the meaning of remaining inside the Royal official framework that would allow her to build something for the country around her. She co-founded cultural centers, such as the Haya Cultural Center in 1976, as well as the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, in 1980. These two institutions had a leading role in forming, exhibiting and defining the Jordanian Art Movement until recently when the National Gallery of Fine Arts organized a big exhibition called “Seventy Years of Art in Jordan” in 2013. While dealing with the contemporary, a brief account of the past, putting women artists today within a framework of history and the archival artistic history, shows how artists’ works derived from previous decades of arts history and at the same time subverted and reinvented the official arts framework. I have briefly introduced Samia Zaru as one of the brilliant figures and one I had the pleasure to meet. But the story has to be told from before.

4.1.1 The official history – the most ancient and the most recent

The history of arts in Jordan is paradoxically at the same time the most ancient and the newest in the region since it developed constantly and slowly only in the last six decades. It is the most ancient indeed because it was near Amman that in 1982 the ‘Ain Ghazal statuettes were discovered (See figure 4). They are probably the earliest sculpted figures to be found anywhere in the world. They date back to 7000 BC and represent human forms of unbaked clay with their eyes made of two shells lined with black paint. Since the production of the ‘Ain Ghazal statuettes, Jordan has come under various cultural influences, including Assyrian, Nabatean, Ancient Egypt, Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and finally Islamic civilizations with its Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayyub and Mamluk dynasties. Traces of different layers of these civilizations can be found at Amman’s citadel, where the Temple of Hercules, a Byzantine church, and an Omayyad Palace coexist, as well as all around Jordan. In the middle of the fifteenth century, Jordan became part of the Ottoman Empire and, until First World War, it was part of Greater Syria within Ottoman lands. With Damascus as the provincial capital, Jordan was pushed to the status of a backwater province. It is easy to guess that, as a consequence of this

²⁷⁸ Interview with Sameh Hijjawi, visual performer, artist and PhD researcher, 20th April 2016, Amman.

secondary political role, we do not have witnesses of arts and culture flourishing in this time. The colonial Western intrigue after First World War shakes the “cultural foundations of the Arabs, affecting their aesthetic sensibility, their literary appreciation, and their artistic creativity.”²⁷⁹ Even with its first manifestations since Jordan’s foundation in the Twenties, it was only in the Fifties that a modern art movement made the first steps towards a real existence.

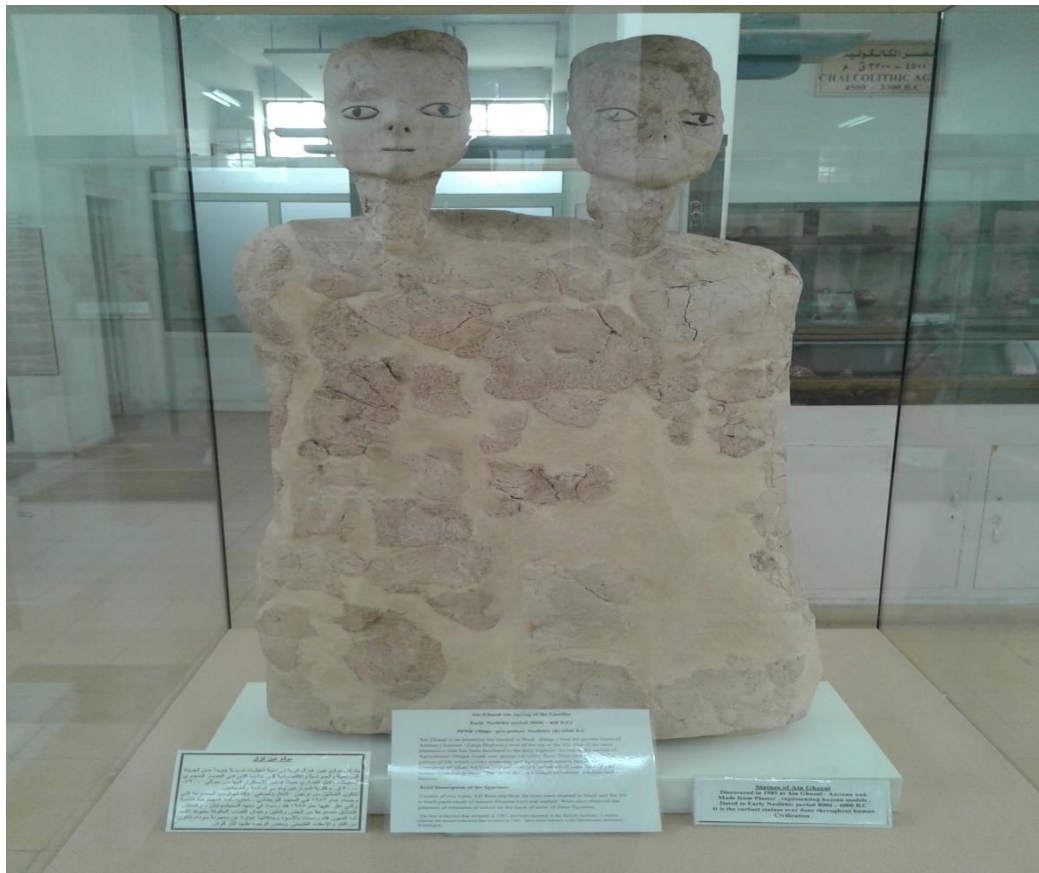


Fig. 4 Statues of Ain Ghazal in the Jordan Museum in Amman’s citadel. They are likely to be the earliest sculpted figures to be found anywhere in the world. They date back to 7000 BC and represent human forms of unbaked clay.

Other forms of indigenous artistic expressions did of course exist and never stopped existing, influencing and creating contemporary art, including “rug and textile weaving, embroidery, nil work on silver (brought to the country by Circassia’s migrants who came from Russia at the end of nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century), gold-smithing, pottery, painting on glass,

²⁷⁹ *Saba’ona ‘amman min al-fann al-urduni al-mu’asir*, al-Jami’iyya al-Mamlikiyye lil- Fonon al-Jamila, al-Mathaf al-Watani al-Ordon lil fonon al-jamila, Amman 2013. (*Seventy years of contemporary art in Jordan*, The Royal Society of Fine Arts, The Jordanian National Gallery of Fine Arts).

woodcarving, and Arab calligraphy.”²⁸⁰ The first modern Jordanian artistic group was founded in 1952, “The Jordanian Art Club”. Many scholarships were delivered to young students to start or complete their studies in Beirut, Baghdad or Cairo, or in Europe. From the Sixties until the Eighties the arts education and practice was strengthened, through the foundations and the galleries as we have seen, but just to give an idea of the most recent involvement, it was only in 1988 that the first Ministry of Culture was established and it began its active role from 1990 onwards, through the foundation of other cultural centers. The role of the Minister of Culture has increased visibly during the past twenty years, not only in the increasing numbers of festivals and initiatives which were promoted together with other Royal foundations (see this Chapter 4.4). While introducing this brief history of Jordanian Art with Samia Zaru, we have already mentioned the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts. In their aim to encourage and support local artists through exhibitions and to also have an educational role, the Gallery was the promoter of a unique project of this kind and the first in the Arab World, the Mobile Museum. This pioneering project was launched in 2009 and it consisted of a van which was turned into an art gallery. Every Tuesday, it travels to a town or a village to exhibit the work of a Jordanian artist, with an introductory lecture on contemporary art in Jordan and a workshop on painting for children. So far, it has reached 274 communities. I mentioned the case of the National Gallery’s Mobile Museum to let the reader understand how artists and galleries, even at their more official and governmental level, are not only increasing in terms of realizing international artworks and creating participation and interest, but also increasing the local audience and trying to develop an art in the country. This is the goal of what many female artists have been dedicated to throughout their careers and to which they continue to dedicate their efforts.

4.1.2 Women and independent art spaces. Mekan Art Space/ مكان

Throughout this history of arts in Jordan, women have always been not only present, but even protagonists as artists, curators, and initiators. One of the first women in Jordan and Palestine to

²⁸⁰ *Saba’ona ‘amman min al-fann al-urduni al-mu’asir*, ibidem.



Fig. 5 The entrance at Makan Art Space in Jabal al-Webde, Amman. It was open for over 12 years.

study art formally was Fatima Muhib, born in Jerusalem in 1920. The presence of women in the fields of arts and culture in Jordan in the last decades is not only witnessed by the number of painters and artists,²⁸¹ but also by the roles they had in the history of the museums in the countries²⁸² and in opening and managing art spaces, as we will develop in the next paragraphs. Women are also now leading most of the art galleries,²⁸³ some of which are commercial. One of the central places in the arts in Amman has been Darat al-Fonon,²⁸⁴ the House of the Arts, more than an art gallery, a whole art center, a point of reference for arts and cultures for its workshops, conferences, library and video library, films, gallery talks, publications, scholarships, art programs, and of course temporary and permanent exhibitions. The creation of the Darat al Fonon in the central neighborhood of Jabal al-Webde was the vision of Suha Shoman, herself an artist and curator. It was established by the nonprofit organization the Khalid Shoman

²⁸¹ I collected and selected from the Wijdan Ali's book, *Modern Art in Jordan*, Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman 1997, the names of all women who exhibit there: Annie Sakkab, Clara Amado Khreis, Ghada Dahdaleh, Diana Shamounki, Dodi Tabbaa, Farhelnissa Zeid, Marguerite Tadros, Monia Saudi, Najwal Innab, Nasma Nimri, Nawal Abdalla, Rajwa Ali, Riham Ghassib, Rula Shukhairi, Sabahat Rashan, Samia Zaru, Soha Shoman, Suha Nursi, Ufemia Rizk, Wijdan Ali. Some of them, like Farhelnissa Zeid and Samia Zaru, gained international recognition.

²⁸² C. Malt, *Women's voices in Middle East museums. Case studies in Jordan*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2003.

²⁸³ Among the galleries I had visited: Dar al-Handa and Nabad Art Gallery, both directed by two women.

²⁸⁴ Darat al-Fonon's website at: <http://www.thekhalidshomanfoundation.org/>.

Foundation, opening its doors in 1993. It is in the same neighborhood, a few meters from the Darat, a privately endorsed institution, that ten years later, in 2003, another art space was born, and an independent one: the Makan Art Space.²⁸⁵ More modest in term of dimensions, money and initiatives, it is not possible to trace and recount some of the profiles of contemporary art in Amman without speaking about Makan. As a collective formed by four women, it ceased to exist after almost 14 years, in January 2016, but it has paved the way for many independent artistic and cultural inspired forms, which we will discover throughout this chapter. As a place, it is still there and it was temporarily used (March–June 2016) for the Spring Sessions art program (see Chapter 4.4). An open space that is an alternative to the formal, commercial and institutional spaces, Makan was conceived for contemporary arts and social practices. Apart from its events and workshops, it also organized a residency program and international artist workshops, the Shatana International Artist Workshop. Sameh Hijjawi, one of the artists and the artistic director for many years, continuously recalls at Makan the experience as a collective, a fundamental place for developing her arts practices and her individual artistic paths:

If I was not part of Makan collective life would have been more difficult, I met there a lot of people and made possible many things. It does change, it creates a community and the community is very supportive, but it is also a bubble. (...) Makan always had collaborative projects with many artists in the region, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine. Makan was a life-long thing, we did exhibitions, then I took my own studio and then I went to London, but when I came back in 2007 we became a collective. Makan was always there. We organized the Shatana International Artist Workshop from 2007 until 2009 and it was a project with twenty-one artists from around the world in a house, it was fantastic. We had the fluidity, the flexibility, and the credibility to get funds to invite artists. Amman is not a hub, it is not Cairo, it is not Beirut; it is not Palestine, which is very sexy. Amman is not sexy. There was there the possibility to meet a lot of people from around the world. It functions as a family. So many people were involved in the art space over the years, and Amman needed it. Our space was informal. Makan was different from any other place in Amman, there was no jealousy between the artists since we worked together, and it had an open door policy. People were surprised: “Are you working together?” It

²⁸⁵ Even if the association no longer exists and the space is for now left to Spring Sessions, the website is active and the source of many materials from more than ten years of activity: <http://www.makanhouse.net/>.

*became a different thing then and something new always came out of Makan. It was really important. I was the artistic director for a couple of years, and then we initiated The River Has Two Banks, until 2015. Now we are no longer part of the Makan collective. We no longer have a name and a bank account. We donated the library to Spring Sessions. I am happy I can be an artist in Amman without Makan. Every time I was in Amman, everything revolved around Makan. My artistic life revolved around it. So we need to change this: I grew up a lot but it would be great to make a connection with the city without the space.*²⁸⁶

The narrative of Makan is for me introductory, as Samia Zaru briefly introduced the art movement in Jordan and its growth over fifty years. The narrative of Makan is essential for me to understand the present. As Samah Hijjawi wrote in the Shatana International Artist Workshop publication for 2008, “with only a brief and classical historical repertoire, the visual arts are generally dominated by a commercial gallery scene and dictated by an older generation of artists whose conformist aesthetic definitions leave little room for contemporary forms of practice and thinking to emerge.”²⁸⁷ It is the new critical and independent spaces, initiatives and artists that pertain to my thesis. I could have simply chosen Makan as a perfect case study for an ethnographic research with all the women artists around it and at the time of my first settling in Amman, Makan was not about to close; on the contrary, a crowd-funding campaign²⁸⁸ was initiated by the collective, to sustain and continue to run the place. But while I had known this place since 2010, I wanted rather to privilege in my research the most recent experiences, the less well-established or newly formed spaces and ideas, which are of course perfectly in continuity with the collective of Makan. I did not want to walk on a secure road of a well-known place Middle East independent arts and cultural arena such as Makan, but rather I preferred to discover more. It was Makan, as it did in contemporary visual arts in the last decades that paved the way for my research, when its last artistic director Shuruq Harb gave me the first list of ten artists from Amman, from which my research started. I, as Sameh Hijjawi said, needed to make a connection with the city that was not only related Makan, that was not only visual artists and that was not taken for granted.

²⁸⁶ Interview with Sameh Hijjawi, visual artist and performer, Amman, 20th April 2016.

²⁸⁷ Sameh Hijjawi, at Shatana International Artists Workshop 2008, at <http://www.makanhouse.net/page/publications>.

²⁸⁸ The YouTube link for the crowdfunding campaign can be seen at: <http://www.makanhouse.net/upcoming-events>.

Seven of the twenty-one women I interviewed mentioned Makan due to its presence in their careers or for the role in the independent cultural life of the city. But all seven are nowadays involved in a new research, in a new place they run, or they are simply concentrating on their work individually. Even if Makan has closed it made history in creative contemporary arts practices, which are continuously evolving and functioning as a form of feminist and creative activism, or *femtivism* as we have renamed it. Margot Badran argues that this “creative activism of Lotfi (Egyptian artist, *ndr*) and other artists, as part of the Cultural Revolution, constitutes a distinct challenge to patriarchy.”²⁸⁹ As we have already acknowledged, women in Jordan and in the whole region of Arab countries have often assumed a leadership role in the fields of arts: “the change in cultural behavior has allowed creative women to reject men’s expression on their behalf, and rendered all the more acute their desire to openly resist and respond to this unwelcome authority.”²⁹⁰ The four founding female artists at Makan had not only artistic skill and talent, but they had a vision. A creative individual with a vision shares a feminist consciousness: Watfa Hamadi declares a theatre piece by the Jordanian artist and cultural initiator Sawsan Darwaza, “Musabab bil wuduh” (Afflicted by Clarity), “a feminist text, because they write directly from a feminist perspective.”²⁹¹ Even if, nowadays, contemporary creative women, female cultural curators, and artists in Jordan hesitate to define themselves as feminists, four women sharing a vision, pursuing it collectively and running it for more than ten years, incarnates a feminist practice in the field of arts and in a larger sense. The same even occurred in Egypt during “the 18 days of Tahrir” in 2011 when “in the first instance, women activists rejected being explicitly labeled as feminists, rather preferring a more inclusive and human-rights grounded approach to political participation in the revolution”²⁹² in a context where gender issues “under the regime was manipulated by the authoritarian state and by international actors (...) but it becomes an issue soon after” when “the revolution increased the awareness of gender as a political problem, both in the institutional sphere, where the gender gap is immense, and in

²⁸⁹M. Badran, “Dis/playing power and the politics of patriarchy in revolutionary Egypt: the creative activism of Huda Lotfi”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, p. 47-62.

²⁹⁰W. Hamadi, “Feminist Discourse in the Arab Theatre”, in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, 2014.

²⁹¹ W. Hamadi, *ibidem*.

²⁹² L. Sorbera, “Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014”, in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 63-75.

the public space.”²⁹³ Concerning their leadership on the independent cultural scene, women do not reject feminist thought and visions through which they enact their own creations, but the already institutionalized feminist discourse, which has lost its revolutionary strength: the words “Huquq al-mara”, overused as “Tahrir al-mara” and the abstract singular “al-mara”²⁹⁴ have “degenerated to the point where they have become so ill-defined and vague, as to turn harmless and be easily ignored, though often cited in the public discourse, not only that of politicians, but of women as well.”²⁹⁵ The desire today is to rely on feminist discourse seeking a new language, new terms: and creativity is often this language, the re-imagination, the space, the voice of these women, opposite to:

“the global “technocratization” of gender issues (a phenomenon I refer to as “donor-driven gender activism”), and a heightened politicization of gender following the events of the 11th of September, 2001, and the ensuing “war on terror”. (...) In relation to the Middle East, compliance with gender conditionalities is a soft option for authoritarian regimes in comparison to moving towards democratic representation and social justice.”²⁹⁶

While they oppose this “technocratization” of the gender issue, gender and feminist issues are on the contrary at the heart of female artists’ research. Identifying in the contemporary cultural fields of the capital Amman many different creative urban middle- and upper-class women involved in running a space or a cultural independent initiative reveals both the need for spaces for individual or collective artworks where a prevalent women’s role is challenging more and more traditional views or taboos; it proves how managing financially precarious places is a resistance to the neoliberal economic reforms and policies which colonize or demolish spaces, leaving them under a visible and invisible continuous order.

²⁹³ L. Sorbera, *ibidem*.

²⁹⁴ “Huquq al-mara” means Women’s Rights, “tahrir al-mara”, women’s liberation, and the abstract singular “al-mara”, Woman.

²⁹⁵ J. S. Makdisi, “Huquq almar’a: Feminist Thought and the language of the Arab Women’s Movement”, in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, 2014.

²⁹⁶ D. Kandiyoti, “Between Feminism and Social Engineering: The Trouble Trajectory of International Gender Activism”, in *Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East*, 2014.

4.2.1 Resistance as generating creative spaces. Hayyez/ حيز

*“Any creative expression
is a way, a critical response
to the power structure
that we live in”.*

Dima Maurice²⁹⁷

I met Dima for the first time at a birthday party. It was Shreen’s birthday party, but it was not in her house. I actually realized that many of the birthday parties I was invited to were never at private houses, but always at collective and creative art spaces like Makan and Hayyez. This already speaks of the meaning of the spaces themselves as places for socializing and entertainment which are also used to work and create. So, I met for the first time Dima, and I met Hayyez, her space, her studio, her project, her office, her birthday parties or gathering places, together with her friend and colleague Nora. It was just the first of countless times I have been there to work, to meet people, to have a meeting, to attend a workshop, and every time Dima, of course, was there and she would introduce the space to newcomers. When she first explained to me the idea of the space, I was happy but I had not thought about it as one of the places I would have included in my research. It was actually going there so often that it became, more than other places, one of the most generative for reflections about arts, cultures and Amman. The same thought concerned Dima: she is an architect and graphic designer and she would not define herself as an artist, but as a creative person. This is how she would introduce herself:

I am an architect because my main passion is spaces and what happens in the spaces; of course I take inspiration from my city, and from the places I grew up in, and the urban context of that. My main passion is creating beautiful functional spaces, and dealing with that space which is creative, a new discovery, and one layer after another. I am passionate about discovering even more and more in my profession.

During different months, while developing a friendship with her, I figured out that I needed to listen to her and find out more, even if she first refused to be interviewed as an artist. Dima is a creative woman and an extremely generous person. And I think this is already a good indicator of

²⁹⁷ Interview with Dima Maurice, architect, graphic designer, co-founder of the Hayyez space in Jabal el Webde, Amman, 7th June 2015. All Dima’s work can be found at: <https://dimaswork.wordpress.com/>.

how her workspace can function well. Every time I mentioned something I needed, for my research or otherwise, she would immediately put me in contact with someone to help me: whether it was a tripod to shoot for a project or a translation to correct, Dima is always ready to share all her knowledge and contacts. I cannot remember one single time when I met her and she would not invite me to a talk, to a workshop, to a party, to an exhibition, to a film screening, and to her space, Hayyez, of course. The most precious help she could give to me was the sharing of her thoughts about Amman, Jordan and her beloved profession. Dima comes from an urban middle-class family based in Jabal al-Webde, a mixed Christian–Muslim neighborhood where some of the cultural life happens. Her father is an Egyptian doctor and her mother is a Jordanian teacher, and due to the Nationality Law, which restricts the passing of nationality from a woman, she does not hold a Jordanian passport, but only an Egyptian one. So, even being a privileged educated woman in Amman, she rarely gets a visa to travel abroad and even though she often travels to Egypt, only once was she able to travel to Europe, and that was for only four days during which she went to an architecture conference in Switzerland. She visited a lot of architectural sites that she had previously studied. Through and also behind her privileged position in Amman, there is a critical sense of the city, which is manifested in the projects she runs. The origins of the space she co-founded, Hayyez, can be traced also to the last months of 2010 when people everywhere (in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Jordan and elsewhere) were thirsty for change and would meet to discuss and think together. It was only few months before 2011 started:

When I first graduated in 2010, you need to imagine the state that Amman was in...it was the highest point of the recession, the highest point of neoliberal policy in Amman, the highest point of politically charged speech. Imagine graduated people, friends, not having a job, but full of ideas. We started to explore politics, to speak about politics and the idea of governance, and what it means. We, a group of friends, started a “Project Manifesto” in Darat al Fonon. It was simply talking about things. We started an event in 2010 – until December 2012 – called Hiwar Hadari, Civil/Urban Dialogue/Conversation. We were very young, we did not have money but we had a lot of time. We wanted to talk in a critical manner, we started to produce budgets. At that moment there was no Lab in Darat al-Fonon. There was nothing, it was frustrating but we had a lot of things to say. We produced interviews with creatives, we did small exhibitions,

critical thinking: people would come, like sixty or seventy people, and we were asking people to become involved in the way the municipality was running. But then I reached a point when I was in a studio and I was asking myself where my voice was. I am passionate about community-based projects, how you can work on something and produce together. We were often accused of being just laboring mouths to talk and we do not know what to say. And sometimes you change your mind and you get even more passionate about that. The political situation became even harder, 70-80% of the founders of this group, all activists, people left the country either to work in the Gulf or to pursue their studies abroad in Europe or USA, Canada, because Amman became this really frustrating city. Me and Nora wanted to do something, we talked a lot and we said: now is time for doing. We are passionate about the environment, about low budget community-based projects. So we started for a studio for free. Hayyez means a “space,” it means full expression for us. It is this place where young designers can come and express themselves. Our initial idea was to be a collective of designers and architects and take a project, and basically work because we care about it and we are passionate about it.

Hayyez²⁹⁸(حيز) , located in Jabal al- Webdeh in Amman, can be translated into “space” in Arabic. Dima Maurice and Nora Salem, architects and graphic designers, are the initiators of this space which is, in fact, open as a co-working space to all architects and designers, as well as other artists. Hayyez engages in projects outside the space itself and outside the city.

Generating creative spaces as a practice of (women’s) resistance entails a redefinition of space itself. When I first thought of Hayyez, as well as other creative spaces such as Meem, which I will introduce in greater detail later on, I thought of it as a re-signification of the workspace and women’s creative space due to the way it was relational, contextual, and mobile. In fact, Hayyez represented to me a complex space of interactions where conventional norms are renegotiated and dislocated. Consciously or not, we feel and internalize what the space tells us about it and about the work and eventually the art produced in it. If, for example, we imagine or we want to describe an office or even a conventional studio for arts and cultural practices, we would probably have in mind a closed-off desk, lonely hallways and few obligatory conference rooms with a huge table ensuring that people are separated from each other. Space has always been a foundation for the expression of our cultural values, and we generally ignore its impact on our

²⁹⁸ All the projects can be found at their website: <http://www.hayyez.com/>.

behaviors. Hayyez is not an office. It is a space of creations and collaborative projects and its name reminds us of being mindful about the space we are in (see figure 6). It activates critical forms of resistance and contestation through different mechanisms of reflections and relations. I would describe it as an independent and creative space rather than using the adjective “alternative.” The word “alternative” has in fact, according to me, the connotation that “contemporary” (and also “alternative” in different parts and in deeper terms) has in Hanan Toukan’s thesis about cultural practices in post-Civil War Lebanon²⁹⁹:

“Western funders became increasingly involved in projects designed to encourage Arabs of the Post-Cold war generation (...). In their emphasis on supporting what they often term “contemporary” artistic and cultural practices, these funders have expressed great faith in the potential generation (...) to reform their societies by acting as a deterrent to the “Islamist threat”. Within this framework “contemporary” took on a very specific meaning, pertaining not to the works aesthetic qualities as viewed in their particular trajectory, context and art history, but rather to their perceived significance as necessary counter-hegemonic elements in the effort to attain a new society embracing neoliberal versions of democracy, freedom and reform (Asef Bayat in *Transforming the Arab World*).”³⁰⁰



Fig. 6: Hayyez’s space in Jabal al-Webde, Amman.

The foundation of a space such as Hayyez could be easily placed in this meaning of

²⁹⁹ H. Toukan, “Art, aid, affect: locating the political in post-civil war Lebanon’s contemporary cultural practices”, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, London, 2013.

³⁰⁰ H. Toukan, *ibidem*.

“contemporary” or “alternative” if we want to align this particular notion of Arab women as the comforting, reassuring and encouraging hope of alternatives to the general scary threat of Islamism and/or wars around. “Creative,” however, is primarily the self-denomination of the space’s founders, who present a different kind of narrative, alternative indeed to that imported kind of neoliberal democracy which claims to construct more desirable and attractive cultures for its pleasures, investments and control.

4.2.1 Reflections on Performed Spaces as a Site of Resistance

Feminist geography played a major role in formulating theories of space, placing the attention not only on the dynamics of gender making or unmaking the spaces, but also on class, as a determinant factor in the production and theory of space.³⁰¹ Engaging in a discussion about space to better define Hayyez as generated by and generative of women’s creative resistance and women’s creative agency, I first refer to two distinctions around the notions of space. The first distinction distinguishes, in fact, place from space. As we have already introduced, Hayyez is not an office, but it is a creative space. This distinction between office and space can be opportunely compared to the distinction between place and space. In Michel De Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* this distinction stands clear: *lieu* and *espace* do not necessarily constitute a binarism, but they assume the dimensions of the established order and the mobile elements in it. The place is “the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence” while the space is composed of “interactions of mobile elements.”³⁰² There is no an exclusion of one from another but it is an order that becomes dynamic. De Certeau defined it as a configuration of positions, implying “an indication of ‘stability.’” In contradiction to the place, “the space has none of the univocity or stability of a ‘proper space.’” The two are not seen in dichotomous terms, but rather one is filled by the other, like an empty stable element and the full element that mobilizes it: “In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus, the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” This

³⁰¹ J. Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, I.B. Tauris, London 2003.

³⁰² M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984 (First published as *L’invention du quotidien*, Union générale d’éditions, Paris 1980).

concluding definition of space as a practiced place perfectly fits the distinction between an office and a creative space, as in the case of Hayyez. In fact, Hayyez, is a physical space of work, but it contains its mobile elements since their projects are inside the space and outside it. The projects in which Hayyez work are engaged with the city: the “walkers” (both its founders and people working in it) of Hayyez characterized it as a space rather than a place. For example, this space is also a mental or intellectual space. All of these people sit down together and discuss matters. They are shedding the chains from their brains and expressing their opinions. Physical spaces become mental spaces. These physical spaces are changing the mindset of the people. Even if it is a small number of people, they are looking at issues through different lenses. The landscape with people engaged in it becomes a mindscape where real change happens. They are resisting the labor market trying to be inclusive in their own collective space. They are practicing and having an empirical and intellectual experience of the space they have conceived, propping it as a space for non-conventional workshops, such the one on social design in refugees’ emergency architecture. Being the idea of two female architects, the concept of Hayyez as a dynamic space is also a “designed” space: and alongside the planning of the place, there is also the creative, functional and original design of two women. We now move to the second distinction connected with the concept of space and we will come back to the practiced place defining it also as *performed space*.

The second distinction that arises while speaking about space concerns the connection with the concept of gender. Space, not directly in the terms we have discussed until now, can symbolically represent a power structure. In this sense, in the cultural studies perspective, space “can be grasped to the concept of gender since gender relations vary across space and spaces are symbolically gendered.”³⁰³ Gendering space has involved vast bodies of studies, which I would simplify here in the distinction between “home” and the “workplace.” This division is further articulated as the division between the “private” and the “public”: “Home is regarded as the domain of the private and the feminine whereas sites of paid work have been coded masculine within the public sphere.” It is interesting to look at these definitions³⁰⁴ and discover them as opposite, or rather mixed up, in a unique definition when we turn again to the conceptualization

³⁰³ C. Barker, “Space”, in *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*, The Sage Publications, London, 2004.

³⁰⁴ In fact, I intentionally chose to read the definition of space from the *Dictionary of Cultural Studies*.

of what Hayyez mean. Hayyez is in fact both a home and a workspace;³⁰⁵ it is a private apartment – a room inside is usually rented to people willing to live there as a means to sustain the space economically³⁰⁶ – but it is also a space of public meetings and workshops; it is a place where work is conceived, designed, articulated, completed, and...it is free-lance but paid work. It is a space where eventually the distinction between public and private or home and workspace can be annulled and rethought. But, most importantly, it was founded and it is run by two women, who are at the same time “housekeepers”³⁰⁷ and workers as creative designers and architects, often surrounded by artists and creatives of the city or the region. Plus, when home is cast “as the unpaid domain of mothers and children, connoting the secondary values of caring, loving, tenderness and domesticity,” a feminist discourse which speaks back to the (mis)conception of the homeplace is completely erased. *Homeplace: A Site of Resistance* is bell hooks’ essay about the homeplace, where home is the space which reminds us of humanity and keeps memories: home is a site of resistance.³⁰⁸ Reconceptualizing home is a recurrent theme in Arab feminist art. In this sense, the “home” and “private” connotations that a creative space could assume is anyway not seen as necessarily negative; on the contrary, we can articulate the idea of a home and a creative space together as the site of re-inventions of women’s selves and of their artworks and professions. Furthermore, going back to the idea of a space as mobile, this concept of home and creative space together has also reflected the collaborative and community-based project and research projects which bring Hayyez outside the space and outside the city. This is particularly evident in the Ghor al-Mazraa Community Center project, a project to design and build a community center in the challenging context of Ghor Al Mazraa, an agricultural zone south of Amman. In the phase of research and documentation, they started a blog that aimed to document the research and design process as part of an ongoing project. During this phase of research, Dima and Nora directly collaborated with the women of the community “to reconsider the effects

³⁰⁵ I prefer to use workspace instead of workplace due to the distinction we made between place and space in the previous lines.

³⁰⁶ This is one of the strategies for independent workers to self-fund and sustain their spaces.

³⁰⁷ Dima usually cleans the space as if it were her home, before starting work.

³⁰⁸ b. hooks, “Homeplace (a site of Resistance)”, in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, Turnaround, London 1991.

of design³⁰⁹ on them and on communities. This is how Dima describes it, showing us how the planning and the design of a place need to be redefined from a feminist and non-Eurocentric perspective:

We started working, we did a proposal for a community center, the process of design is not a commercial process, we started with a blog, with the Ghor al-Mazraa project. We studied the vernacular and local materials to imagine this community center. It is a continuous research in the community. (...) Our aim of working on that project was to get feedback from the women themselves. For each one of the submissions (forming a concept and then drawing), we sat with the women and they gave us the feedback, we did not bring any foreigner into the concept. When UNESCO came and visited these women they came with a present – and because women often work in the field and they are very tired – they would grab comfortable chairs, but it was an alien object to them, as those women normally sit on the floor. So when we started working on all the local materials, and all their habits, this is why the research took up the longest period of time. I am against the idea of architects only. Being creators means also that I work with people, they make the choice. Vernacular architecture is the most sustainable; it is formed by natural resources.

Dima's work is speaking about a *femtivism* which is working with the people. Although feminism in Jordan has been said not to be collective, caring about only the rich people, this creative *femtivism* is indigenous and homegrown. The young creative women embrace all the people regardless of class. This is more relevant in general, to Arab feminist history. The criticism of being non-inclusive has been made to many feminist movements across the Arab world. According to many scholars, such as the historian of Egyptian feminist history Lucia Sorbera, this is a simplification, which aims to undermine one of the most revolutionary forces of social change.

The gendered nature of a space, this presumed double nature of home and workspace, of private and public, which instead interweaves in the creative space of Hayyez and in its projects, does

³⁰⁹ D. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*, MIT Press, 1981, p. 3.

not only define their projects or the space. It involves personal lives and gender roles and how working in a space or in a community can change male-dominated professions and gender perspectives. Even Hayyez meant, to Dima, a safe space to develop and imagine her occupation in the city, the physical space to create without any pressure from external sources, and a space to subvert gender and class-driven roles in her society and in her family:

Part of my womanity is being free to do my work, being productive in a community. I grew up in a family of many important men, but my work releases me from that label. I am neither the housewife nor the daughter, I am Dima the architect, and architecture in particular is a profession of decisions. When you start working, you make a lot of decisions. My work empowers me as a woman. It defines me as a woman. On many levels, in an older generation, we have never had that. When I say I am an architect, people do not take it seriously because it is exclusively a man's activity. When I was working in the field, people did not use to listen to me because I am very young and I am a woman and I am not very tall. So I feel I was disappearing in the male-dominated fieldwork. Most of the well-known architects are given a studio by their families. I did not have that. But I have so much encouragement from my generation, from creators.

This multiple and dissenting conception in/of space, professions and gender roles redirected me to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the extension that critical geographers Gillian Rose and Nicky Gregson made to that theory of space in *Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities*.³¹⁰ In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), and more recently, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler's project is to disrupt dominant understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality, assumed as static and given, and which assume that there are two bodies, two genders, and that heterosexuality is the inevitable relation between them. This narrative sustained by "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them."³¹¹ Reading Butler's most discussed theory, Rose and Gregson argue that spaces too need to be thought as performative, and so they

³¹⁰ G. Rose, N. Gregson, "Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities," in *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 18, 2000, pp. 433- 452.

³¹¹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminisms and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London 1999 (first edition 1990), p. 179.

insist on the complexity and instability of performances and performed spaces. In doing so, the two geographers agree with a number of geographers that “both performance and performativity are important conceptual tools for a critical geography concerned to denaturalise taken-for-granted social practices, and concur with their emphasis on the creativity of everyday life.”³¹² To illustrate their reading of Butler’s performativity, willing to present the concept of performed spaces, they studied two particular contexts: community art movements and car-boot sales. They consider them as respectively alternative spaces of cultural production and consumption. Through the education and the process of doing in these different places and situations, the geographers maintain that the social actors perform not in existing locations waiting to be inhabited by performances but “rather, the specific performances bring these spaces into being.” So we need to consider the space as performative, not only in consideration of the subjects’ positions and of the power relations in it, but also the interrelated nature of it:

“We want to examine the social relations of performances and the relationality of their spaces, and to suggest that another source of performative instability is the blurring of clear distinctions between positions and spaces. Performed spaces are not discreet, bounded stages, but threatened, contaminated, stained, enriched by other spaces. As are performers.”³¹³

The relational character of space and its performative qualities shake up its safety and its boundaries and the distinctions we have seen in/of it. Since gender is a doing more than a being, in Butler’s conceptualization, then we can affirm that also “space is a doing”.³¹⁴ And also, if gender is the complex and unstable result of multiple political, cultural and social intersections, we can therefore attempt to consider the space in the same complex and unstable field as the performative.³¹⁵ Space does not exist beyond the political, social, cultural practices that produce it.³¹⁶

The relationality and interrelationality of (performed) space is also in the space conceived by Luce Irigaray: a space which reflects the necessity and conditions of an intersubjective ethics. The construction of a space becomes an imperative full of implications in terms of relations: “not

³¹² G. Rose, N. Gregson, *ibidem*.

³¹³ G. Rose, N. Gregson, *ibidem*.

³¹⁴ C. Giubilaro, *Corpi, spazi, movimenti. Per una geografia della dislocazione*, Unicopli, Milano 2016.

³¹⁵ C. Giubilaro, *ibidem*.

³¹⁶ C. Giubilaro, *ibidem*.

an environment where someone is prisoner, but a corner opened on a metastable perspective,³¹⁷ a space to create, where every movement defines openness and, at every openness, a movement corresponds. This space and the relations of the bodies compose passages and encounters.

This conceptualization of the spaces, of their performativity and of Irigaray's openness and passages relinked me again to Dima's and Nora's practices in their works. As I have already stated, Hayyez is not only a physical space to go to. Hayyez engaged in other projects with Dima and Nora as architects and designers; for example, Dima designed Joz Hind, a small restaurant in Jabal al-Webde in Amman that only sells organic food; while Nora designed The Lab, a space for contemporary art at Darat al-Fonoon. What these two spaces have in common – one commercial, the other not – is the importance given to the public, to making spaces common and open to the majority. The interrelationality nature of their design showed me a sign of their will of engagement in the space, not only in terms of aesthetics, but especially in the political and cultural resistance they perform in their city. Again, I leave Dima to explain her project, Joz Hind:

Any creative expression is a way of critically responding to the power structure that we live in. In architecture, when we designed the restaurant, part of it was to embrace the streets and to celebrate the streets. We designed, and then realized a façade, a big window, looking at the street. We had a lot of problems with the municipality because they did not want to give us the permit to open this lovely kitchen onto the streets. In my opinion their refusal was because it celebrated the street too much; my work defines the political and the power structure. I have never done an exhibition about resistance, but fighting for a façade was my dance between the power structure and the people's will; my being critical of the political power structure.

A similar instance occurred with Nora, who designed The Lab, at Darat al-Fonon. The idea of the creator of this space came from Noura al-Khawsaneh and Rana Beiruti, who were the people

³¹⁷ L. Irigaray, *Condividere Il Mondo*, Bollati Bolinghieri, Torino 2009 (first published as *Le partage du monde*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 2008), p. 70. The translation of the quote in English is mine. See also L. Irigaray. *L'etica della differenza sessuale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1985.

who exhibit contemporary arts in a space where two huge windows expose them to common citizens and passersby. Exhibitions at The Lab, as well as seminars and workshops, are then immediately displayed to the public, which is a non-consenting and unconscious participation of the art.

As another example we can give of this concept of the interrelationality of the space is the idea of Melika Qutishat,³¹⁸ who, together with her friend, initiated in the same area of Jabal al-Webde another creative space. As for Hayyez, at the core of the opening of this space was a necessity to escape a commercial and neoliberal configuration of arts, culture, works, professions, gender roles, social inequalities, entrepreneurship and creations. Melika grew up in Amman and studied for three years and a half in Beirut. She studied graphic design but she did not want to work in a company, in the office of a company, and disappear in a full-time job in front of a computer. After working for a while in a gallery, she decided to stop in order to do her own artwork. She would like to create a book with illustrations for children. She decided initially to open her own space to combine her professional skills with a non-commercial way of realizing her potential and her artwork.

We opened the Meme (ميم) workspace with a friend about two years ago. We had a printing machine. We found a beautiful space in Jabal al-Webde, we had a machine and then we started to develop the concept of Meme. Over the past two years we went through a million things. We had art classes, six workshops; we worked with people with disabilities, with graphic designers. We want to do things to better connect people and not commercial work. Meme was never one thing, it was multiple things. It was for a while an artists' residence and it also created our circle of friends, who would meet up: we had many gatherings, fire dancing, music, yoga. It was a beautiful place for people to meet and create. We also had two bazars there to invite people to make local and handmade products.

Finally, during the cultural and artistic initiative of Spring Sessions, which I will introduce later on in the chapter, Melika was able to start to realize her artwork.³¹⁹ An illustration book for children, made out of recycled paper, a book which also contains seeds so that children could

³¹⁸ Melika Qutishat, graphic designer and artist, interview 3rd September 2015, Amman.

³¹⁹ Melika both produced and exhibited her books as artworks during both editions of Spring Sessions that I attended in 2015 and 2016. In 2016, in fact, she wrote a book about plants and natures that she hoped to publish as well.

after reading it, plant the seeds. The story is in fact about trees and plants around Amman that are not known by the majority and how everything is connected, about food that comes out from nature. When she first thought about the idea of the illustration book, she would start drawing herself and think about herself as a woman wishing to wear a huge T-shirt for men and when she puts it on her sex and her gender disappear because she just feels comfortable wearing her huge t-shirt. This is how conceiving the character of her book, she would generate her vision on gender, where gender actually disappears, sending a message to everyone and building an idea of equality from childhood and from the universal language of drawing: re-imagining gender roles doing children books.

I wanted to specifically make sure in the book that you cannot know if it is a woman or a man: it is for children. It can be a boy with long hair, it can be a girl. There are neither words nor characters, I did that on purpose because I want everybody to understand, it has no gender, it has no words, and it is a universal being. If the idea of this book works, and the children go and plant outside, for (male and female) children I imagine something that both can do equally. I do not know how it might work and how it can affect others. It could be something else, but anything I do has to have a universal language. It seems very abstract. But I hope it can generate new gender visions.

The Meme workspace had to close due to sustainability problems and it is one of the major problems independent, crowd-funded and low budget creative spaces are facing. When I interviewed Melika, she was helping another independent creative space, the Studio8 dance community space, to survive and resist with a crowd-funding campaign. Studio8 finally re-opened and continued its dance activities and creations, while unfortunately the Meme workspace did not. This conclusive detail is not actually only a detail: while it is paradoxically easier to find a job in a company, artists and creative people wanting to re-invent their professions and not work in male-dominated studios or companies (as is the case for Dima, the architect, and Melika, the graphic designer), they face the difficulty of sustainability and survival. Their resistance to the neoliberal job market, while they would deal with and not reject the support of NGOs in mixed-funded projects, and their insistence on collaborative projects, is both an encouragement for further creations and an indisputable reason to celebrate their spaces.

4.3 Resistance of the “Archetists.” Dina Haddadin and Saba Innab دينا حددين و صبا عناب

The Archetist is an architect

in the spirit of an artist.

An artist in the mind of an architect.

Lina Sergie³²⁰

In the previous paragraph we met Dima Maurice, who refuses to be labeled as an artist and prefers to identify herself only as an architect and a creative person working in the fields of arts and culture. Art and architecture are often defined in relation to each other in terms of “function”.³²¹ Dima Maurice stresses the functionality of her work in architecture and design. In the reflection of Jane Rendell, and in the current debate and practices of artists, art can also be considered functional in its reflective and critical role. Instead of engaging in the debate about the functionality of architecture, comparing it to the conceptual and less practical functionality of art, we can see the combination of both and a productive dialogue, in concepts and practice, between the two. This is the case of two women, architects and visual performance artists, who not only practice both the professions in their lives, but also they stress the “marriage” of the two professions and they work and play with the two minds: the mind of the visual artist and the mind of the architect and how they work together. Dina Haddadin and Saba Innab are the names of these two brilliant women. So, in this case, unlike the examples in Jane Rendell’s text, the artists are not collaborating only with artists, but the two minds, imaginations, gazes and competences are linked to each other in the same person. Dina’s and Saba’s architectural projects and works, their (video) installations and mixed-media paintings/drawings with raw materials, witness the reflexive lens in architecture through which they eventually “critique the flows of information, capital, markets, technology, interactions, flows of images, sounds and symbols as well as power structures and political systems embedded in urban morphologies.”³²² Through

³²⁰ Lina Sergie, architect and writer, was the curator of the exhibition “Archetist”. The whole text and interview with Dina Haddadin about the “Archetist” can be found on her website: <http://dinahaddadin.prosite.com/10788/text->.

³²¹ J. Rendell, *Art and architecture: a place in between*, I. B. Tauris, London 2006.

³²² “ART + POWER + SPACE, Public discussion with Mario Gooden, Dina Haddadin, Saba Innab and Jack Persekian: What are the conceptual grounds for Architecture in the creation of new spaces for the engagement with

their *archetist* works I perceived another different kind of cultural resistance: the resistance of the city through architecture which “is not about adding to the city as much as absorbing what already is there; (but instead) to work with the residue, or with the negative spaces, the hole, the spaces in-between.”³²³ Through their work and artwork, they also investigate the sites where architects work to critique the systems where they are supposed to operate and the processes of the critical understanding and possibilities of a place. The large majority of their production interrogates Amman, which in the last years has witnessed a vivid, contradictory and problematic relationship with architecture, especially mainstream, practices. Whatever concerns architecture in Amman nowadays, it is “automatically sexy” in Saba Innab’s expression.

If you are talking about art in the Middle East, there are a lot of stereotypes and so the Western public looks for something “sexy.” For example, if you are coming from the Gulf, whatever is connected to the oppressed women would be interesting. If you are from Lebanon you will not speak about anything else other than the Civil War; if you are from Palestine, the occupation and the art under occupation is a very sexy subject. I am talking generally, but the works which are produced and published or exhibited are confirming this kind of image. It is very difficult that artists from these areas I mentioned speak about different subjects. They have to explain why their work is important connected to those themes. And, for example, in Lebanon an artist would generally feel that his/her work is not important if it does not speak about the Civil War, even if it has no substance. Concerning Amman, the beautiful thing is that nothing is still completely mainstream. There is no concept or idea which would be, in the terms of the arts, “sexy.” But the notion of sexy is always present and now, for example, whatever is related to architecture is automatically sexy.

The mainstream words about war in the Middle East have also strongly influenced artists. Even if their work would sincerely refer to the loss and distress feelings that the geopolitical and humanitarian crises caused in their areas, there is also a tendency to enlighten this art as representative of the conflict areas. If, for example, Syrian artists are now becoming famous in

and interpretation of Contemporary Arab Art in the Middle East?” Talk at Darat al-Fonoon, Amman, 11th October 2012.

³²³ In Dina Haddadin’s website in an interview about *Archetist*, she cited Francis Alys’s words: <http://dinahaddadin.prosite.com/10788/text->.

Europe,³²⁴ this is unfortunately connected to the tragedy of their country. While I do not blame the importance given to such contexts, I would also like to celebrate arts in Jordan even if war is not happening and the only short-lived civil war, Black September, is still a taboo and rarely tackled by artists. But it is Saba Innab, in particular, who is reclaiming the importance of challenging these taboos and 2011 was in this sense a good step forward for the liberation of the forbidden and unspeakable words in Jordan. But until now, Jordan has not become an artistic hub such as Beirut and Dubai or Sharjah:³²⁵ and so art from Jordan is not sexy. Only architecture is. This notion is connected to the neoliberal projects and the contested geography in the city of Amman. There is a vivid debate about architecture and space in Amman³²⁶ and this is a positive sign of the reaction of the city to the current phenomenon of gentrification, demolitions, creation of privatized public space for gated communities, “playscapes”³²⁷ for upper classes and for the transnational capitalist class. But even if all these problematic issues found a critical and fertile terrain, there is also a refusal somehow to redirect the neoliberal projects to the political. As Saba Innab recalls, during a public talk and discussion in Studio X in Amman about the “New Downtown Abdali”³²⁸ project, an ongoing project which is going to host businesses, investments and leisure facilities near the old city center of Amman, she introduced a part of her research and she strongly criticized that project.

When I said that this kind of reconstruction of a downtown with private capital investments from outside is a political choice, the public rejected this: they rejected the political signification. Political means also economy, class, and history: ignoring a city center where there are commercial activities to build a new one is a political choice. They rejected that and that was the

³²⁴ Syria’s Biennale Pavillon at the 55th Venice Biennial of Art: <https://theculturetrip.com/middle-east/syria/articles/art-is-a-dear-friend-syria-embraces-the-international-spirit-of-the-venice-biennale/>.

³²⁵ Sharjah is a city in the United Arab Emirates which has hosted the Biennial of Art since 1993, <http://www.sharjahart.org/biennial/sharjah-biennial-12/welcome>, organized by the Sharjah Art Foundation, <http://www.sharjahart.org/>.

³²⁶ Studio-X Amman is a regional platform for experimental design and research run by Columbia GSAPP and the Columbia Global Centers, Amman. Through workshops, lectures, screenings, and field visits, Studio-X Amman brings together Columbia GSAPP students and faculties with practitioners, researchers, and students from the Arab World to critically reflect on the role of architectural education and practice in areas of conflict, <https://www.arch.columbia.edu/environments/11-studio-x-amman>.

³²⁷ R. Daher, “Amman: Disguised Genealogy and Recent Urban Restructuring and Neoliberal Threats”, in Y. Elsheshtawy (ed.), *The Evolving Arab City. Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*, Routledge, London New York 2011.

³²⁸ The project and then the construction work was initiated in 2008 and it is still ongoing, even if some offices have started to open: <http://www.abdali.jo/index.php?r=site/page&id=4>.

first confrontation I had with the audience. I realized that it is very important to make people uncomfortable and that they disagree.

In contesting political and architectonic choices in the city and the State involvement in such privately-funded urban restructuring, both Dina and Saba engage with their professions, their arts, their gender presence in the fieldworks, and their citizenships, problematizing the enthusiastic “moment” of neoliberalism and its troubled and predictable effects. They also criticize the West/East Amman divide that such large-scale real-estate investments are reinforcing and reproducing. They belong to that generation and urban creative class that need and want to resist these current transformations in the production, manufacture and consumption of urban space. So, how particularly do Dina Haddadin and Saba Innab challenge these notions and redefine a male-mainstream architecture in Jordan? To which extent can their artworks be considered a cultural resistance to the neoliberal reconstructing of the city? And are their gender roles reconstructed through their practices in front of the predominant heterosexual male gaze?

Amman has always been a city of migrations and transitions. After centuries of being inhabited, at the end of the nineteenth century it started to be revitalized and as soon as that happened an initial flow of migrants arrived: the Circassians from what is known today as the Russian Caucasus. Some authors and later novelists would describe it as being a very inclusive city ever since its foundation and then in its earliest developments at the time of the British mandate: Rami Daher called it “the city of many hats”³²⁹ since in the 1920s and 1930s you would see walking downtown, *al Balad*, men with the Circassian *kalbaq*,³³⁰ Syrian and Lebanese *tarboosh*, Palestinian and Jordanian *hatta* or *kofiah*, not to mention also the Iraqi *faisaleiah* and the Western suits witnessing the British and French presence in the area, as well as some Turks arriving in the new Emirate from the deceased Ottoman Empire. Some have argued that due to these factors, the evolving city was enriched and transformed every few decades by different flows of migrants and refugees; Amman “suffers from a lack of identity to which some residents has weak sense of belongings.”³³¹ Since I first lived in Amman, I used to insist on the question: *min wen enta/enti?* Where are you from? This is a general question that no one would ask to a

³²⁹ R. Daher, *ibidem*, p. 42.

³³⁰ These that follow are all the original names of the hats in the different languages or Arabic dialects from the region.

³³¹ R. Daher, *ibidem*, p. 43.

taxi or bus driver or to a neighbor or to a colleague at university, because of course most of the people, except in the largest world capitals, are from the city in which you meet them. In Amman the question does not sound strange, and the answers would tell you why: *Ana min hon. Yaani...min Falasteen*, which means: “I am from here. Well, I am from Palestine.” *Ana min Nablus, ana min Jaffa, ana min al-Quds, Jenin, al-Khalil...* “I am from Nablus, I am from Jaffa, I am from Jerusalem, Jenin, Hebron...” This sense of being from “here” but not exactly from “here” is very common among the whole of the Jordanian population of Palestinian descent in the country, while the large refugee population made up of Syrians, Iraqis, Yemenis and the migrants workers from Egypt and Southeast Asia of course identify themselves only with their country of origin. Amman is today a city of almost four million inhabitants and its population more than doubled in the past ten years³³² and it is still a very recently developed city if compared to the other big capitals in the Middle East. Amman has experienced “continuous and rapid physical expansion such that its urban fabric is more a construction site than a city.”³³³

All the consequent spatial transitions, site constructions, demolitions, marginal spaces of Amman and the *power that dictates what is happening in the city* form and shape the specific interest and research in the art of Dina Haddadin. Dina has always wanted to be an artist and consequently she wanted to study art at university. But when she finished school, her father told her that art is not a career, it is a hobby and so she had to choose “something that would fit better with her life.” Dina’s reaction was to study architecture so she would feel close to the arts despite coming under the professional engineer label. She studied architecture in Jordan and when she graduated in 2006, she started her art career; having also the great opportunity to attend some art courses in New York in 2008. She has always lived in Amman but her exhibitions have travelled to many countries and her artworks are part of the collections in museums in Jordan, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, New York, and London.

Saba as well, living between Amman and Beirut, exhibits around the world and always goes back to Amman as her primary source of knowledge and inspiration. She is one of the millions of people who are from Amman...*but not really*. She was born in Kuwait, she came to Jordan after

³³² The Jordan Times, “Amman’s population rises to four millions”, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/amman%E2%80%99s-population-rises-around-4-million-%E2%80%94-biltaji>.

³³³ R. Daher, *ibidem*, p. 41.

the First Gulf War in 1991 and she was a baby when her stable identity as a Palestinian in Kuwait was challenged by Amman. Why Jordan? What is her relationship with Amman? After living for a while in Zarqa,³³⁴ her family moved to the capital and she decided to study architecture. It was through architecture that she started to become passionate and fascinated by this transit city and she then developed her mixed media art, with her architectural design drafts, orthographic projections, axonometric drawings, and her mapping and painting in wood and on canvas.

Both Saba's and Dina's productions are very rich and so I have selected some of their works to speak about the transits and the temporariness that invade their perceptions of city and space.

4.3. 1 Transits in Dina Haddadin

If we would like to describe Dina's arts in only two words, then we can initially say it is transient and it is huge. Transit is both in the titles of some of her exhibitions and the spaces she questions and is passionate about. Through her work, we can see both a valorization of the marginal and a critique of the current forgetting or abandoning; she also critiques the transformation of gated spaces through gentrification and demolition. The second series of Transit exhibitions in 2011 is called "Transit Witness". It is an installation she made in the Rainbow Cinema House in Amman, with chairs and tables found in the building, video with sound projected on walls, video with sound on monitors, sound through earphones, a camera and newspapers (See figure 7). She

³³⁴ Zarqa, few kilometers from Amman, is a separate district and governorate and the second most populated today, after Amman. It has historically been inhabited by Palestinians, while today a larger number of Syrian refugees live there.

collected very old newspapers from the Levant: Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. It is the



Fig. 7 Dina Haddadin's exhibition "Transit Witness" (courtesy of the author).

narration of a changing place (passing by and moving from one room to another and revealing newspapers on walls) and in this case it is not only the space that is transient but also the time. The viewer-spectator, who is also a performer because s/he can see her/his own reflections in the space, travels back to the presence of cinemas in Amman. "Cinemas in Amman once represented the emerging of modern institutions that contributed to the social transformation of the city. Cinemas in contrast to newspapers were open to everyone, including the illiterate at that time: a place of public gathering, a place of social change that shaped the intellectual environment of the city."³³⁵ In the city center in Amman today there are no cinemas. The only one is in Jabal Amman (very close to the city center), the Rainbow Theatre, where most of the Royal Film Commission's initiatives and sponsored festivals happen. Where are the cinemas today? Dina's installation and video immediately raise this question. It would not be surprising to discover that,

³³⁵ From her website's description of the installation: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/405079/Transit-w-i-t-n-e-s-s>.

while the historic cinemas of the city are today closed and abandoned (only one was rehabilitated as a Theatre, Al-Balad Theatre³³⁶), there are, of course, multiplex cinemas in the big city malls. The cinemas in malls are huge and accessible only to the wealthy public of the city. In the “Transit Witness” installation there is also a reunification with the idea of the cinema open to a public. “Once the viewer is seated, with the headset on, the camera captures the motion and transmits the viewer’s hands on the table onto the projected video on the wall (using the blue screen effect). Being part of the cinema space itself as a witness of change, struggling to hear the stories being told through the headset, amongst the noise that is generated in the room from the construction noise captured in the cinema space in the video projection on the other side.” Her work is beautiful and at the same time investigates and documents and involves, in many different forms, the public to her works, both through video installations, as we have seen, and also through public performances. Through her work we witness the neoliberal re-adjustment of the city where “popular” cinemas in the city center are abandoned, while abounding in the city malls, where less people can access them. It is also a suppression of spontaneous gatherings and critical spaces for discussion, as cinemas used to be, favoring a commercial and gated space, as the city malls are.

Another series of Transient, “Transient Terminals”, is a four-hour action involving public participation, and three installation structures (framework, wood, cement and paint, see figure 8). This work investigates the current transformation of the urban public scene in Amman into a business and tourism spectacle, and one example of that is Raghadan Bus Terminal in downtown Amman, which over the past 35 years has been a major transportation terminal, from areas around Amman and to cities like Zarka and Karak. A public space that was used for all aspects of urban life; for connection, transport, for orientation, to meet, to buy, to sell, to exchange, to play, to protest... It used to be a vital hub and it was full of life, but because the image of Amman needs to be very attractive most transportation was shifted to the northern station, Mujamma’ al-shemali. In 2006, and with the support of The Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (which has sponsored several tourist projects in Jordan) and a JD7 million make over, a permanent structure was created to house bus and taxi services along with a modern

³³⁶ The Al-Balad Theatre was renovated and rehabilitated as a cinema, theatre and concert space as well as constituting an organization putting on festivals such as the storytelling festival. The website is: <http://al-balad.org/ar/>.

commercial center, built on 34,000 squared meters, and a 12,000 squared meter built-up area... a project that is part of a large-scale downtown renovation project. Consequently and during the



Fig. 8 Photo from Transit Terminals' action in al-Mahatta, Amman (courtesy of the author).

construction period, a lot of the local businesses were affected, a number of kiosk owners had to be relocated to temporary facilities on Al Mahatta Street and other temporary transport terminals in and around Mahatta. But the main issue was the re-location of downtown Jabel Hussein service cabs operating a line to the new Raghadan Touristic Complex. Many Jordanians over the thirty-five-year period grew accustomed to the operating line that was changed in the name of modernity. Fees had to be paid by taxi drivers to rent a spot in the new terminal, which a lot found inconvenient since they were already losing their passengers, who found the move very problematic.

My performance was to get to three locations in the city that were actually very important transportation hubs: Raghadan, Abdali (where buses, taxis and services used to go to Syria and Iraq) and the third was Mahatta. These three locations are undergoing changes and transitions. I have built some structures representing the power and the authority of the city. I build structures like watch towers and we were moving them with the help of the public. Are they moving or are they moving through my movements, so through the power? I labeled each one of them with the name of the stations. It is like a play or a game with the public and the spaces. They are powerless in the decision-making. The monument represented in the work as a watchtower, is a symbol for an ephemeral transient state of change in the city; which in the video

is a collage of construction structures; carried around by the people of the city, a cycle where people are the core of change in their city; yet they are burdened with these transformations. A watch tower is a harsh representation of the power in the city, which forces changes yet these changes are ephemeral in terms of their effect on the urban public fabric of the city. These projects start in the streets between the public as rumors, small talks between the vendor, the customer, or the different actors behind it. And rumors are as ephemeral as the projects they are about. My initial idea is to encourage rumors, fabrications of urban myths, and involve the local public in the game and use the taxi service line (the stops, the cab, the terminal) to transport not only the passengers but their rumors too. Humor is complex, laughter maybe a nervous reaction to our failure to know how to respond to something.

The project failed, and it is now a ghost town, a couple of service lines still work from there, the project killed the urban fabric over the last seven years, the surrounding shops are now all out of business. The terminal has once again been moved to a location that is even further on the peripheries of Amman, and the JD7 million structure that was created is now accommodating temporary offices until they figure out how to make use of the empty 12,000 squared meters.

Along with the performance and the installation, I did a series of paintings of spaces in between you cannot access, because they are in construction. I wrote a concept about emptiness, again about the issue, an empty house, an empty lot, a dig, this emptiness that we created, what is it? The empty that we see.

Through her precise, detailed, historicized and original artwork, Dina Haddadin is producing a sort of counter-map of the spaces in transition in the city, analyzing and criticizing the loss and the problematic consequences of neoliberal market choices. During fieldworks for many other arts projects, which for reasons of brevity I will not describe here in detail, she also countered the demolition of houses of Palestinian refugee camps which were in marginal neighborhoods. People were considering this a second *Nakba*, the catastrophe that obliged them to leave Palestine in 1948 to Jordan and neighboring countries. These people were eventually calling her every time a new demolition was happening and through this she perceived herself an artist and activist and reporter, documenting the city and denouncing it. But also through her work she

constantly had to question her role as a woman in the public. Although she felt welcomed, she experienced the inequality in the field and in the gendered perception of her work by the public.

Everyone who sees my art says: "Are you a woman? I thought you were a guy." Because my work is always huge, rough, invasive and people think of women artists as very sensitive, delicate. My work is perceived as very aggressive, it is always double sized (paintings and installations), and I always got these comments from guys. Apart from this I never felt any difference as being a woman artist. In the environment of architecture and arts it has been good. These comments impacted me. But I loved that they were surprised. But sometimes being a guy would be much easier. When I was pregnant, it was difficult and all the people were saying: "Are you crazy, are you driving?" It is much more difficult, but being a guy I could walk without hiding, and I can observe without being observed all the time.

Dina challenges her gender not only being in the field but also re-conceptualizing spaces which are considered traditionally not for women. Her work transgresses the borders of social acceptance and it is very political. She both contests the house as a unique place for women and the public space as not for women. She lives in both and she destabilizes both with her thought and artworks. Her art, her research, her work is a constant question and also this home/public divide is annulled in a new transition: from the perceived gendered immobility of women to a new vision of gender in spaces.

I always work, observe, participate in a space which is suspended. I tremble as a woman: something is not finished, suspended, transitory and we women usually are the people who want to finalize, in a different class of society. (For most of the women) the house is all their space, we say the woman is the "malika al beit," the queen of the house. In my case I am changing a lot, I am using everyday materials, from houses as well. If a woman is always "qaede,"³³⁷ sitting,

³³⁷ The verb "qa'ad" in Arabic means "to sit". It is common for women without a job to say "Ana qa'ede" (the present participle of the verb), which means "(I am) sitting, staying". It has of course an apparent neutral meaning when women describe their status, but it is not so neutral when it is a man giving the order "to sit" in a different context. I am referring particularly to an incident which happened in the Jordanian Parliament in December 2014 to a former female member of the Jordanian Parliament called Hind al-Fayez. While discussing, in a heated exchange with a fellow MP, gas imports, another member of the Parliament, Yahya al-Saud, started his speech. Hind intervened again in the discussion, but Yahya started to shout at her, inviting her defiantly to sit down: "Uqu'udi ya Hind", "Sit down, Hind". Hind Al-Fayez did not stop her argument with other MPs, which made Al-Saud even angrier. He started shouting again, saying: "May Allah have revenge on who ever came up with the quota to the parliament." (The quota refers to the number of parliament seats reserved for female members). Supporting Hind al-

staying at home, this space is different. I am staying; something is not in the house, in common spaces I feel this sense of completeness we all look for.

Dina's passages in the city are full of meaning concerning *femtivism* and creative agency, which is also a need to respond to her city's change. Her political dissent towards the choices related to construction interrogates the people, her destabilizing presence as a woman in the field defines a feminist active experience of spaces.

4.3.2 Saba Innab. How to build without a land

In my work cultural resistance is the motivation. Going into taboo, tackling many political taboos is a form of resistance. You demand to understand the space you are in, you demand to understand the city, and the issues around it. I am really driven by this relationship, to be very specific in these issues. In Jordan the attention goes in relation to class, in relation to Palestinianess. This probably can be seen in the art and research practice and it is politically problematic.

Representing the unspoken and the hidden history is what emerges from Saba's artworks and reflections. Studying and questioning continuously the city, its expansions and transformation shows the political dimension of the city and of the decisions behind the urban planning. Saba Innab, working as an architect, produces in the arts field a critique of contemporary architecture, in Jordan and in general, in the global alienation of the neoliberal non-inclusive plans. What

Fayez and showing people's frustration concerning gender politics and women issues, the hashtag #Uqu'udi_ya_Hind, #Sit_Down_Hind went viral on social media and also got international attention, in the Middle Eastern and Western media (see, for example, CNN and others: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/08/world/meast/jordan-female-parliament/>; http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mmw/2014/12/will-jordanian-hind-al-fayez-sit-down-a-look-at-the-trending-hashtag-sit_down_hind/; <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-jordan-parliament-sit-down-20141208-story.html>; and more recently: <https://chronicle.fanack.com/jordan/faces/hind-al-fayez/>). Going back to the meaning "qa'ede", also very significant also on social media was Hind's picture with the saying "mish qa'ede" (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/12/07/Internet-erupts-with-Jordan-sit-down-Hind-memes.html>), "I am not sitting", which does not constitute only a reply to the incident in the Parliament, but also refers to women who do not remain at home, without a job, instead taking part actively to the socio-political life. Of course, this is not to be taken as offensive by women not working, but rather as an exhortation and a right to achieve.

drove her research was surely her personal story as a Palestinian born in Kuwait who then lived in Jordan, and the realization of the political choice to leave Palestinian refugees in camps in a evident temporariness, without a future or a solution, and in a hidden temporariness in the city of Amman, which itself contains many refugee camps, in slightly better conditions than in other areas like Lebanon or Gaza. In an article published recently in a collective book,³³⁸ she tells the story of certain moments in the formation of Amman as the capital of a “modern state”: the city “has been constructed within the framework of nation-building” and the various signifiers of this narrative and a certain type of monumentality also emphasized different and growing schisms in the city. Saba Innab places the origin of the capitalistic choices in the late 1960s during King Hussein’s reign, enforced by the urgent need to rewrite a narrative after Black September in 1970. She refers to the Jordanian national building enforcement as a “systematic denial causing a disjunction not only in the official history and the collective narrative but also in the spatiality of the city.”³³⁹ This monumentality enacted by the governmental architectural policy is then progressively accompanied and substituted by a new commercial one, where exclusion and suppression are perpetuated continuously. She, for example, cites the case of the Secret Police Building, which was recently been replaced by a retail tower in the “new center” project: “it does not end the police state; rather, it masks it (...) through banal architecture that impedes mobility, covers up memory and perpetuates a kind of everyday oppression.”³⁴⁰ Saba’s critique of the nation-building process in this reconstructing, abandoning, demolishing and dividing, engages different media of arts and otherwise, from topography, in a non-linear mapping of Amman’s growth, to painting and sculpture. This involvement of different media is evident in her ongoing project, “How to Build without a Land”. Saba started again criticizing her/the profession of architecture by problematizing the notions of building, and consequently, of dwelling: by revisiting the relationship of construction and land to the temporariness that gradually transforms – or deforms – into durability, she proposes to reconsider the criteria in architecture for a change in politics. Saba started the project in 2011 when she was simultaneously employed by the UNRWA (United Nation Relief and Work Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East) as an architect to rebuild the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. The

³³⁸ S. Innab, “Reading the Modern Narrative of Amman” in Andraos, A., and Akawi, N., *The Arab City. Architecture and Representation*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016.

³³⁹ S. Innab, *ibidem*.

³⁴⁰ S. Innab, *ibidem*.

camp was demolished by the Lebanese army after an armed conflict with the fundamentalist group Fatah el-Islam in 2007, whose fighters lived in the camp. The condition of refugee camps in Lebanon is crumbling and the reason for this abandonment resides in the condition of Palestinian refugees themselves, who do not have access to most of the professions in Lebanon and are still refugees and second-class citizens. This is very different from Jordanian Palestinians, for example, where the large majority of refugees have become national citizens: Saba is one of them, holding a Jordanian passport.³⁴¹ She often defined her project and her work as a kind of resistance through the concepts she develops.

I see resistance in a more theoretical and artistic way, contemporarily looking at the condition of human kind but then linking it to Amman and Nahr el-Bared. This project “How to Build Without a Land” tries to understand maps in a critical way: between art work and research I have found a form of resistance. But of course there are times that I think and I feel that arts are just arts. But I think it is also necessary to challenge yourself and keep moving to what you want from your life.

The ensemble of “How to Build Without a Land” is constituted by text-based elements, painting and mapping, which are usual compositions in Saba’s works (see Figure 9 and 10). From the first moment Saba went to work in the Nahr el-Bared camp she felt it was an aggressive camp and maybe the saddest Palestinian one in the region. But her work does not concern only this camp. The sense of temporariness that the camps reveal does not concern only camps, but also the

³⁴¹ The large majority of Jordanian citizens (60%, but there are no official reports referring to the origins of citizens) with a Jordanian passport are originally from Palestine. Indeed, two million Palestinian refugees are still registered at UNRWA, and are without, therefore, a nationality.

capital Amman, where Saba says *the temporariness is very subtle, really hidden, Amman is*



Fig. 9 “How to build without a Land”: Saba Innab’s exhibition in Darat al-Fonon, Amman (courtesy of the author).



Fig. 10 One of Saba Innab’s paintings of “How to build without a Land’s exhibition in Darat al-Fonon, Amman (courtesy of the author).

really close to Palestine but it cannot be further apart. This temporariness could describe in her eyes also the Middle East in general and not only the city of Amman. Her conceptual artwork also captured the attention of the Italian philosopher, writer and political militant Franco Berardi, called Bifo, who retraces in an essay in *Ibraaz*, the leading critical forum on visual culture in the Middle East and North Africa, Innab’s work through the concepts of identity and of deterritorialization: “She explores variable notions of ‘building,’ whether by the physical construction of an object, or by building with language. Innab does not claim identity: the spread of the identitarian obsession is the counterweight of a condition of deprivation – of land, of

space, and of livable life. Identity comes up as a sort of vengeance: an effect of resentment.”³⁴² Saba Innab traces two levels of deterritorialization: the human condition in the act of building without really dwelling and so belonging to what we build; and the condition of being a refugee and in exile, “being landless”, which constitutes the temporariness. In the first deterritorialization she affirms the distance between dwelling and architecture, “and poetic dwelling is what is left.”³⁴³ In the second level, in the absence of the land, “even the poetic dwelling is lost.”³⁴⁴ The dramatic conclusion is the question which entitled the whole project: “How do we build without a land? How do we build temporariness when it is mutating constantly into permanence?” Dwelling in temporariness had transformed “physically” from the tent to the barracks to the urban densification. This transformation manifests living in the past while projecting into the future, where the present does not exist. The cycle of life in the temporary, in the waiting, becomes something similar to a reality that is parallel to real time. This temporary, this waiting parallel to real time represents to me the marginalization and the mainstream, the exclusion and the monumental, the demolition and the gentrification versus the capital and commercial, contradictions often exposed in her criticisms and the national building and neoliberal development of Amman, whose camps are forgotten and transformed in permanent urban areas, but never included in any urban planning. In the presentation of her project,³⁴⁵ Saba claims that that the several elements of which it is composed construct together a spatial narrative. This spatial narrative includes the redefinition of Palestine’s borders through a painting that retraces them from satellite maps:

“The Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese, and Egyptian frontier strip is retraced from one side – the opposite side of Palestine – and transformed into different densities. Shapes of terrains and settlements are abstracted into pictorial forms and lines, which are unfolded and reattached, becoming an organic – somehow an alive – line, which is neither real nor imagined, not only because it doesn’t exist in this form, but because you can feel the temporary nature of it and how it changed through time. The presence of the line is defined by the ‘absence’ of land defined by the loss of Palestine.”³⁴⁶

³⁴² F. Berardi, “Building in A-topia”, in <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/126>.

³⁴³ S. Innab, “How to build without a Land”, in <http://urgeurge.net/2015/04/11/how-to-build-without-a-land/>.

³⁴⁴ S. Innab, 2015, *ibidem*.

³⁴⁵ S. Innab, “How to build without a Land”, in http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2014/saba_innab/.

³⁴⁶ S. Innab, “How to build without a Land”, in <http://urgeurge.net/2015/04/11/how-to-build-without-a-land/>.

I would borrow Jane Rendell's definition to describe Saba's work as a critical spatial practice and – as Saba herself describes – as a spatial narrative. Following Rendell's suggestions, "architecture must look to art as a critical practice and move outside the traditional boundaries of its field" and "art can offer architecture a chance for critical reflections and actions. We can then assert that Saba's artwork embodies these suggestions with her critical spatial narrative. But Saba's artworks can also be inscribed in the current interest in abandoned spaces in art and architecture which explore emptiness, temporariness, and absence, like fellow Dina. Her problematic belonging to her profession as a female architect and her conceptualization of the human alienation and of dwelling also recall the positions of postmodern feminisms and knowledge discussed in spatial terms: from the mapping to the boundaries, from the dwelling to the personal positioning. Her profession is also defined problematically by gender: but her position in her role liberated her, discovering the field and creating a new space.

Architecture is a very male activity, I actually hate male architects, it brings the worst out of a man, he makes things, and he feels omnipotent. Amman is a very male-dominated field. Although in the arts the curators are female, most of the stars are male architects. In tapping the unknown and going to a new space, at the time I discover a new space that is very challenging to gender roles, I feel liberated in a way and automatically it is separated. It is beyond gender, it becomes above. In a way, also this moving between issues of temporariness and then documenting, taking pictures of a space, things like fears because it is dark, create totally a new space. I think they come across in a way and they allow this relation or this emotion of being related to my gender, which then combines when it appears in a print, in a model.

Through Saba Innab's artworks, critique and double-practice, again we face the reframing of gender roles and the male-dominated profession: not only a critical view towards neoliberal patriarchal society, but the creation of new unfixed and fragile spaces in the field of the arts, which derivate from temporariness and are defined by cultural resistance as a motivation. This positioning, even if not explicitly feminist, is intuitively seen as an effect of feminisms' knowledge and also a producing of new knowledge that, if not feminist in terms, would be feminist in practice, through new spatial female practices.

Most of the very interesting practices come from women because they are out of boxes, in Amman as in Beirut. We need to create, to challenge and to push. It is a natural extension of feminism, even if you are not tackling what you say but you are putting your mind and your body at stake to maybe take a picture or to photograph because you push every boundary and this produces a new kind of knowledge that, in the end, would be part of a sphere, a public sphere that can be an extension of feminism in a way.

4. 4 Resistance as cultural initiatives. Spring Sessions and the engagement in the city

I would rarely attend a cultural initiative or event in Amman without discovering that one of the organizers or one of the people somehow involved is Toleen Touq. The name of this determined and tireless woman was mentioned to me many times by different people and even if I used to meet her very frequently throughout 2015, she claimed to be always much too busy and I only managed to interview her at the end of September 2015. But participating in all her initiatives allowed me to get to know her in different ways. Some of the people mentioned her name to me not (anymore) as an artist, but as a curator and a cultural manager and producer. In the context of my research, as I learnt from Cultural Studies and as exemplified by the ethnography of cultural encounters and reckonings of Jessica Winegar in contemporary Egypt, the subjects of my interest are all “those people who created the ‘work’ of art, which involved, but was not limited to, the artwork itself,” and the “different practices which made the work of art and they also become part of cultural politics.”³⁴⁷ In this sense, Toleen Touq and her colleague and co-director in their visions, Noura al-Khawsaneh, were both for me precious art-interlocutors and our dialogue was nurtured by their cultural *femtivism* in the city. This last paragraph about Spring Sessions is also closing a chapter and a circle about female presence in arts, spaces and the city. If through Dima’s work and her independent space, Hayyez, we have seen the resistance of creative spaces, and through Dina and Saba we have been in the architect and artist mode, questioning the neoliberal city, now with Toleen and Noura we can further analyze the engagement in the city and the cultural and educational work in the fields of arts. Toleen and Noura, in fact, organize an

³⁴⁷ J. Winegar, *Creative Reckonings The politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, Stanford University Press Stanford, Stanford, 2006, p. 9.

annual project, called Spring Sessions³⁴⁸ (جلسات الربيع), a three-month project, its third edition being held in 2016, where during the spring, artists, creative people, and students are encouraged to develop an art project in/about the city, while conversing through lectures and workshops with international artists in residence, as well as local ones.

We have to acknowledge that Toleen and Noura are not alone in the cultural and educational work and in the different cultural initiatives: Toleen launched many in the past eight years. Many are the autonomous initiatives that operate successfully using a mixed funding model. Just to mention some of them, among many others: the story-telling festival, Hikaya Festival, at the Balad Theatre, where the cultural manager until 2015 was Lubna Juqqa; Ta3leeleh community, which creates a monthly live open-mic platform in Amman, Ghor al Mazra'a and Salt, whose initiator and curator is Rawan Zein; the innumerable festivals and concerts organized by Shermine Sawalha, among them Mektoub's The Word Is Yours Festival, the first regional urban arts festival, and Kazdara, the Jabal al-Webde Art Walk in the evening and night. All these examples are symptoms of this creative *femtivism*, represented by this female urban middle class, capable of networking and contestation, in a country where "the borderline between the State and civil society are very blurred."³⁴⁹ NGO, State funding projects and Royal Foundations lead and control many of the (cultural or not) activities, without forgetting about the police state which strongly limits political life. It is in this context that we insist on the term cultural resistance when discussing the creative urban class women, involving communities in and outside Amman. In fact, what characterized all these initiatives is that they are often "informal domains", as Toleen Touq described them in an article in 2014:³⁵⁰ informal, fluid and unaffiliated art structures and strategies, offering different avenues and "bringing a more radical and grassroots practice to the city sphere."³⁵¹ National institutions such as the Royal Cultural Center and the Hussein Cultural Centre, managed and budgeted respectively by the government and the Greater Amman Municipality, organize different large cultural initiatives and festivals, like the Contemporary Dance Festival and the Jazz Festival. Another big government institution that is very active and

³⁴⁸ This is the website of the initiative where it is possible to find information about the three editions held until 2016 <http://thespringsessions.com/>.

³⁴⁹ R. Daher, *ibidem*, p. 51.

³⁵⁰ T. Touq, "Informal Domains. Art and Culture beyond Institutions in Amman", on <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/97>.

³⁵¹ T. Touq, *ibidem*.

constantly encouraging local filmmakers is the Royal Film Commission, promoter of uncountable film festivals.³⁵² Together with other privately endowed institutions and a big number of independent galleries, art and cultural production might be satisfactory, except for the fact that, even with all these events, there are still very few if we put on a par with a capital city of four million inhabitants. But the gap is not only between the number of initiatives and the number of inhabitants, rather between the restricted and already “educated-to-art” audience to whom all these initiatives are mainly addressed and the rest of the city. Moreover, between institutions and smaller, artist-run collective spaces and projects there are forms of intersections and collaboration, sometimes in projects from the mixed-funded system. But as Toleen asserts, most of the time friction and dissonance are due to the huge and slow bureaucracy and the prevalent system of corruption which impede a truly stable cooperation, and the creative women, rather than strengthen their informal strategies to reach out to a different audience, struggle with the constant problem of funding and sustainability of the projects themselves. Regarding the creative initiators in Amman, what I perceive is the search for an autonomous voice, both the voice of the artist and the artwork, migrating from the search for an institutional patronage and inspired and supported by a more cosmopolitan, in the sense we referred in Chapter Two, trans-local and transnational network and cross-cultural communication.

4.4.1 Spring Sessions: nourishing young artists and developing arts in the city

Travelling into this artistic field and fighting this cultural battle, the aims of Toleen and Noura, the co-founders and organizers of Spring Sessions, are not only to increase the cultural and critical thinking of the participants, but also in fact to involve the city, neighborhoods, and public and shared spaces, while experimenting outside the common and traditional modes, and to deal with them as women artists. Creating alternate dependencies within the Jordanian art scene,

³⁵² In only one year and a half in Amman I attended a large number of festivals, many of them co-founded or hosted by the Royal Film Commission, among others: *Karama Film Festival*, both edition of December 2014 and December 2015, *Iranian film week*, *Tunisian film week*, *Algerian film week*, *Franco Arab Film Festival*, both edition of June 2015 and 2016, *Sheffield Film Days*, *European Film Festival*, *Gaza Human Right Festival*, *Women week Film days*, and uncountable previews of famous films from the entire region, especially from Palestine, Gaza and Syria.

artists are not empowered to be totally independent unless they can self-fund in perpetuity. Having secured entirely local funding from individuals and private companies, the group is not bound by the constraints and/or politics of international or government money. This is how Noura introduced herself and their initiative:

I used to work with Darat al Fonoon as an assistant director for a few years, but I did not want to work only at exhibitions, because the audience would be quite limited, in an art gallery. (...) I thought it has to be something educational. Because I have found that, often, art is disconnected; I want to develop audiences and work on educational aspects of contemporary arts; to create a platform where the audience is the participant as well, so that we end up with a group of artists. (...) The idea was to get the participants to grasp the methodology of producing works and creating their own methodology; there is no specific way of producing contemporary arts. Toleen and I have conceptualized and developed together. (...) As a woman pushing myself, trying, pushing the boundaries, the independence of art space, I think being a woman is a challenge in Jordan and working in art is even more of a challenge, (...) the only challenge, because there is an assumption that women cannot work, but the challenge here is to show that is not like this.³⁵³

The other co-founder, Toleen Touq, reminds us of the “artist as an ethnographer,”³⁵⁴ the artist as a geographer of arts and culture, as a situated thinker, as a narrator of new encounters, as an attentive protagonist of the surroundings, to whom the site of artistic transformation is the site of political transformation and the primary point of subversion of the dominant culture: arts bestow voice not only upon young artists, but also upon the city, the postcolonial city, the official city and the to-be-discovered one. One of the principles in fact of Spring Sessions is to change every year the location in the city of the workshops, lectures, preparation of the final artistic project or product and its final exhibition in order to connect the artist more with the city, to adopt an area and a space and to maintain a fresh gaze: to look always at Amman with new eyes. This has been practically adopted since the first edition, when the two initiators chose to revitalize, with their sessions, the King Ghazi Hotel in Amman. This is one of the oldest hotels in downtown Amman and was dismissed for years. The architect Dima Maurice worked on the renovation of the site

³⁵³Interviews with Noura al-Khawsaneh, Amman, 8th June 2015.

³⁵⁴H. Folk, *The Return of the Real. Art and Theory at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996.

and Spring Sessions happened for the first time. A place in the middle of the city center where vendors in the street and shoppers could interact daily with the artists and participants, where “as transient guests in the hotel of downtown, we are as much in dialogue with the street vendor below us and hassled daily by the authorities from above, as we are amongst each other, creating new works and drawing new narratives for and in the city.”³⁵⁵ Toleen explained to me during our long awaited interview:³⁵⁶

Spring Sessions is about geography, it is about Amman and in general the city, looking at it from a local perspective, not to believe or adopt the official narrative of the city, but to create your own narrative, new perspectives. Young artists, do show your own vision, who you are as an artist, and how you are in Amman through your artwork. (...) The topics are various and have different aspects. Existence, arts, and politics, workshops on public interventions, the role or the importance of cultural production for farmers, the rural community, not only the urban, studying very intensely the city itself or a specific neighborhood, of which some are more theoretical, some more practical.

The artistic and cultural initiative becomes, for women, the opportunity to re-signify gender and profession through art, through a creative and artistic activism as the place of resistance, a place for resilient feminist forces, and the place to problematize the world of arts, classes, and privileges from a critical perspective: the perspective of Toleen, a class-privileged woman who lived abroad, who worked abroad and who returned to her home city to experiment as an artist and cultural producer, to contribute in building and enriching the cultural scene in Amman. As we have seen in previous encounters with the architects and as many other women stressed, Toleen Touq also criticizes the male-dominated power structure from her own point of view, as a woman, an artist, and being educated and privileged but “not fully a citizen,” in terms of gender:

We need to normalize the presence of women in the arts fields: most of the independent art scene here in Jordan is run by women. Men want to be doctors and engineers, but women can hold a flood of jobs: we are very passionate, problem solvers, multi-taskers, and creative; this is the positive way of looking at it. The public sector and institutions are run by men. All the ministries are run by men, now we have a female Minister of Culture, but it is all run by men. The

³⁵⁵ T. Touq, *ibidem*.

³⁵⁶ Interview with ToleenTouq, Amman, 21stSeptember 2015.

government is extremely bureaucratic, traditional and corrupted. We need to talk about women and gender and normalize, not classify the presence (...). I am not a full citizen in this country, as a person and as a woman. In terms of my rights, I do not have the same rights as my brother, and also in terms of being in the public sphere. The way I look, or talk or dress or walk, I am not the same. I cannot speak about women and art only, the context is different and the situation in Jordan is difficult. It is beautiful to be a privileged woman and be doing things but still...it is important to keep in mind that, in Jordan, this art world is a bubble. It is interesting and we are moving, but it is still a small percentage. We are working with a group of people and it multiplies and does not represent society. I want to problematize the issue itself.

Problematizing the arts scene and the privileged society approaching arts does not mean that women have to limit their voices and thoughts, or stop producing and creating arts, only because it is addressed to the arts bubble. And this is why Spring Sessions tries to involve the city, trying to cut the dichotomies of public/private and inside/outside, and looking for mediation between outside and inside spaces and between class divisions. During my participant observation of some workshops, presentations and the final exhibition in 2015 and 2016, I witnessed the participants of Spring Sessions involved in an affective experience of urban space and a transversal, inclusive and collective practice: a creative and performed geography of arts and culture in the city (see Figure 11). In the last edition of Spring Sessions, in 2016, participants engaged in a two-week workshop with the artist Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad,³⁵⁷ entirely conducted in Culture Street in the Shsmeisani neighborhood in Amman. They lived in this street, doing the workshop, for two weeks without any official permit, nor did they have one for the final exhibition. It took time to obtain it and in the end, they had to start, so they did it without a permit. The workshop aimed to “disrupt participants’ automatic perception of acts and behaviors that govern urban experience, in order to recalibrate how we perceive and represent our environments.”³⁵⁸ Participants were both female and male, and the female presence was challenging the divide between the focus on a city whose constraints disadvantage and oppress women and the city which liberates them. The mediation in between the two was in their natural presence and in the developing of their art projects. One of the female participants, Razan Mbaideen, thirty years old, assumes herself to be the director of the street, Culture Street, and

³⁵⁷ The website of the artist Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad: <http://www.bh-n.com/>.

³⁵⁸ Spring Sessions, *100 days of art in the capital*, Amman, 2016.

was inviting passers-by to discover her new rules. As for her final art project, she performed the role of running candidate in the local elections, which by coincidence were announced during that same period for the 20th of September 2016. “Razan Beik - Mother of All” takes on the form of an electoral campaign, with posters, banners, video and photo



Fig. 11 Final exhibition of Spring Sessions 2016 edition: “100 days of Culture in the City”, Culture Street, Amman.

documentation of the campaign (see Figure 12 and 13). While using the same language of local elections, in an ironic way, Razan ridicules the patriarchal order that constantly invades public space and, especially during elections, presents men as the saviors. Her humor and her persuasiveness convinces first the audience of the exhibition of the right to participate and to be involved, and secondly, to be, as women, protagonists of processes. Not a coincidence, in June when there was the Spring Sessions final exhibition, the date of the Jordanian parliamentary elections were announced for the following 20th of September 2016 and some governmental banners inviting the people to vote started to appear in the city. Razan’s idea and example hides a kind of feminist political activism, which is usually very fragmented in the city of Amman, in a creative and unique mode. She also performed what Butler calls the “pastiche-effect,” i.e. “the use of popular culture as a strategy of resistance.”³⁵⁹ In the same ironic and political way, another

³⁵⁹ H. G. Sami, “A Strategic Use of Culture: Egyptian Women’s Subversion and Resignification of Gender Norms”, in M. Said (El), L. Meari, N. Pratt, Nicola (ed.), *Rethinking Gender in revolutions. Lesson from the Arab world*, Zed Books, London 2015. pp. 86-106.

participant, the artist Sarah Shahaltoug, presents on cinema posters four dramatic political figures or concepts in four different countries in the Arab World, Jordan included. Ridiculing TV and media language on political events, she re-imagines them in a movie genre, going from comedy to horror. Another artist, Reham Sharbaji, shows the artist's complex relationships with the city, interrogating herself and Amman in "Who is Amman?", a video installation which shows her walking and the shadows of her figure. All these examples of art projects that developed during the Spring Sessions reminds us of the Lefebvrian notion of citizenship, not connected to the nation-state, but to the city, and "the right to the city", which later brought Purcell also to hypothesize "to create a city as an artwork."³⁶⁰ However, feminist criticism has underlined the absence of the intersections of gender and class power relations in this right to the city. So, the "right to the gendered city,"³⁶¹ the right to use and to participate in the city, taking into account the gendered problematic violations, is re-qualified as the necessary engagement with the discussion of patriarchal power relations, their cultural and religious norms which allow men to control the city, to possess it and belong to it. The gendered city is the city where Razan, Riham, Sarah, as well as Toleen and Noura, directing Spring Sessions, reframe and reconstruct their gender roles in a dimension where the daily use of space is connected to their challenges, aspirations and desires. Women dwell and define their space in the city by being involved in redesigning it.

³⁶⁰ M. Purcell, "Citizenship and the right to the global city: reimagining the capitalist world order," in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(3), 2003, pp. 564-590.

³⁶¹ T. Fenster, "The right to the gendered city," in *Journal of Gender Studies*, 14(3), 2005, pp. 217-231.



Fig. 12 and 13 Razan Mbaideen’s photos and poster for the “fake” election campaign at Spring Sessions 2016’s final exhibition, Culture Street, Amman.

Chapter 5

Midwifing the Change: Female Bodies Resistance

While in the previous chapter we have seen the space in the city through cultural initiatives and creative spaces in which cultural resistance and new imaginaries are enacted, in the last chapter of this research we encounter the female body as the intimate space of resistance. Female artists acting in the city, through storytelling and public performances, carve a space outside as a site of resistance, exerting their creative agency with their bodies present. Their bodies become the spaces: they self-create a space by becoming one. Beyond geographical and material spaces, female bodies, taking a risk and investing in art beyond social and public gender norms and roles, restructure spaces in the city as well. Through their bodies female artists bypass monitoring and surveillance, inventing strategies to speak out loudly. Breaking taboos, such as having political discourses in public spaces, or discourses on gender and sexual based violence, become their way of midwifing the change. Also the canvas becomes a space for women, for speaking about women's pain and new narratives regarding female bodies, and their various modalities of agency to be protagonists of change.

5.1 Storytelling: female narratives in body politics

*“Whoever thinks that all women are alike
is suffering from a disease of madness
for which there is no cure”*

Scheherazade, *One Thousand and One Night*³⁶²

³⁶² A. Blythe, “Beyond Sherahazhade: Feminist Portrayals of women in The Arabian Nights”, in *Nonbinary Review*, 6, 2015, <http://nonbinaryreview.com/archive-2/issue-6-1001-arabian-nights/beyond-shahrazad-feminist-portrayals-of-women-in-the-arabian-nights/>.

The first time I saw the storyteller Sally Shallabiyye “in action” was not during one of her storytelling performances, instead she was working as a waiter at the Rumi Café in Jabal al-Webde. When someone told me that she was Sally, the story-teller, I introduced myself and I immediately recognized that she was not only a story-teller, but a multi-tasking woman. Our conversation at the beginning of June 2015 confirmed many of my first impressions. She was a storyteller, *she invented herself as a storyteller*, but she was also a facilitator and trainer, a computer programmer, she was a cultural advisor for projects, and yes, she was also a waiter: her body was continuously moving in that moment I saw her for the first time serving the joyful and colorful clients at Rumi, one of the cafés in Jabal al-Webde where some of the artists and cultural practitioners often meet and discuss. I was not totally relaxed when I had to interview her. Even if, after that first time at Rumi, I used to meet her at many of the cultural events or private birthday parties or dinners and she is very nice, I was also afraid of “my interview performance”. Most times, the encounter with the artist made me immediately feel relaxed, this was particularly true with Sally, who gave a big contribution to my work and to the theoretical understanding of different modalities of creative agency.³⁶³ Moreover, after our interview, I started to follow her and tried to attend many of her storytelling performances. Even during our interview, she would tell me a story to show me her work. And I completely fell in love with her way of telling stories, subverting roles and making it funny: her voice tells the story, sings, imitates the characters, her hands play the tambourine, and a few objects, such a ring or a hat, symbolize or refer to the story and its protagonists. Sally’s work needs to be analyzed against the history of storytelling, which has a long tradition in Jordan and, more broadly, in the Mediterranean world.

Storytelling is of course not a new profession; on the contrary, it is a very traditional one in many different cultures and women have always played a big role in it.³⁶⁴ It was a popular community art form, which not only entertained, but also ensured social cohesion and cultural production, and memory. There is a general recent return to and appreciation of the original work of storytellers. This is happening at the same time of the revival of oral history, which is regaining a

³⁶³ Interview with Sally Shallabiyye, 8th June 2015, Amman.

³⁶⁴ E. Warnock Fernea and B. Qattan Bezirgan (eds.), *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1977; M. Badran, m. cooke, *Opening the Gates. One Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1990.

space in the contemporary societies of Arab cultures.³⁶⁵ During the holy month of Ramadan, storyteller Sally Shallabiye's weekly performances happened at night, after the iftar, the meal which interrupts the fast, and many people in the audience chose them as an alternative to popular soap opera on TV. In fact, popular television soap opera, Internet and social networks continue to gain the majority of the public, especially during Ramadan. The role of the storyteller has been played in many different cultures from men and from women. If the traditional male-mainstream dominated public sphere is occupied by men, storytelling was in the women's private space. The actual, personal, original form of storytelling by Sally Shallabiye informs us of the female body politics in the public space in Jordan. First of all, in continuity with the tradition of literature as a feminist act, she disrupts the public-private dichotomy, making it a profession and performing it in public, but more significantly she intervenes in an even more contested and old dichotomy: the one opposing the mind and the body in a restricted over-sexualized conception of the female body in public. Sally's work should be analyzed against a long tradition of feminist storytelling. The icon of this figure is Scheherazade, who we generally connect to both storytelling and the Arab world and whose name is Persian in origin. The famous queen and storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights* has been widely explored by literary criticism. But until recently, Scheherazade was an orientalist icon. This icon has been recently recuperated in the context of feminist literature and feminist literary criticism: some people, like the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Sheykh, see her as the first feminist in the Arab world, while on the contrary, another Lebanese writer, Joumana Haddad, sees her example as negative, as passive, as lacking rebellion. The real trajectory of Sally Shallabiye comes from the legacy of modern feminist literature, through which also Fatema Mernissi – who reconstructs Scheherazade's trajectory in literature, narrative and imaginaries, as I will trace – Hanan Sheikh and Joumana Haddad reappropriate an orientalist – and misogynist – tradition and make it a feminist theme.³⁶⁶

The story goes that [Shahryar](#), the King, found out one day that his first wife was unfaithful to him and he cut off her head. Therefore, he resolved to marry a new [virgin](#) each day for three

³⁶⁵ L. Sorbera, "Challenges of thinking feminism and revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014", in *Postcolonial Studies*, 17(1), 2014, pp. 63-75.

³⁶⁶ Moroccan writer, sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi: F. Mernissi, *La Terrazza Proibita*, Giunti, Milano 1996 (first published as *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Perseus Books Group, New York 1994) and F. Mernissi, *L'harem e l'Occidente*, Giunti, Milano 2009. The Lebanese writer Hanan al-Sheykh who wrote a retelling of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The other Lebanese writer, Joumana Haddad, wrote instead *I Killed Scheherazade*.

years and to behead the previous day's wife, so that she would have no chance to be unfaithful to him. He had killed one thousand such women by the time he was introduced to Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter. Learning of this violence and against her father's wishes, Scheherazade volunteered to spend one night with the king. Once in the king's chambers, Scheherazade asked if she might bid one last farewell to her beloved sister, Dunyazade, who had secretly been prepared to ask Scheherazade to tell a story during the long night: "She had a plan: a very eloquent and very civilized plan to use her art to humanize him and stop this bloodbath."³⁶⁷ Through "a cerebral rather than physical seduction,"³⁶⁸ the king lay awake and listened with awe as Scheherazade told her first story. The night passed by, and Scheherazade stopped in the middle of the story. The king asked her to finish, but Scheherazade said there was no time, as dawn was breaking. So, the king spared her life for one day to finish the story the next night. The next night, Scheherazade finished the story and then began a second, even more exciting tale, which she again stopped halfway through at dawn, "using her *nutq* – her ability to penetrate a man's brain by using the right words."³⁶⁹ Again, the king spared her life for one more day so she could finish the second story. And so the king kept Scheherazade alive day by day, as he anticipated the finishing of the previous night's story. After one thousand and one nights, and one thousand stories, Scheherazade told the king that she had no more tales to tell him. During these one thousand and one nights, the king had fallen in love with Scheherazade. He spared her life, and made her his queen. Fatema Mernissi, in her *Scheherazade Goes West* researched how *One Thousand and One Nights* could reach us today: the stories in the written form were traced to a Syrian manuscript dating to the early 1300s; little attention was paid to them by the Arabs, who scorned oral storytelling as marketplace entertainment and "a symbol of the uneducated masses."³⁷⁰ It was Charles Galland who translated the original manuscript from Syrian to French, where the stories enjoyed great popularity among eighteenth-century literate Parisians. The story was reborn in a vast number of modern and contemporary European theatre pieces, and in films, in ballets, in opera, in books and was a source of inspiration for many others. According to Mernissi, "Not until the nineteenth century, one hundred years after the Europeans, who had the

³⁶⁷ H. al-Shaykh, Interview NPR Staff, "Scheherazade: From Storytelling 'Slave' To 'First Feminist'", in NPR books, <http://www.npr.org/2013/06/09/189539866/scheherazade-from-storytelling-slave-to-first-feminist>.

³⁶⁸ "Scheherazade goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems. Fatima Mernissi, Author", in *Publishers Weekly*, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-7434-1242-1>.

³⁶⁹ "Scheherazade goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems. Fatima Mernissi, Author", *ibidem*.

³⁷⁰ F. Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*. Washington Square Press, New York 2001, p. 55.

written text as early as 1704, were the tales finally published in Arabic!”³⁷¹ So subversive was their power that her stories were only published in Arabic a century after appearing in French, and they remain a target of censorship. It is certain that scholars agree on at least one point: that the stories did not stem from one authorship, but were instead compiled from different sources, often rewritten to the local tastes of the audiences and gathered in a single manuscript which did not contain some of the most famous stories. The stories were only lost in the transcriptions, but also in translations or rather “orientalist” reinterpretations. Sir Richard Burton, a renowned linguist, fluent in Arabic, and a flamboyant social figure, chose to do some translating of his own. The result was a contentious, yet most popular, eroticized version of *The Arabian Nights* – a Victorian, pornographic bestseller. Contentious though they may have been, Burton’s translations remain, for some, the best versions we have today of the tales.³⁷² And yet, as the tales moved west, certain critics maintain that Scheherazade was irrevocably changed and today remains one of the most misunderstood female characters in folklore. Suzanne Gauch, in her forward to *Liberating Shahrazad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam*, remarks: “No matter how many tales European translators included within the Nights, their inevitable relegation of Scheherazade to the silent shadows served the purpose of reinscribing stereotypes of the Islamic world as inherently misogynist and retrograde.”³⁷³ And Susan Muaadi Darraj maintains that Scheherazade “suffered terribly at the hands of translators,” where she became disempowered and turned into a “sex kitten.”³⁷⁴ It is not only Scheherazade and her transformative potential of storytelling that are criticized but also the female characters in her story, who are seen as misogynists and negative. Only recent feminist portrayals of women in Scheherazade’s tales trace a different understanding of them, underlining women’s multiple and intelligent strategies and knowledge. But, what appears to my eyes the most important issue is to acknowledge in the diverse assemblage of stories the different range of qualities that women represent:

“Shahrazad makes this message clear at the end of the story “Qaman al-Zamar,” when she states, “Whoever thinks that all women are alike is suffering from a disease of madness for which there is no cure.” The women in *The Arabian Nights* play an active and subversive role against the tyranny of fathers,

³⁷¹ F. Mernissi, *ibidem*, p. 56.

³⁷² R. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights : A Companion*, Tauris Parke Paperbacks, New York, 2004, p. 34.

³⁷³ S. Gauch, *Liberating Scheherazade : Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam*. University of Minnesota Press, New York 2006.

³⁷⁴ S. M. Darraj (ed.), *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, Praeger Publishers, Westport CT, 2004.

husbands, and kings, most often using words and cunningness to convince men of the wrongs they are committing just as Sharazad's stories teach King Shahriyar to repent of killing the daughters of his subjects. The women of *The Arabian Nights* reach far beyond the images of wicked adulteresses and nubile harem girls to include an assortment of strong and intelligent women, who seem to have mostly gone unnoticed by modern readers.³⁷⁵

These examples of incomplete transcriptions, misinterpretations, fake translations, censorship, re-adaptions and inspirations are not peculiar only to Scheherazade in the history of literature and of the oral storyteller. Yet, Sally Shallabiyye's attempt, through her storytelling, is not a retelling of the same stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Counting on the vast and rich tradition of popular tales, local folktales, Arab folktales and world folktales, and writing new ones, she plays and replays from a feminist perspective with the power of telling stories, making choices, constructing the characters. Part of her process is to rework the stories and make them more contemporary by making small or large shifts in them. Another element of how she makes the stories hers is in the choosing of which story to include and which story to exclude in her repertoire. In doing so, she tries to tell a different narrative, a female and feminist narrative of popular storytelling. The aim of my analysis of Sally's work attempts to rethink storytelling in body politics and how specifically female narratives and female bodies resist that body politics "disempowering the narrative, neglecting the agency."³⁷⁶ In the framework of the patriarchal and neoliberal authoritarianism, which is common to most of the Arab countries, and therefore to Jordan as well, female bodies are one of the sites of contestation. Especially after the Arab uprisings, the discussion on the body came up again as a central topic. Control, subordination, and (sexual) violence over bodies, which should remain docile and modest, are at the core of discussions. The explicit gender violence of regimes, such as rape in Syria as a weapon of war and sexual assaults or harassments in Egypt, to mention only two well-known cases, reverberate in the streets as a fear and a warning for women not to engage in politics and in the public sphere. The control over women's bodies (whether discursively or physically) becomes an important element in the exercise of power over particular communities.³⁷⁷ Although gender

³⁷⁵ A. Blythe, *ibidem*.

³⁷⁶ L. Sorbera, "Body Politics and Legitimacy: toward a Feminist Epistemology of the Egyptian Revolution", in *Global Discourse*, 2016.

³⁷⁷ N. Al-Ali and N. Pratt, *Women and war in the Middle East: transnational perspective*, Zed Books, London and New York 2009.

discriminations are still very present and gender equality is a long way off, in Jordan the same kind of extreme violence is perpetuated less explicitly and directly by the authoritarian State, but invades the private sphere. I believe that authoritarianism, as well as other power configurations, imperialist policies and neoliberal capitalist economies, “are pervasive with their (trans)national articulations of sexism, racism, and heteronormativity,”³⁷⁸ becoming then responsible for all kinds of gender violence. Verbal or physical harassment is quite common in the streets and women often do not feel comfortable and try to denounce it:³⁷⁹ it is not however as dangerous as elsewhere in the Middle East and a public sexual assault would rarely happen, nor would a “regime rape”. On the contrary, gendered hate speech in politics³⁸⁰ and in public, domestic violence and so-called honor crimes are still some of the most problematic issues. The State would maintain control of an uncontrollable violence in the streets, but still strongly moralize on women’s possibilities to enact. This is also why the streets, the (supposed-to-be) religious and traditional norms control the way women dress, speak and walk: “the society/tribe/family decides how women should dress and behave” and so how women’s bodies should not “transgress expected gender behaviors.”³⁸¹ The public discussion in Jordan about female bodies did not reach the same level as it did in Egypt and in Tunisia, where two women, Alia al Magdi in Cairo and Amina Sboui in Tunis, exposed their naked bodies online to make an artistic (Alia) and a political (Amina) statement and so risked their lives.³⁸² Instead, in Jordan the debate is very much more concentrated on honor crimes and recently also more on domestic violence, social and cultural taboos, which are the focus of my investigation. The public transgression of the modest female body can be simply connected with not being shy enough. It is in this context that using the body to do a performance contrasts with the dominant morals and narrative of women’s bodies. Even when they are not sexualized, female bodies should not overstep the limit of their spaces. In this sense, storytelling performances become a space, not only a voice, where the interiority of the body presence bares her soul to the public. Sally, for instance, moves

³⁷⁸ N. Al-Ali, “How to talk about Gender-Based Violence?”, in *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 2(1), 2016, pp. 7-11.

³⁷⁹ See Chapter Three about Rula Quawas’s students.

³⁸⁰ The case of Hind al-Fayez in Parliament, for example, we have already mentioned in previous note.

³⁸¹ A. Al-Najjar, A. Abusalim, “Framing the female body: beyond morality and pathology” in M. Said (Ed), L. Meari, N. Pratt, Nicola (ed.), *Rethinking Gender in revolutions. Lesson from the Arab world*, Zed Books, London, 2015, pp. 86-106.

³⁸² Both cases are reported in the mainstream media; as for scholarship, see again *Rethinking Gender in revolutions. Lesson from the Arab world*, *ibidem*.

comfortably and with a loud voice because it is her body becoming the space that expresses her resistance to the gender norm. Storytelling embodies another kind of cultural resistance which tries to deconstruct the female body-connected dichotomies, such as body/mind and the virgin and modest/shameful and floozy woman. Moreover, oral stories are also connected to the idea of polyphony and interaction with the audience and interlocutors, which belong particularly to a transnational feminist perspective. This open and rich interaction with the audience also corresponds to a kind of affirmative “approval” of this body politics, which is of course more spontaneously accepted by the people even if it does not fit with public morality and religious norms. Women artists’ creative agencies, in the context of the urban creative middle and upper class in Amman, commit to resisting marginalization through their bodily performances in the public sphere, exercising a profession and reframing and reconstructing it, like Sally does through the storytelling.

5. 1. 1 Sally Shallabiye, *el-hakawatiyye*

سلي الشلبية الحكواتية



Fig. 14: Sally Shallabiyye’s storytelling in Jadal for Culture, 5th December 2015, Amman.

In her attempt to shift dynamics of delicate gender issues, Sally's work as a storyteller remains, inventing and reclaiming a position, an occupation which is traditionally for men, at least in the occupation of the space that it requires. This is the reason why Sally, as a woman who is a storyteller, chose a name that feminizes her family name, Shallabiyye, شلبية from the original "Shallaby"; as reclamation of her name and of her profession; she also feminized the masculine form work "Hakawaty" into the feminine "Hakawatiyye", حكاوية (see Figure 14). As a storyteller and creator, she practices her right to change the meanings which were traditionally conceived.

In the storytelling there are a lot of things happening, in the dynamics of me being a woman, what does it mean what access I have? (...) I first read the story on my own and then commit to an interpretative reading. I take a story structure and I play with it. I can flesh out a character, I can make it longer, I can give them a voice, I can give them life, I can make a character flat, and it is not a paper, not a novel, it is the oral tradition: stories are alive. When they get written they get flattened. The stories are full of feelings and changes, it is very beautiful because they are alive, stories and characters are alive. (...) There are some stories, where the woman is passive, a pretty woman just trying to get married, and this is not just the narrative we want. Of course, I can change it; I am the storyteller and I did change it. When the stories do not work, I reconstruct them. It is prepared in order to have the woman rescue herself, and the community altogether, so it shifts the dynamics of what it means to tell the story, the stories have more power, and women are smarter, the man is afraid of this character. I find something more balanced, and some stories where the men are also smart (laughing). We want a smart society, not a society which is cute.

Sally Shallabiyye's storytelling sets a new place in gender roles; as she positions herself on the stage, she tells a story and breaks down and reconstructs a place where women are no longer confined to this male-made world. Through a perspective of generational and long-term changes, this work might contribute to creating new gender visions and transformations in society,

because it creates a new imagination, an alternative agency and alternative values: the retelling as a need to recreate an imagination for a new balance between genders.³⁸³

Story telling can create a space for imagination, and I think it is a form of resilience and creativity; we went to Syrian refugee camps, we gave a tool of resilience through the stories, a space of re-imagination, may have been forgotten, may have been hidden away because of the trauma, giving a space to remember childhood, simply creating a story. It is not just the entertainment of thirty minutes or forty-five minutes, it is remembering, creating, and opening the mind. It is not about the values, it is about opening the imaginations. Sometimes we forget as adults this space. I tell stories to the kids, and everyone is expecting the children to have fun. But if you look at the adults, they are engaged, they are listening, they are participating, and they are amazed. It is beautiful. And so, in all of that, is there a gender dynamic construction challenged? For someone, perhaps, because I am woman and not the man, the hakawaty. It is not unimaginable, where there usually is a man in the public space, and a woman more in the private space, and the most famous storytellers are men. There is a reconstruction of gender, I think, and it happens when as a woman I have access to more people, I am safer around kids and children in this context.

As in all feminist stories, the research, particularly in the arts, connects itself to personal issues and questioning that has found its way to women's minds, alongside a desire to be transferred to other people's minds, including bodies and female/male divergences in education, as well as women's place in society. Sally's stories also emerge from this contested space, which she re-appropriates with her talent and feminized profession and storytelling. Sally's personal story regards also how she understands the centrality of her body in her struggle. Her words communicated to me how she came to understand the significance of her own female body as political and intimate at the same time. In Salma Shash's article about two prominent figures, such as the Egyptian feminist activists, Doria Shafik and Latifa el-Zayyat,³⁸⁴ the author re-reads Doria's and Latifa's biography and autobiography respectively with an eye on the position of their bodies. Even if in their life and political activism they did not transgress the mainstream

³⁸³ N. Hussein, "Gestures of Resistance between the Street and the Theatre: Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman's *No Time for Art*," in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 25 (3), 2015, pp. 357-370.

³⁸⁴ S. Shash, "Battles with Desires: Centering the Body in the Personal Narratives of Doria Shafik and Latifa El-Zayyat", in *Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 1(2), 2015.

expectations of the female body norms, their private and intimate diaries become important testimonies to understand how the bodies are relevant. In this essay we again acknowledge how “the authoritarianism is a gendered structure (and) woman’s political activism is primarily perceived and explained through their gender”³⁸⁵ and especially when the repression becomes physical in the violent context of imprisonment, then they start to understand the body as the strongest tool of resistance: “In realizing that they controlled her body, she realized that she controlled her feeling of shame”. Contextualizing the analysis, I wish to enlighten the significance of the body in a woman’s process of understanding of the self and how female professions where the body comes to be exposed becomes an essential passage of the process. Re-signifying gender roles does not require specific competences, except that of mobilizing our bodies in the research and the process of the self through our personal stories.

Being a woman is a political identity more than a gender identity and I play with that identity and the boundaries: what does that mean? And I understand the privilege that I carry and also the disadvantages. What being a woman mean is a personal story and history, in my case as an only daughter with three brothers, I had to work twice as hard, and I have always found it inequitable and unfair. As a child and as a teenager I was always struggling and it was not just in my family, the society and patriarchy and misogyny, and it never made sense to me. You have to tidy up, to wash the dishes, to make the bed, to help your mother...and half of the work for my brothers. As a child and a teenager and the early adult, constantly I tried and try to push this border, putting an end to the social construct, in a body that aligns, my life is always about pushing these boundaries, and how do you cross that line? It is always an attempt to understand how you can push this border: confrontation, dialogue. (...) As a storyteller I am still at the beginning, I still try to feel my voice; I am waiting to tell my own story that is more contemporary and personal and more ... questioning in people’s mind. My body is always in my work; how you embody life, performance is about placing your body, your physical body in the space, but how do you place that body? How can you take up space? How can you look at it? It is interesting that in telling a story there is a hiding and a listening. There are some times when I am more ready to expose my body, the inside of my body out. Now I can very much see the transition; I am in the process of transitioning out, I think the layer of hiding (is going)... the

³⁸⁵ S. Shash, *ibidem*.

name that I changed, Shallabiyye, I have my stage name only. Now it is in a stage of emerging, my internal body, myself, and my physical body. Then I will be ready to tell the story of the self... When I am ready to tell a story, I take up space, both emotionally and physically: when I enter, I enter. It can be intimidating, always a balance as well, drawing people inside. I am apologetic of taking up spaces because growing up with brothers, I constantly had to negotiate for rooms, constantly negotiate for being seen and heard. Now, I would like to be seen and heard; I have the right to be seen and to be heard. I would like to do that in a non-competitive manner, I do that with a smile, by creating a subtle feeling that you can do that without losing the boundaries. I am going to be friendly. But the boundary is there. It is a constant negotiation as well. There is a constant awareness of body at the same time. When I walk in the streets downtown, there are a lot of people and there are men standing and you have to pass through, usually you do not pass between them, but you walk on a side. I used to do that. Now I keep walking. I do not do it anymore. I take up my space. There is no talking but... it is a constant negotiation of our bodies and spaces. A negotiation of privileges.

The intersectional nature of discriminations of body politics reveals that not only gender, but also class and political economy affect them. Far from ignoring that, Sally uses her storytelling smartly enough to criticize and dissent from the political decisions in the city and the political economy of her country. As a soft tool, storytelling and that softness and irony in Sally's stories are an indirect way to attack politics. The indirect way is not a way to protect herself, rather again a way of leaving space to the imagination to create an opinion about current issues. In 2014 the Greater Municipality of Amman decided to remove the street vendors and their small "tables," which are called in Jordanian dialect the "bastas", over which many people try to sell their commerce downtown. They are regulars in downtown and they are just like shops. As we have previously seen analyzing the work of other artists, through these kinds of decisions and interventions, the municipality and government want to "Westernize" the city, to create an aesthetic downtown and a more appealing town for a certain class. Weirdly enough, the richest and newest part of the city is called "Western Amman". It was the time of the first edition of Spring Sessions in 2014 and the program was in King Ghazi Hotel downtown (see Chapter 4.4). Spring Sessions and Sally Shallabiyye decided to do an intervention about this decision which would have left many people unemployed. This idea was not so easy to realize because it would have intersected many lines: the lines of political, artistic, and social interventions. So Sally

Shallabiyye wrote a story, a short one, only one page. But in only one page she wanted to stress all the problematic and intersecting issues that came up through: class, gender, capitalism, neoliberalism, and worker exploitation. The story was very simple and for the intervention in public she used the object of contention in that case: the flat pack “basta,” which is also the name of the intervention.

The story starts with a young woman taking her basta downtown and setting it up. The men who have bastas and the little kids who sell wares across downtown start to harass her verbally or accidentally brush against her basta. It was constant but it did not stop her. Until one day, a man decides to come, bring his basta and sit next to her and he said: “She is my sister.” And with the word “sister” the street changed. They would become friends until the day he asked her where her special basta comes from. She supposed that everybody knew that it is from the new store Ikea, but the man does not: “What is Ikea?” This short story aims at interposing all the critical elements which can appear in the streets: the gender roles and norms in the street, but also in the commerce; the political decisions of removing a very common street commerce; the knowledge about the global neoliberal stores arriving in the city and the common popular ignorance about these stores killing small commerce. Bridging class and gender, as well as politics and economics, and the mechanisms which guide them, it attempts to show the intersectional nature of different paradigms. The woman is adamant in her position and her steadfastness is rewarded by a man who wishes to let her continue her work. The phrase he pronounces in order to protect her from harassment and annoyance – “She is my sister” – underlines how gender roles are often framed in a socio-familial form of respect and how both men and women use the norm as a strategy to resist or reinvent roles and their positions. It is a political story in the sense that it criticizes the status quo, but it also witnesses a permanent search to rethink systems of political thought in a more inclusive way. I think also Sally wants to show the spontaneous solidarity and trust which is established between the young woman and the man, who is unfortunately the only one to support and protect her. This also corresponds to the simple reality of women’s lives: apart from formal and social inequalities, a natural, concrete and just interaction does not separate women’s and men’s lives as it can appear to in a mono-representational narrative. On the other hand, we can see how the harassment is not only the fruit of the patriarchal mentality but it reflects also the sense of injustice that political neoliberal economies engender. So the municipality’s decision on the downtown basta cleansing, the gentrification process and the rise

of new stores such as Ikea store provoke also frustration, which is unfairly addressed to women. Sally's attempt, in the context of Spring Sessions' program in 2014 as well as every week with her contemporary tales, is to embrace a larger understanding of problematic dynamics, especially sensitive to gender, class and policies. This continuous work constitutes a potential transformation of social and gendered imaginaries beyond hegemonic cultural codes.

5.2 Visual Performance Artist Samah Hijawi. Body strategies versus surveillance

Me: Ok now I am getting nervous! What was I thinking!?! Why am I doing this?

Ola why didn't you stop me! This is crazy.

Ola: Don't ask me but yes, you are crazy.

Me: But let's agree on one thing, if the police or the mukhabarat (intelligence service) take me away, or try and stop me, first get photos, then come and get me out of the police station.

Ola (smiles): Ok!

Me: Now I need to decide what to wear. I have the dress I am wearing (a salmon long-sleeved cotton dress). Or shall I wear these dark pants with a white or grey shirt?

Diala: Dress!

(Part of me wants to wear the dress, it's one of my favorites, but I chicken out and stick to the bland look. In retrospect, I should have worn the dress.)

Ola: No, pants and shirt.

*Ghalib nods in agreement.*³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ S. Hijawi, "Where are the Arabs?", in *Ibraaz*, http://www.ibraaz.org/projects/114#_ftn2.

It was the 19th of May 2009 when Samah Hijawi performed in the streets of Amman with a public performance called “Where are the Arabs?” This dialogue reported above was the dialogue between Samah and her friends in Makan Art Space which preceded it. She was going to three different locations in downtown Amman: the Mango Market, the Vegetable Market and near the Habiba sweet shop (see figures 15 and 16). The intervention in different parts of the city took three days and then she recorded her speech so that the video performance was also shown in cafés, bars, and restaurants with TVs, and in the following years also in museums and galleries around the world.³⁸⁷

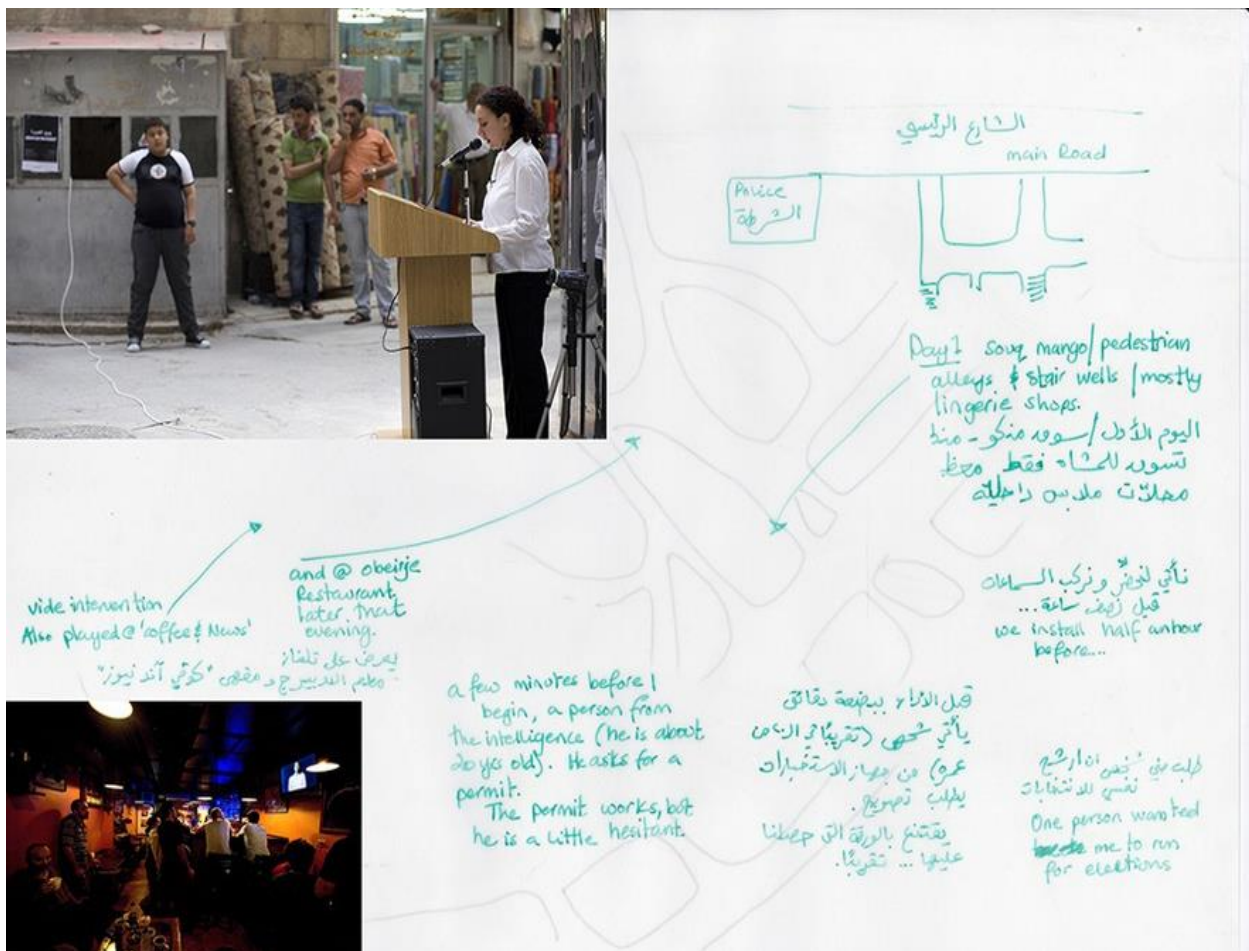


Fig. 15 Samah Hijawi’s performance “Where are the Arabs?” in downtown Amman, May 2009 and a photo of the video in a café (courtesy of the author).

³⁸⁷ The video performance and the video of the public performance can be seen on Samah Hijawi’s website: <http://www.samahhijawi.com/#!blank/dgouh>.



Fig. 16 Samah Hijawi's performance "Where are the Arabs?" in Mango's market, in downtown Amman, May 2009 and a photo of the video in a café (courtesy of the author).

Body has been the privileged space of the performance art since its birth in the contemporary arts, starting in the 1960s. The artist is at the core of the performance and s/he establishes a direct

and primitive contact with the audience through the bodily acts. The language of the body performance art is a hybrid of aesthetical and militant practices that is ephemeral and does not lie in perpetuity. Having been christened in the critical literature in the beginning of the 1970s, it has centuries-old traditions from theatre, visual arts, dance, and mass and folk culture.³⁸⁸ The complex relationship with mass culture, the oscillation in time and the hybridity of the genre, made performance art defy any definitions, “not so much because it comes in from many forms and styles, but because it stakes out its territory.”³⁸⁹ Whatever possibilities and inter-media assemblage it may contain, performance art is recognized as an oppositional form of art and “alternative” culture. Distancing themselves from the academic field of Performance Studies, some performers, such as the Chicano Guillermo Gomez Peña, performer and activist, educator and writer, together with his collective, “La Pocha Nostra,” operating in the United States, confirm ironically the attributions of the “self-proclaimed arts world of the dominant tendency in each country,” which refer to the performance artists as: “‘alternatives’ (alternative to what? To the real art?)”, ‘peripheral’ (to their self-imposed center); ‘experimental’ like in a permanent process of attempts; or ‘heterodox’; if we are of ‘colors’ (who does not have colors?) we are always labeled as ‘emerging’ (such as en aesthetic exotic tribe)”.³⁹⁰ Although problematizing these attributions, performance artists find these attributions appropriate if corresponding to the radical stand against the dominant culture.

The desire to reclaim the city and the space through body performances assumes a different value in Jordan. In one of her articles, Samah Hijawi recalls a brief history of a few public performances and social interventions in Jordan’s public space in relation to the diverse reactions of the intelligence services. Starting from first public performance by a woman artist in Jordan, Samia Zaru’s *Tents and Stones* in 1988 (see Chapter 4.1), until 2011, she noticed how the police state increasingly determines the relation with the spaces.³⁹¹ The kinds of resistances that a woman performance artist enacts are multiple: taking the risk in a state-monitored country to be in the streets to perform, assuming the risk itself as the form to dismantle the authority over herself and everyone. Secondly, the body and the cultural codes of the body in public: the female

³⁸⁸ B. Salles, *Subversive expectations: performance art and paratheater in New York, 1976- 85*, The University of Michigan Press, New York, 1998, pp. 1-10.

³⁸⁹ B. Salles, *ibidem*, p. 2.

³⁹⁰ G. Gomez Peña, “En defense del arte del performance”, *Horizontes Antropológicos*, Porto Alegre, ano 11, n. 24, p. 199-226, jul./dez. 2005. (The translation from the original Spanish text is mine).

³⁹¹ S. Hijawi, “Performativity and Public Space. Interventions as Performative Gestures For Political Engagement in Jordan”, in *Ibraaz*, 9(2015), <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/129>.

body performance as a resistance to decolonize the body from imposed norms. The political risk and the female body politics incarnate a possible theory of the public performance in Jordan, where the artists struggle to reclaim the city as theirs.

“Where are the Arabs?” was not Samah Hijawi’s first public performance in a public space. She started in 2007 with a performance called “Yareet”, which means “I wish...!” , asking the people passing by in the streets to continue the sentence from “Yareet”. This was a first experiment to probe, through her direct contact and body presence, people’s dreams, imaginations, fantasies and words. The second public performance was in that same year and the following one, and it was called “Disorientation.” Following the same idea of “Yareet, she would ask people in the city to write how we imagine other places we would like to be and she would use a collage technique to collect people’s imagination. These first two experiments derive from Samah’s need to leave safe spaces where practitioners used to meet, such as, for example, Makan (see Chapter 4.1.2), and question the city, the audience, the passers-by. As Samah recalls, 2007–2011 was a period of intense experimentation and social and artistic intervention in the streets of Amman.³⁹² As I explained earlier in this dissertation (see Chapter 3.2), the two-year period of the Arab uprising, 2011–2012, witnessed also in Amman and all of Jordan another kind of reclaiming of public spaces through demonstrations for socio-economic changes, rather than more explicit political demands. After this intense period of movements, from the artistic-cultural to the socio-political re-appropriations of public spaces, Amman’s streets experience a short period as a vacuum, which has nowadays again been replaced by street festivals, especially in the last two years (see Chapter 4.4). But the level of surveillance and control increased again, as it did after 2011–2012, not only as a consequence of the uprisings, but especially due to the deterioration of the situation in neighboring countries such as Syria and Iraq and the threat of security for Jordan. Particularly in 2011, Samah remembers the constant presence of the intelligence services at Makan’s events, which allowed her and the other artists and practitioners to get used to their faces.³⁹³

“Where are the Arabs?” was Samah’s first public performance that was much more direct and political, both in the content and in the meaning: it was also the first performance where her body was at the center of the intervention and not only her ideas, words and collages. The speech she

³⁹² Interview with Samah Hijawi, 20th April 2016, Amman.

³⁹³ She ironically told me that they started to treat them as part of the audience and participants of their audience, making jokes such as: “Do not worry, do not take notes, we will put everything on the website!”

read in public in Amman was a compilation and a recombining of fixed phrases from Gamal Abdel Nasser's speeches, through which the prominent Egyptian president and leader sought to strengthen, in particular, the narrative and the politics of Arab unity. During the 1960s, the leader Abdel Nasser prompted political enthusiasm not only in his country, but in the entire Arab world and, even broader, in all African postcolonial countries.³⁹⁴ Although he was an authoritarian military leader like many others in the Arab world in the same period and beyond, he left in people's minds, even today, the sensation of strength and the possibility of achieving stability. This enthusiasm failed when the Arab armies were defeated in 1967 war and Israel's army occupied once again Palestine, the so called West Bank, in the territories which were not part of the State of Israel but under Jordan jurisdiction since 1948. Before this war and defeat of Arab armies, as well as the contemporary deviation of Pan-Arabism in cruel regimes in Iraq and Syria, Arab unity was the dominant rhetorical discourse in Egypt and the Middle East. Samah herself wrote: "The Arab unity project bears distant memories of hope and euphoria that only returned with the recent Tunisian and other Arab uprisings of 2010–2011."³⁹⁵ The title of the performance "Where are the Arabs?" echoes the often repeated question by Palestinians and also recalls popular songs of the 1980s. In a time when Palestine was at the core of the everyday politics of the Arab world, the performances aimed to explore the audience's reaction and relationship with their recent political history in greater depth. Recalling pan-Arabism, and its nostalgic political meaning, aimed meanwhile to problematize it paradoxically, alluding to the "failures, compromises and contradictions."³⁹⁶ While the paragraphs of the speech Samah read during the twenty-five-minute performance refer three times to Arab unity, the audience is not informed that the speech is taken from Nasser's and "maintains contemporaneity without historical contextualization."³⁹⁷ This is the text as it was read by Samah during the performance.

'Citizens.

We are gathered here to celebrate the anniversary of unity and the birth of United Arab Republic. What we celebrate today is not merely the birth of unity, nor the birth of a great nation

³⁹⁴ K. J. Beattie, *Egypt during the Nasser Years: Ideology, Politics, and Civil Society*, Westview Press. Boulder CO 1994.

³⁹⁵ S. Hijawi, "Performativity and Public Space Interventions as Performative Gestures For Political Engagement in 3wJordan" in *Ibraaz*, <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/129>.

³⁹⁶ A. S. Weiner, "Insurgency and Circumspection: the Legacy of Pan-Arabism", in *After All*, online Journal, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.40/insurgency-and-circumspection#cite11364>.

³⁹⁷ S. Hijawi, "Where are the Arabs", *ibidem*.

solely; but the birth of willpower. Unity was simply the expression with which this willpower chose to express itself.

The reality, my brothers, is that unity was simply a popular demand that gained its freedom and rid itself from all traces of foreign control. It continued to pave its path, and declared this to its rulers; the proof of this is that freedom was only achieved after a long struggle that set out from the very beginning to the very end to acquiring freedom. This was willpower. The willpower, your willpower my brothers, was the result of freedom, as there is no willpower without freedom.

We have come a long way, my brothers, to own our freedom, and from there on to gain our own willpower. The region was filled with great hopes and dreams, but dreams are not achieved unless the path ahead was paved by the motivation to work, and there is no motivation without freedom.³⁹⁸

State security police apparatus in Jordan created and continue to create strong embarrassment in pronouncing or shouting publicly the word “freedom” if referring to the government or to the Kingdom, except in diverse political contexts such as Palestine where the word “hurriya” (freedom), generally shouted in relation to the occupation of Israel’s army, seems to be more acceptable. Only in 2011 throughout the Arab world, from Tunisia to Bahrain, was the word “hurriya” itself freed in public spaces, as well as in the private sphere, where people would not feel free to speak about politics: “even the walls listen” a popular saying would advocate, referring to the intelligence services, who could be everywhere, even your neighbor or your brother. The repetition in the three different paragraphs of this speech of the word and concept of “unity” let the repetition resound in the oral language for emphasis and it is usually repeated three times. It also evokes the insistence with which Gamal Abdel Nasser used to exploit any single speech in the many different countries he visited from 1959 to 1963 around Africa and the Middle East to recall for unity. But the freedom in his speech was the freedom of the post-colonial states from the colonialist imposition on their own territories. The word freedom in 2009, preceding the wider and bigger shout for freedom in 2011, was paradoxically pronounced by Samah in a different context of a request for freedom: words taken from Nasser’s speeches, but alluding subtly to the freedom from the post-colonial leaders, like Nasser himself, who

³⁹⁸ The text was read in the original Arabic, the translation is provided here by the author S. Hijawi, “Where are the Arabs”, *ibidem*.

owned and still own their countries, the country of the people, not the country of the leaders. So in her public intervention, there are multiple subversions of the original meaning of Nasser's speech in a contemporary underground and widespread call for freedom. This underground call for freedom, verbally explicit but softly hidden by different strategies through this particular public performance, shows the continuous creative revolutionary agency exerted by Samah and by other women artists. Another word which is repeated different times is willpower, "irada" in Arabic. This second word will be the protagonist of 2010–2011 Tunisia uprising as well: it recalls in fact the poem of the Tunisian Abu Qasim al-Shabbi, "Irada al-hayyat" (the willpower of life), which is also the Tunisian national anthem. The Tunisian revolution has re-appropriated the national anthem, as a popular hymn calling for freedom. The word "irada" in Samah's words in 2009 seems to foresee the willpower and the agency of the people and the streets as their witnesses. Moreover, the gesture gains other political significance if we look at the context in that period. At the time of Samah's performance in 2009, in fact, it was forbidden by law to gather in the streets for political or cultural events and this obviously explains Samah's fears and anxiety before starting the performance. This law changed after 2011, when a short notice of two days would allow demonstrations and public gatherings. But at the time, Samah had to face the presence of the intelligence services "attending" the performances every day. In order to perform without making explicit it was a political speech in a cultural public performance, Samah used a strategy to trick the intelligence services.

Amman is an extremely monitored city, people do not feel they own the public space. They own their home, they own a land, but they do not own the city, they do not own the pavement, they do not have a sense of ownership. They do not think it is their property as long as they are outside of the house. This is related to why Arts is not related with the public space, secondly as a space in which engaging politically. The mukhabarat (the intelligence services) are really really strong. When I did the performance "Where are the Arabs?" they were there all the time but we tricked them. We have got permission to film through the Royal Film Commission and for them it was very confusing because there was not a film set at all. And I was talking and talking: and someone was filming. The first day the guy from the mukhabarat was young and stupid and we got rid of him. The second day the police were around but still confused. The third day the mukhabarat were waiting at five o'clock for my speech. Everyone was saying "This is crazy, don't do it. You gonna get yourself into trouble." And I did not get into trouble, I mean I am

woman, I would not get into trouble as quickly as a man, but still it is a very political speech in a public space, we do not have public speech in the public in Jordan, it is highly policed space.

It is the rebellious individual agency of the female body through the performative gesture of this intervention which defines it as political. The relation and intersection of aesthetics and politics in Samah's performance are not only mining state authoritarian patriarchal restrictions, but also softly critically addressing the neoliberal tendencies of privatization and speculative development, which steal common spaces from the active citizenship. In this case, the public reacted and someone took the stage to give a speech in the middle of the market. One of Samah's goals was in fact to test the audience, as part of the process of instilling a reflection in the public. The strategy Samah uses to trick the intelligence affirms her willpower not only to reclaim the space in public, but also to reclaim "the body as uncontrollable by the system."³⁹⁹ She simultaneously operates three types of subversion of the immediately readable and visible in the performance: first, the subversion of the political speech of an Arab leader towards a speech of freedom with a different meaning (the freedom to which Nasser is referring is the freedom to gain from colonial powers outside and inside the country, while the freedom Samah and her generation refers to is the freedom from the leaders like Nasser), creating a paradox for the audience, which is not aware of the origins of the discourse, despite it sounding familiar and reassuring; secondly, the subversion of women's bodies as sacred taboos controlled and confined which instead become a site of cultural and political resistance, critically expressing past histories, present states of intolerance and performing a political speech usually given by men in public; and finally, the subversion of the legal restriction on public assembly through the strategy of the film permission. Samah admitted that often her public performances were understood as feminist stands and were interpreted through a gendered lens. She, on the contrary, went to the street to reclaim the space itself as her space in the city, through the inner space of her body, without explicitly thinking of it as a feminist act. She also affirms that the subconscious part of her mind could have worked in that sense. I do not want to construct a forced feminist reading of women artists' interventions, but rather reflect on her creative agency as a woman as a modality of action which intersects body presence with other political dimensions and the power within as the space of resistance. Her performance embodies "aesthetic-political activities that test the boundaries of acceptable conduct,"⁴⁰⁰ which is also the acceptable conduct of gender norms and

³⁹⁹M. El Said, "She Resists: Body politics between radical and subaltern", in *Rethinking Gender*, ibidem, pp. 109-133.

⁴⁰⁰A. S. Weiner, *ibidem*.

roles. Whether her intention was to perform publicly as a feminist stand or not, it is in her own words that we can read the fear of overexposing a female body when, before the performance and after, she thought she would have preferred to wear the dress and not the pants and shirt: *Part of me wants to wear the dress, it is one of my favorites, but I chicken out and stick to the bland look. In retrospect, I should have worn the dress.* Consciously or not, she would have worn her favorite dress which she can usually wear comfortably in Amman, challenging the public gender norms of “proper clothing for a woman” in her case because she was reading in public. She did not overstep that gender limit of the clothing norm connected with the female body. The most difficult taboo to challenge is the one connected to the female body in public. But she defies the taboo of speaking loudly and in political terms in the public as a woman delivering a political speech. In particular, Samah’s creative agency challenges the status of the monitorial and surveillance system within her city and the country she lives in, using her female body also as a strategy of impeding the control and interrogation: (...) *I did not get into trouble; I mean I am a woman. I would not get into trouble as quickly as a man.* It is perhaps the fact that she is a woman that she has not been arrested or interrogated or because it is the time “to embrace their feminism as no longer threatening – and no longer taboo.”⁴⁰¹ Political, social, and sexual taboos still dominate the public sphere as well as culture and education in Jordan. Reclaiming artists’ works in city spaces attempts to ensure “active participation and critical citizenship,”⁴⁰² re-establishing, through the artistic bodily performances, the original nature of the city which is political. The willpower within her, exposing her body for possibilities of freedom regarding politics, aesthetics and gender roles, is the site of her cultural resistance.

5.3 Gender violence on canvas. Rand Abdelnur’s paintings

We have often mentioned different kinds of taboos which continue to exist or to be imposed upon Jordanian society and upon the state of political authoritarianism of the Kingdom. As for the last paragraph of this chapter, we encounter the complex theme of gender violence when or whether related to the concept of honor or not. While other female artists have rejected being labeled explicitly as political artists, alluding softly and indirectly political messages, the young

⁴⁰¹ K. Wilson-Goldie, “To the streets”, in *Frieze*, <https://www.frieze.com/article/streets>.

⁴⁰² S. Hijawi, *ibidem*.

painter and artist Rand Abdelnur defines herself explicitly as a political artist, tackling social and political issues at the core of her art research and paintings. For her first solo exhibition, “Woman II: Adorned with Jasmine,”⁴⁰³ in a gallery in Amman, it was the case of her challenging one of the most difficult taboos in the society: rape and honor, and the articles of the Jordanian Penal Code correlated to these crimes. As we have already said in a previous chapter (see Chapter 3), Rand is not the first to openly tackle this kind of issue. But maybe she is the first artist to show so directly the figurations of women having been raped. Breaking the social and political taboo is the aim of her paintings, wishing to raise awareness of and instill courage in all those women who suffer from gender violence, especially domestic violence, which is the most common case in Jordan. Speaking out loudly about violence towards women can be doubly difficult: first, breaking the social taboo within the environment; secondly, breaking the “cultural” justification or explanation for it. In fact, especially from a Eurocentric and Western or Westernized unilateral feminist perspective, gender violence and honor crimes, when seen in non-Western countries, becomes a robust category in which to construct a narrative. Unfortunately, this narrative has not only remained words, but it has reached the point of justifying or, even worst, motivating military and political interventions under the name of human rights and prevention of gender violence.⁴⁰⁴ On the contrary, women of the “other side” of the world, i.e. underdeveloped countries in the Western-centric geography of the world, have been victimized twice: not only as victims of this male violence, but also as the victims of an entire culture and religion, denying them all the basic rights. As we have tried to show through the whole work of this research, these neo-orientalist assumptions lack the deep knowledge necessary to understand, and eventually re-tell, the complexity: the complexity of lives, women’s lives, and the complexity of religious (mis)understandings. Jordan, in particular, has often been connected with the narrative of honor crimes, in a time where it has also been enhanced in Northern Europe as a category belonging to the Muslim migrants’ cultures.⁴⁰⁵ These easy and false attributions once again ignore the richness and diversity, in political and cultural terms, of the multiple countries of origins of Muslim migrants in the West, but also tend to forget the most essential and evident factor of this kind of gender violence: a violence, especially domestic violence, which at high rates is happening

⁴⁰³ The website of the gallery hosting the exhibition “[Woman II: Adorned with Jasmine:](http://www.artisanajordan.com/exhibitions/)”

⁴⁰⁴ N. Al-Ali and N. Pratt, *ibidem*, 2009.

⁴⁰⁵ J. Rose, *Women in Dark Times*, Bloomsbury, London 2014.

everywhere in the world as domestic violence or so-called “passion crimes,” only with a different explication than honor. Due to the enrooted historical, cultural, political, and economic dynamics linked to it, gender violence is still far from being deracinated and we need then to acknowledge “the importance of historicizing Gender-Based violence to escape the ‘presentism’ and myopic views.”⁴⁰⁶ The diagnosis of this kind of violence can be traced in the intersectional nature of patriarchal domination with the economic and political conditions within different historical and empirical contexts where the violence is continuously reported: in every region in the entire world. This kind of analysis was deeply developed by the anthropologist Lila Abu-Loghod in her last book, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Her main concern has been with “the determinants of the cultural construction of the honor crime and the effects of this deployment”, instead of looking for other “cultural categories that might be moved into the limelight.”⁴⁰⁷ She acknowledges as one of feminism’s achievements of the last century the fact that sexual violence and violence against women are no longer in some parts of the world a matter of the private life. Nevertheless, a monolithic and stereotyped vision of Muslim contexts and women’s conditions has led the same (Western or Westernized) feminisms to not investigate each kind of violence to make some responsible efforts against it. Instead, the kind of mobilization towards gender violence in the Arab world has often involved and continues to involve human rights organizations and feminist activists, which – as seen through their activities or reports – tend to mark gender violence and honor crimes “as a culturally specific form of violence, distinct from other widespread forms of domestic or intimate partner violence, including the more familiar passion crime.”⁴⁰⁸ It has also been given a special association with Islam, without mentioning the moral agency that a woman, even when a victim of violence, enacts. With Arab and Muslim women’s rights going mainstream, even bestsellers originally written by Arab women helped to strengthen this stereotyped and imprecise view of violence, women and honor crimes.⁴⁰⁹ Through the investigative book of the Jordanian journalist and writer Rana Husseini, we acknowledge also that the pathologists at the Jordanian National Institute of Forensic Medicine have a role in all the crimes against women or cases of gender violence. This let Abu-Loghod deduce how social institutions of policing, surveillance, and intervention are implicated in gender

⁴⁰⁶ N. Al-Ali, *ibidem*, 2016.

⁴⁰⁷ L. Abu Loghod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, 2013, p. 141.

⁴⁰⁸ L. Abu Loghod, *ibidem*, p. 114.

⁴⁰⁹ L. Abu Loghod, *ibidem*.

violence considerations. As for the case of immigrants analyzed in northern Europe by Jacqueline Rose, and the obsession with gender violence and honor crimes in European politics of immigration crimes and mainstream media, gender violence and honor crimes are branded as “tribal” or “archaic,” while the essential elements of this are timeless and were produced particularly within modernity and nationalism. Besides the complex and infinitive considerations about this violence against women,

“the honor crime gives legitimacy not just to all the mechanisms of regulation, surveillance, and mass mediation intrinsic to modern state power but also to the specific forms and forums of contemporary transnational governance, whether neoliberal economic institutions or humanitarian intervention of the feminist or military sort.”⁴¹⁰

Alongside this, Abu Loghod recalls Foucault’s determinant role in founding the history of modern sex in all the forms of discipline, medicalization, prohibition, perversion and shame. It has further been co-opted and manipulated progressively by defenders of religions, as it happens in Jordan when, for example, the Islamic Action Front, the political Islamist party, has tried to counterpose Islam to the feminists campaigners’ struggle to reform penal law. They linked this attempt to the rhetorical discourse of the “Western plot towards Jordanian morality. This is ironic given that the laws on which the honor defense came into Jordanian law from the Napoleonic Code, Ottoman law, and British common law.”⁴¹¹

Whether Islamists align struggle against gender violence with a Westernization of society and its model, whether some feminists and human rights organizations tend to essentialize its cause, all the kind of misunderstandings, misinterpretations and manipulations of the delicate issue of gender violence seem to be far from reaching deeply the pain and at the same time the agency of the women suffering. Creating a visual memory of raped women’s pain and painting their interior voices, as well as their bodies and faces, are the aims of the artist Rand Abdelnour, in her first solo exhibition in Amman. Engaging in the political debate, the artist tried to put on canvas what cannot be told and what cannot be given back to a woman who has been raped: the silence of their pain and the lightness of their bodies. Putting gender violence on canvas, especially alluding to rape, is the political act of resistance of Rand Abdelnour, who beyond the taboo

⁴¹⁰ L. Abu Loghod, *ibidem*, p. 135-6.

⁴¹¹ L. Abu Loghod, *ibidem*.

brings to the gallery and to the public a different kind of reflection about women's pain.

5.3. 1 Rand Abdelnour: Canvassing Women's Pain

Rand works as a painter and as a designer in film production, as painting does not provide her enough to live on. She studied her BA in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Jordan, then she was granted a Fulbright scholarship for her MA in Arts in the United States, where she spent one year. She now lives in her hometown Amman, where she also teaches painting. Since painting on its own does not provide her enough to make a living, film production became her primary source of income. She designs and implements the sets for films. "We have a script; I break down the place and I build it again, designing a set."⁴¹² The last set of a short movie she worked on was the story of a parrot which was left behind in a house in Haifa, in Palestine, in 1948. The project allowed her to tap into her identity as a Jordanian of Palestinian descent who never visited her grandparents' land. She uses her work and her paintings to convey her messages regarding women, identity, memory and culture.

Her first solo exhibition, "Woman II: Adorned with Jasmine" was the second of the series titled "Woman" in Artisana/Gallery 14 in Amman. Her paintings address the topic of article number 308 of the Jordanian Penal Law, considered a controversial article, still at the core of socio-political debate in Jordan. In fact, the article states that: "If a valid contract of marriage is made between the perpetrator (of any of the offenses mentioned in this section), and the victim, the prosecution is suspended. If judgment was already passed, the implementation of the punishment upon the sentenced person is suspended."⁴¹³ So, in fact, this controversial article pardons the rapist if he marries the victim. The woman who has been raped is not legally obliged to marry the rapist. Nevertheless, social pressure often makes the family decide on behalf of the daughter to marry the rapist to resolve an honor affair.

⁴¹² Interview with Rand Abdelnour, 3rd September 2015, Amman.

⁴¹³ N. A. Simila- Dickinson, "Victims' Rights and the Effectiveness of Rape Marriage Laws in Jordan and a Changing Middle East," in SSRN, 25/04/2014.

Women activists lobby to cancel article 308 and the issue is at the top of their agenda. Together with lawyers (see Chapter 3) they work periodically and publicly to cancel this article.⁴¹⁴ The Art Gallery and Center for Jordan Arts and Crafts hosted a public debate in Rand's exhibition space as part of the campaign against gender-based violence in Jordan. Rand's women paintings stand between Rula Al-Farra Al-Hroob,⁴¹⁵ a member of a Parliament and supporter of the campaign, and Asma Khader, a lawyer and human rights activist, President of Sisterhood is a Global Institute/Jordan and former Minister of Culture Spokesperson.⁴¹⁶

Besides piquing feminist associations and human rights organizations, this article of the Penal Code bothered Rand Abdelnur's mind: the accumulation of stories about honor killings, sexual violence, harassment and forced marriages, especially of young women, led the twenty-seven-year-old Jordanian painter to resort to her brush to tackle the issue and raise awareness. Rand asserts that this article should be canceled, and she expresses that by painting the women who suffered that violence and what symbolically dresses them.

The colored patterns of the tents where the wedding takes place and where the women meet their future husband are reflected in the women's dresses in Rand's paintings (figure 17).

I used elements from our culture. When someone sees these tents, s/he immediately says: oh there is a marriage! But now the same pattern is dressed by a woman who is raped. It is a double punishment: first the rape, and then the marriage. The tent would be the same for a funeral: the same pattern of the tent, it is joy at times, and death at others.

Rand attempts to account for women's interior voices through the color of the tent: the message is that a wedding for a woman obliged to marry her rapist is the same as a funeral. In fact, for matters of shame and honor of the family, this article still punishes instead of protecting women victims of violence. Even if the article was amended in April 2016, there are still some clauses which would allow the rapist to marry underage children. The amendments have still not been

⁴¹⁴ R. Husseini, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/women-activists-call-cancelling-controversial-penal-code-article-entirely%E2%80%99>.

⁴¹⁵ The website of the parliamentarian Rula Al-Hroob: <http://rulaalhroob.com/>.

⁴¹⁶ More information about her <https://www.ictj.org/about/asma-khader> and the organization: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/honourcrimes/partners/jordan---sisterhood-is-global-institutejordan-sigij.html>.

approved by the Parliament and the article is in fact amended but not canceled. Today it is reported that 95% of the rapists go unpunished.⁴¹⁷

Ironically, it is the same tent that would be used not only for a funeral but also for a parliamentarian's election campaign, the tents where democracy and political representations are enacted. All these elements and patterns of the tent symbolically dress her, as they represent law, politics, culture, and family standing against her, but it is placed on her skin as a dress. Those tents would eventually be where the same parliament members who refuse to change this article get elected.

The people who can change the law are elected under the same patterns. I thought it was hypocritical and I wanted to show the contradiction creating a camouflage, implying loss of identity due to oppression and abuse. I also use patterns derived from traditional textiles. The beauty of the textiles does not only lie in its bright colors and intricate details, it also has to do with her endearing tradition where the mother teaches her soon-to-be-wed daughter the art of embroidery and weaving to complete her trousseau.

Women dressing in the color of the tents, representing all at once the marriage, the funeral and the political elections, are in fact women covered and monitored by laws, politics and so-defined religious or cultural norms. As in the history of formations of modern states, women and body politics have played a major role in the narrative of asserting and constructing the nation.⁴¹⁸ A woman's body has been and continues to be the place of representation and figuration of the state's policy, and some postcolonial nations or military regimes have co-opted women's rights discourse to shape a State Feminism or – as we have asserted for the case of Jordan – a Royal Feminism. The latter, through introducing in some cases more liberal legislations, have in fact assured more control over women. Rand questions the patriarchal dominations intersected with the surveillance and control systems. She uses not only the colors and pattern of the tents, but also the color red repeatedly, covering the women's faces on her canvases. On her canvases women's bodies are in red: the red ink represents the blood, the pain, the menstruation (see Figure 18).

⁴¹⁷ Jordan Times, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/95-rapists-go-unpunished-under-disputed-penal-code-provision>.

⁴¹⁸ N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.

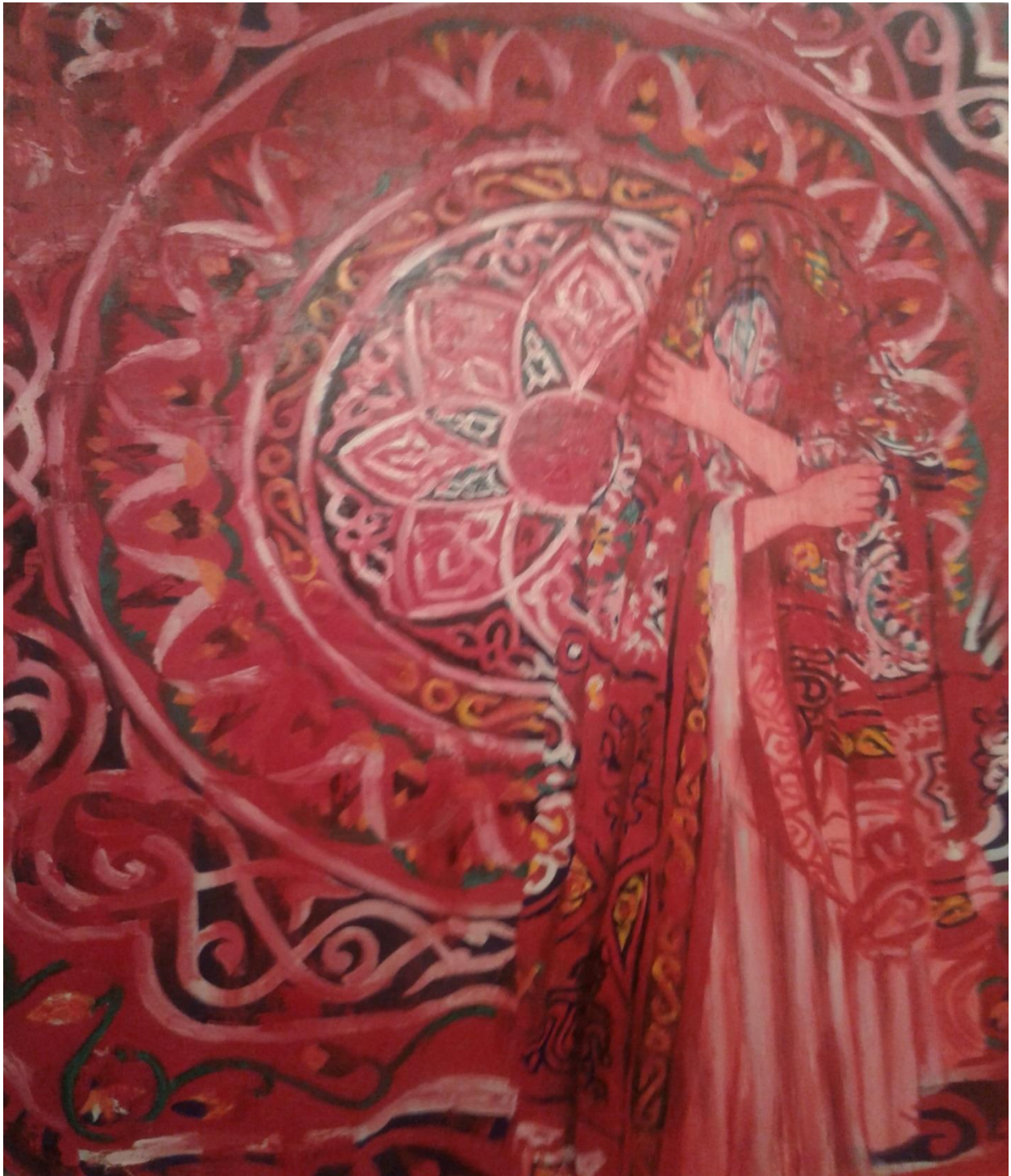


Fig. 17 Rand Abdelnoor's painting at "Woman II: Adorned with Jasmine," her first solo exhibition. Women's dresses recall the patterns of the tent for Parliamentarian elections and funerals.

Canvassing women in red inks and colors is canvassing different taboos and breaking them. Rand conflates the different origins of pain (the rape, the marriage, the law, and politics – and I would add the socio-economic conditions and the belongings of a certain class) and she links these elements to the body. Not only breaking a taboo, but unveiling women from this pain. In fact, not all women in her canvas are covered by the red. Some of her paintings show women's faces, women's naked bodies and their faces with their open eyes looking directly at the viewer. Sometimes faces or eyes are covered, sometimes they are direct and open. In these entirely different delicate looks, Rand communicates to us the presence and the stand of a woman: whether she is hurt or victimized, she is looking at us, she is questioning us. She also lets us feel the vulnerability in their bodies,



Fig. 18 Rand Abdelnoor's painting at "Woman II: Adorned with Jasmine," her first solo exhibition. The red ink represents the blood, the pain, the menstruation.

maintaining their agency to interact and interrogate. Bodies fluctuate in the imaginary and material space of the canvas. Naked bodies are desexualized giving them a space and a political content, intersecting social paradigms and stigmas with personal ones. Rand's paintings treat the issue of gender violence by declaring responsibilities, but also elevating women's bodies, in their pain and in what makes them feel ashamed, in a new dimension where they move and they create their own space in the one Rand created for them. Midwifing change, creating a space for voices and for a visual memory of the pain.

When I paint, I feel there are many thoughts I am painting. And I incorporate our cultural memory to these colors. I do not know if my work can change something, but it needs to make a change, both in Jordanian laws as well as in the society and culture. My art is urgent and it is political. I am a political artist, although I do not like that definition, but I am. It is pretentious to think that my own work is empowering but this gives a responsibility to art as art. But I like to create any further opportunities for a debate through my art, especially because people do not know and they need to imagine this pain.

Desexualizing women's bodies to link the pain to the political and social contradictions shows again the complexity of Rand's thoughts and the political responsibility given to the arts. Like Sally Shallabiyye with her stories, who in fact creates a new space for the imagination, Rand artworks also leave a space to imagine, this time, women's pain. The dichotomies of modest/shameful regarding the bodies which should remain docile are interrupted by this imagination, and a visualized pain, which break the taboos. The end of this chapter and of this thesis intentionally concludes with this responsibility and this pain. Women's creative agency, disrupting norms and dichotomies, attempts to render the polyphony and the interaction among these voices. Taking into account and sharing also the responsibility to speak of the injustice and the pain, women artists in Amman try continuously to open up physical, mental, creative spaces for cultural resistance, whose deep voices are to be discovered, given and narrated.

Conclusion

Can Women's Creative Artists be considered the New Wave of Feminism in Jordan?

Feminism is the longest revolution.

Juliet Mitchell⁴¹⁹

During the past two years in Jordan I have spent a lot of my time discussing Feminisms. The conversations with students at the University of Jordan during our classes and after; in my weekly and then monthly meetings with the Professor Rula Quawas or with Professor Sara Ababneh in her office at the University of Jordan; with artists and cultural initiators in the arts spaces and during festivals and exhibitions; after films and during concerts; with fellow researchers and journalists; in Syrian or Palestinian refugee camps. This is already a sign of Feminisms being alive. The questions were open and problematic and this is how I would like to conclude my thesis: trying to answer some questions and leaving others open for this vibrant and current issue. Are Feminisms still present in Jordan? Someone would simply ask. Or, as Rula Quawas put it, can women artists be considered the New Wave of Feminism in Jordan? Where is Feminism located? Where are its waves?

“Feminism is dead in Jordan,” or “The history of feminisms in Jordan is a failure”. These were often the comments I sometimes heard from colleagues, anthropologists or professors. Of course, their sentences were well motivated, appropriated, argued and documented. But engaging in deep conversations with female artists and attending their initiatives, I have found some other answers, and some other questions that arose. Even when women do not like to be labeled as feminists or categorized in what they do “as women”, preferring to be considered or be referred as human beings without any gender or political specification, I have found that in their practices that was a deep and intimate experience of Feminisms and often an intellectual recognition as well. The big and problematic issue in the history of Jordan and Feminism has always been the

⁴¹⁹ J. Mitchell, “Women: The Longest Revolution” in *New Left Review*, 40, 1966, pp. 11-37.

class or, as the artists often call themselves, the bubble they form. The distance and the different issues and needs in women's history have led to a persistent misunderstanding between women of different classes. The large majority of women would care more about economic rights for the simple need to survive and sustain their family, while lawyers and professors or other categories would be more committed to the implementation of formal and legal rights. I think that Feminisms stand in all these different stances.

I like to suggest here the idea of the multiplicity of shapes that form Feminisms and a complexity which open up different kinds of movements. Not all women's movements have been canonized in a unique women feminist history. But these movements formed the different ways in which women cultivate the courage to struggle, shine, and exist, although our imposed or perceived status as a minority, due to a broader sense of (male and female) misogyny. In this complexity, I cannot separate political, economic, cultural, social rights and needs, while instead the intersections of all these factors create this multiplicity of shapes.

Women's actions and women's presence, independent from political parties, NGOs or governmental or Royal foundations, is the result and manifestation of new feminist waves where the lack of trust towards institutions or organizations lead women to express their concerns and to show their presence in different ways, where they are protagonists, bargaining their presence for the just cause they carry. And if it regards social, political and economic battles, it does not exclude women's movements in the field of education, as we have said in Chapter Three, speaking about Rula Quawas's feminist class at the University of Jordan; and arts and cultures, as we have argued throughout the entire research through the everyday practices of Dima, Nora, Saba, Dina, Melika, Toleen, Noura, Sameh, Sally, Rand and many others; they incarnate an intersectional and transversal approach, not naming themselves only as political or gender-oriented activists. In the instances and moments in which images, pre-defined roles and duties of the modest and docile, and at the same time traditional and modern, Jordanian women who must appear in the official neoliberal discourse of the city, especially the capital Amman, is contested, compromised and resisted by women themselves, Feminism is still there.

The reason why I have particularly addressed the question of Feminisms to artists resides also in the 2010–2011 uprisings. Many of the initiatives, discourses and changes were prior to 2011: for example, the artistic women's collective called the *Aat* Network of Women Artists in Jordan

founded by Shreen Zmout, Toleen Touq, Dima Bawab and Lana Nasser in 2010 that we have encountered in Chapter Three. But it was in that multiplication of spaces for political action that a new generation of feminists, already existing and practicing in those forms, grew in conscience and in appearance. The creative field became simultaneously a tool of communication, expression and resistance and it was often expressed through visual arts, but also social media, blogs, popular culture, graffiti, comics, etc. This is not only to be addressed in Jordan, but in the entire Middle East, as the historian feminist Lucia Sorbera put it in the case of Egypt and 2011 revolution:

“At the dawn of the XX century, the literary salons and the nationalist struggle paved the way for the emergence of a feminist awareness and political activism. Today the spaces are different, but the practice of women writing to and for women, and of writing the history of the Revolution from a gender perspective is consolidated, and it contributes to shaping feminist ideas. The political scenario is still fluid, but it is possible to imagine that from this laboratory of experiences a new wave of feminism might arise, a wave which, like the past, will find its strength in the creative synthesis between universal and local claims, transnational networks and national specificities.”⁴²⁰

As women took advantages of the crisis in Jordan along with its contemporary artists, the year of 2011 constituted the new enthusiastic terrain to continue the celebration. Through all these different kinds of movements, from different fields, I have aimed to enlighten women’s agency and how it is enacted in arts as creative resistance in continuity with the past and the recent history of Jordan. While Feminist discourses in Jordan and in other countries in the regions are trying to set this space, the new language of creativity is already there, a new space, re-imagining gender roles and contributing to new gender visions, in a long-term perspective, and believing in stable and inevitable generational changes to reframe gender roles. Re-appropriation of spaces or the opening of spaces is a continuous negotiation with society’s and the government’s regulations. While Jordan has not experienced the same upheavals which turned Tunisia and Egypt, as well as many other countries, into places of political change or turmoil, or chaos, women in continuity with the past movements are challenging the political sphere, and their insurgent thought is exploding. Self-expression and the need for urgent change animate a

⁴²⁰ L. Sorbera, “Early Reflections of an Historian of Feminism in Egypt in Time of Revolution”, in *Genesis*, 12(1), 2013.

personal and artistic path, and the affirmation of their professions and roles in the fields of arts becomes a site of possible political transformation. Artists and creative women in the fields of arts constitute an already existing site of resistance and self-representation through arts and culture; a resilient and revolutionary force.

This is the beginning of a continuous revolution, *thawra mustamirra*, where initiating spaces and cultures would decolonize minds and allow the imagination to reign as a power beyond the power structure: when you imagine, you go beyond the minds of the powers.

I started this research believing in the necessity to hear these voices from the Middle East, and particularly from Jordan. Telling the multiple voices of women artists in Jordan, I have tried to center their voices and theorize the strength of women's voices in Jordan. These written voices and the knowledge production resulting from this original ethnographic research are part of a collective awareness in Mediterranean Feminisms, drawing on postcolonial and postexotic reflections, that women's tactics of elaborating a more gender-balanced world reside in beauty; and this beauty is often in the creative and imaginative revolutions.

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