



Presenting Absence

A Conversation, Berlin, March 2022

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To cite this article: Khaled Barakeh, Brigitte Herremans, Anne-Marie McManus & Guevara Namer (2024) Presenting Absence, Third Text, 38:6, 692-708, DOI: [10.1080/09528822.2025.2526914](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2025.2526914)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2025.2526914>



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Published online: 26 Aug 2025.



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**Khaled Barakeh, Brigitte Herremans,
Anne-Marie McManus and Guevara Namer**

This conversation, which took place between 2021 and 2022, was conceived as an exchange on contemporary art practices of representing absence in the migratory aftermath, and ongoing presence, of violence and loss in Syria. It brought together two art practitioners based in Berlin – Syrian-Kurdish photographer and filmmaker Guevara Namer, and Syrian conceptual artist Khaled Barakeh – and two researchers on contemporary Syria – Brigitte Herremans and Anne-Marie McManus, based in Belgium and Berlin, respectively. Our goal was to explore how Barakeh and Namer depict and critique differing forms and modes of absence in their respective works. In the following exchange, they describe their projects on absence, which range across deeply personal, playful and political forms of expression. Herremans comes to absence through her research on the justice imaginary in Syria, exploring how art and activism ‘presence’ experiences of harm. McManus writes on absence from literary and theoretical perspectives.

In our exchanges, we critically address the European context for Barakeh’s and Namer’s works, where Syrian art practitioners are pressured to express themselves through the lenses of war, revolution and refugeehood. A central theme that emerged in our exchanges was Barakeh’s and Namer’s frustration with being asked to speak and create not as individuals or artists, but as symbols of Syria, the latest in a line of Orientalised archetypes of Middle Eastern war for media consumption, or as representatives of Syrian art. Against this latter abstraction, they insist on

the fragmented and plural nature of Syrian artistic communities, refusing to speak for anyone but themselves. A related theme is what Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh calls ‘epistemic agency’: who gets to set the terms and topics of a conversation about Syria and/or Syrian art?¹ We quickly found that our conversation, aiming for an academic publication with its attendant conventions and expectations, risked repeating the very forms of epistemic and discursive violence we were trying to critique. Without pretending that we can extract ourselves from power relations, we have nevertheless taken liberties with the text that follows in an effort to reflect upon, rather than conceal, moments of disagreement and encounter.

Such encounters appear in what follows in a confrontation over the division of intellectual labour, for example, or a disagreement over whether ISIS has any role in our conversation. We retain these exchanges to reflexively highlight our own complicity in epistemic violence and in behaving like, or treating others as, symbols of positions and identities. Yet we have chosen to remove the names of speakers in these instances. By occasionally omitting names, we hope to let discomfort and misrecognition, which are the feelings we associate with these transient instances, inhabit the conversation on the page as it did at moments in life. By moving back and forth between identifiable voices, we hope to evoke the shifting nature of this dynamic in the unfolding of a dialogue and the friendships that underlie it.

The resulting text is a composite of multiple meetings and email exchanges that took place between August 2021 and March 2022. Some structural dynamics that challenged the conversation remain invisible. At no point did all four of us meet in person. Herremans, based outside Berlin, was able to attend one of five meetings but worked extensively on the concepts and transcripts for the project. Namer took a long artistic residency mid-project, and the text concludes with a conversation between McManus and Barakeh that took place during this period. Several of us have complex relationships to English and to textuality, which affected our ability to work collaboratively over distances. What we present is an incomplete snapshot of the many works and ideas in progress, centred around the struggle to name and represent absence.

Absence is a Crowded Experience

1 Yassin al-Haj Saleh. “We As Syrians Are Allowed to Be Witnesses.” ArabLit. September 30, 2020. <https://arablit.org/2020/09/30/yassin-al-haj-saleh-we-as-syrians-are-allowed-to-be-witnesses/>

2 In the early 1960s, shortly before instituting land reform, the Syrian state declared fifteen percent of the Kurdish population ‘Foreigners of Hasakeh’ and stripped them of all citizenship rights. Their descendants (including Guevara), although born in Syria, had no official nationality until 2011.

Guevara Namer Fighting absence – I mean my own absence – is a way of making a statement about my life. I think it is always a question of being present or not, and I look back on my first exile in Syria through my exile here in Berlin. When I was living in Syria, I was stateless as a Kurdish person. I had no civilian rights. I couldn’t get an employment contract, I wasn’t allowed to own property.² I was an absent citizen, I didn’t exist; I was in an internal exile. But in 2011, I got my Syrian passport.

Anne-Marie McManus Did the revolution change that feeling of being absent for you?

GN The regime gave us citizenship to stop the Kurdish population from protesting. But for me, I had more reason to protest because I was finally a citizen. It was like I was finally able to exist; the whole country suddenly opened their eyes. We saw each other. This is why I say that being in Berlin is not my first absence, not my first exile. My memory and experience of being absented are already so



Guevara Namer, *Stuck in Reflection*, photograph, 2017

crowded, it's the opposite of things being empty or uninhabited. Here in Berlin, it is still the case that I'm absent. There's a power that absents me while I'm trying to exist, trying to present myself.

Brigitte Herremans Could you talk about your work as an artist in Syria before 2011?

GN I built my experience in filmmaking, even though I studied photography. I think about making documentary films as building a reality. Creative documentary, for me, is a platform for searching your own voice because it's about storytelling. It's not a fiction you invent, but you still have to create. You have to capture what's in front of you and really build it, using editing to retell the story from your perspective. So you are in a non-stop search for that voice because it's a new challenge with every story you are trying to tell. For me, it was the obvious thing about art: I was finding my voice.

The problem was there were almost no gallery spaces or film festivals back then. The National Cinema Organisation, which belonged to the Ministry of Culture, controlled everything about film production and distribution, for example. For artists who wanted to work freely, we had to create the structures for our art to exist and be seen. I worked on the Dox Box Film Festival, starting in 2008, which aimed to create a space of freedom and to break the siege on culture and art.

Khaled Barakeh There's a lot of continuity between how the state was trying to absent people as citizens and this cultural siege.

GN Yes, definitely. This is part of the crowdedness of absence, because there's an artistic and cultural aspect to it that I can't separate from the state trying to absent me as a citizen. Maybe that's why my art-making merged with my activism. There was always this question of 'why art?' [in pre-2011 Syria], when I had the feeling that no one around me valued it or cared. Seriously, why art? What is it going to affect, whose life is going to change? The state didn't recognise me as a citizen or respect me as a person. At some point you feel like it isn't worth anything, like you should just go and form a political party.

AMM Which also wouldn't leave much space for a creative voice...

GN Yes; this issue of voice really matters. There's an ambiguity with absence; I'm not sure as an artist if it is about my visibility or my existence. Those aren't the same things. Fighting against your own absence can be a fight for existence – but also about being visible, being heard.

KB I feel you are bringing out a parallel dynamic here, with everyone talking about 'us' – from the regime controlling and silencing our voices, to the Western media representing us over the past ten years. We were completely absented before 2011, and then it happened again. I never felt more Syrian than after I left Syria. In Europe, I am supposed to speak and create in a way that's representative of Syria. I don't have an individuality because no one asks about it; [I'm supposed to just] function under the label, 'a Syrian artist'. Of course, sometimes that impulse contains genuine curiosity about Syria. But for the most part, we are absented in the ways Guevara just described. When we are asked to speak as symbols, it repeats this Orientalist imposition of certain lenses on us. We are asked to speak about war, being refugees, being Syrian artists. How am I supposed to speak about these communities when they have multicultural identities? But when you are asked over and over to speak on Syrian-ness and the Syrian issue, even if you don't want to, you end up producing answers that fit the white narrative.



Guevara Namer, *Protest banner with image of Ali Mustafa, a Syrian forcibly disappeared activist*, photograph, 2023

GN When I present my films, I am never asked how I made them or why. It takes on average five years to make a film, but the audience only asks about the context. I've had so many arguments with moderators trying to get them to understand that we aren't politicians and shouldn't have to only answer political questions. It's a constant struggle to bring the discussion to your space, onto your terms.

AMM So your art is being used like an anthropological or political source rather than taken on its own terms.

KB There is a real erasure of complexity in the European scene. We're pigeon-holed by our identities, and that prevents art from Syria (or elsewhere) being framed or understood as abstract, poetic, modernist, or anything else. It's interesting; most of the teachers who taught art in Syria had studied in the USSR, so we grew up with this socialist realist impulse and didn't get to learn a lot about abstract art. And now it's being blocked here in a different way.

Inside/Outside the Frame

BH I was wondering, for both of you, about the absence of Syrian victims, who are out of the frame. How do you deal individually with this contradiction – that there is so much documentation on Syria, with forensic evidence and images everywhere, but Syrians themselves are absent?

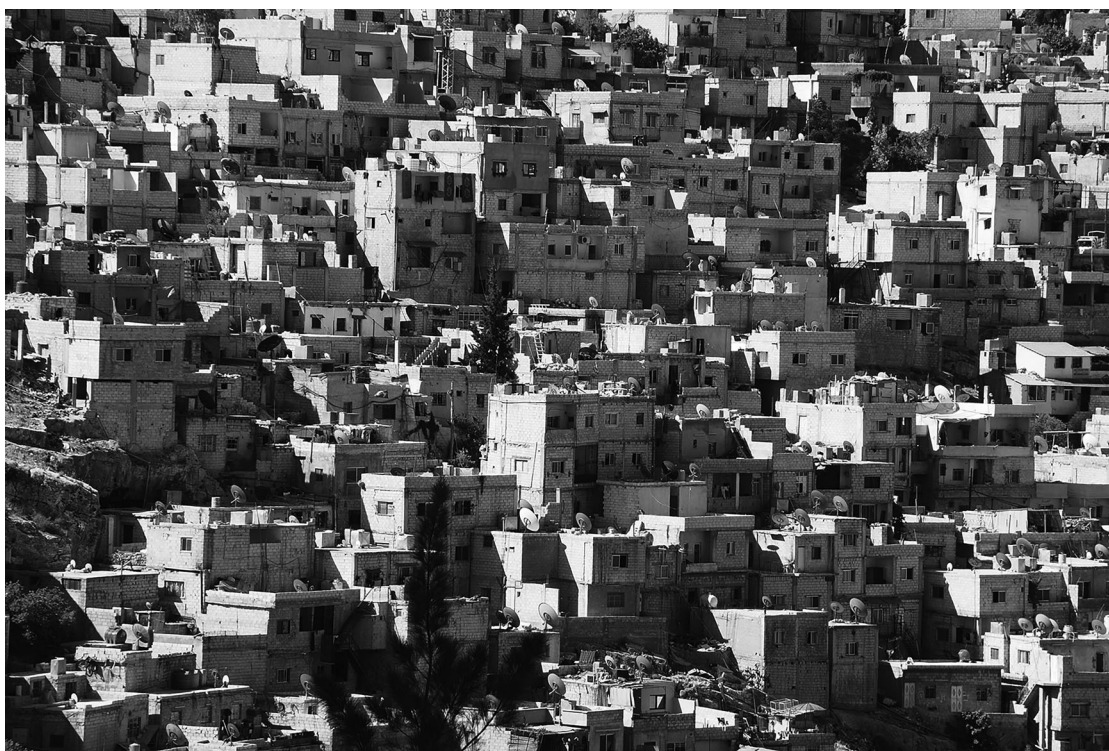


Guevara Namer, *Forest: The Border Project*, photograph, 2007–2020

GN I always felt from the perspective of filmmaking and media that it is not about Syrians being absent, but objects. It's true, the amount of footage on Syria is huge, but I don't agree with the claim that it is the most documented event in history. It is a question of what we mean by documentation and how we think about digitisation, which was itself a shock, combined with the shock of trying to capture the Syrian story as a content and as an archive. I really commend the archive as a resource for us for the future – in ten or fifteen years, we will still be present. But I think we have to ask, what is the meaning, or value, of this documentation, of these images? It is not automatic. This is our role, we are always trying to create a meaning out of the representation, out of the archive. I know what you're referring to with Syrians' absence. But we also had a new presence. Suddenly we had access to many international platforms. We could raise our voices through photography, an artistic language to make a statement. But myself, and the Syrian photographers I've trained, we have an issue: that our voices were never welcome or shown.

KB I completely agree. What was important? The image of the war, never the photographer. They were never asked to tell a story about the images they made.

GN What is the definition of absence from a photographer's perspective? Their voice. They were always on the front page, but were completely erased. For me, it is important now to present the people who took the photos – not just the photos or the events. That's why I have started my 'Dialogue with Absence' project, to work against the erasure of these people, especially the 466 image-makers – this term is very important to me – who were killed. But the erasure happens



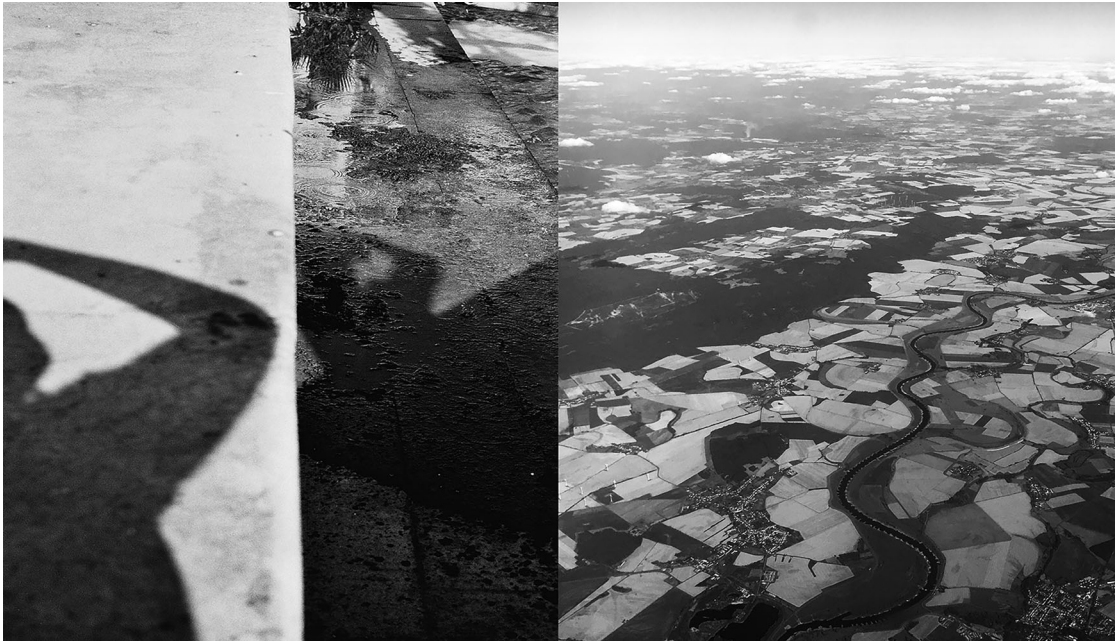
Guevara Namer, *Zorava, a Kurdish Neighborhood in Damascus*, photograph, 2010

even with those who are still alive. They are exhibiting now all over Europe and have awards and work with news agencies, but still their voices are absent. No one asks them, what about you? For some of the image-makers I'm working with, it's the first time somebody has engaged them as creators. What always happens is this pressure from people saying: I need the picture. How much is the picture? Send it, the printed image. If this is not absented, I don't know what is. The people who are creating images of Syria after 2011 for the world to consume aren't being acknowledged. Talking about the people behind the image-making has become a real task for me, bigger than any one exhibition or project. It's going to take a lot of time – because from this absence I'm drawn to new questions.

BH Could you give an example?

GN One thing I am struggling with but that I also find productive right now is: you try to exist when people or forces are trying to absent you. You face it head on. But even when we assert our presence, we are still working with our absence, you see? So claiming my presence doesn't cancel out my absence. I find something interesting in this contradictory presence of both concepts.

KB I hear you, also with our voices being sought out but not being heard. We made so many unheard demands in 2011, then we tried to talk and challenge and create a new environment, but it didn't reach Western audiences. In this sense, there was no echo. So it led to us being present, but somewhere else, like we are supposed to provide the material for Western cultural masturbation. I keep seeing this dynamic of erasure and then filling in. Culture comes in to clean up



Guevara Namer, *Untitled: Times Project*, photograph, 2007–2022

the mess left by politicians, creating programs and museums and exchange and residency programs to ‘celebrate your diversity’. Like, let’s go and destroy your country then make a cultural festival.

ISIS/No ISIS

[Names in this section are replaced with numbers]

Speaker 1 I think, conceptually, it is also important to talk about the change after ISIS. You didn’t mention this, but of course, it has influence... the revolution was welcomed because it is a certain narrative of the Arab masses revolting. And it was something that could be embraced. Your voices could be heard because the voices were soothing. But then the voices weren’t welcome anymore because the perspective changed.

Speaker 2 It stole the narrative from us.

Speaker 3 No, it was always not about our voices... again, this issue of our voices being appropriated and us being muted. It was about what audiences want, the international community and what they want to hear. People in Germany don’t want to feel guilty again, so the moment you tell them it’s ISIS, they feel better. They don’t need any more empathy with Syrians – because they deserve it, you know? They’re just a bunch of radical Islamic terrorists, let them die or kill each other. European citizens don’t need to feel guilty and can keep feeling like they’re the centre of everything. They were relieved.

Speaker 2 We can talk about it if you want. I’m just wondering if we really need to emphasise ISIS.

Speaker 1 I was struck by the absence of ISIS in our conversation because it's such a determining element.

Speaker 2 I mean, it's always absent for me. It's not the Syrian issue, so it's never part of the discussion for us.

Speaker 3 We want to talk about us, and the world wants us to talk about ISIS.

Speaker 4 OK, let's move on.

The Missing Camera

KB I am working on a project about undocumented stories and images. A few years ago, I heard a story about a woman with two kids trying to cross the Mediterranean. It hit me so hard. One child died while they were on the boat, and everyone wanted her to throw his body into the water. And she didn't want to because she wanted to bury him and visit his grave. She must have fallen asleep holding the body, and during the night one guy woke up and threw the kid into the sea. The next day, they discovered that he had thrown the living child into the water. So she lost both her children in one day and was left holding a corpse. This is one particularly powerful example of so many stories I have heard where I felt, what if a camera had been there to document it all? How would that affect the story and so many other stories that are basically gone now, what power would an image have had? Or to put it the other way around, what if no camera had captured the image of Alain Kurdi, which had such an impact in the West?

AMM I get the sense that the image here would be more than testimony, it would also condense the event in some sense, perhaps close to Susan Sontag's idea of the photograph?

KB Yes and no. For me, the visual is a form of testimony that zooms in from the macro level to the micro, the individual, but I'm also interested in how it provokes different emotions and reactions to texts in the spectator. The idea of the 'Missing Camera' project will be to have artists or photographers recreate images from missing cameras. They won't recreate a scene but elliptically represent that moment, creating almost a canon of these stories that shows their absence and questions what could have been otherwise.

AMM A bringing to presence that doesn't cancel out the absence, similar to what Guevara was describing earlier?

3 'En Mal D'Archive: Memory Revisited' was an exhibition curated by Barakeh in Beirut in 2018 with the programme 'Preserving the Oral History of Syria'.

4 In 2013, a forensic photographer code-named Caesar smuggled over 50,000 images out of Syria. The images depict the corpses of people who died under torture in Syrian prisons; graphic and bureaucratic, the photos show bodies taped with identifying numbers.

KB Yes, I think so. The image they make becomes a metaphor or symbol of the story, a creative documentation that is similar to what we did in 'En Mal D'Archive: Memory Revisited'.³ Because you have to understand, it doesn't even make sense to try to capture reality as accurately as possible when you are an artist trying to represent what happened in Syria. It was so surreal, the stories are almost in the realm of sci-fi.

BH I'm seeing a parallel between the 'Missing Camera' project and your earlier work 'Relentless Images'. That project also created, or I suppose played with, the expectation that viewers were going to see the images of imprisoned, tortured bodies from the Caesar files, but then they didn't.⁴

KB I can see why you're drawing that parallel. In 'Relentless Images', I took the victims out of the photos first of all to preserve their and their loved ones' dignity, as well as their identities. It's important to me that advocacy for the disappeared



Khaled Barakeh, *The Untitled Images*, 300

and the dead doesn't perpetrate new violence on them through images. And as an artist, I wanted to ask how can we represent the victims and highlight both their absence, because they were disappeared and killed, and their physical presence in the documentation? What happens when we evoke their lives and deaths by their absence, through their absence in the frame? The work contained frames that imagined the metadata of the Caesar images, transcribed onto tape like the one used to identify the bodies. Depending on the space I was exhibiting in, I always tried to show the mass scale of the killing and the documentation, like a mass grave. The metadata include things like the time and date of the photo, the technical settings of the camera. The data are important technically, for thinking about the making of each image, and legally, which is the main relevance of these photos today, especially in cases like the Koblenz trial here in Germany. From a legal perspective, it is not just what's in the picture, but also the metadata. By using the tape and metadata, I wanted to go further into the dehumanisation of how Syrians are represented today and force the viewer to see this transformation of humans into statistics. It's possible I will use a similar method for 'Missing Camera' but I haven't decided yet. It might be that I have frames containing a few lines of text, which tell a story of a missing camera... kind of creating the story in the form of image.

AMM So the text takes the place of the image?

KB Yes. There's also another way I was thinking of what has been erased. There are so many stories that are missing. Coming back to the victims, how can we present the people they were in the absence of their voices? How can we do



Khaled Barakeh, *Relentless Images, 2*

justice to their stories? I believe our role as storytellers and filmmakers is to be on the side of the oppressed, to use whatever tools we have to equalise the spotlight and tell another truth, not the one of the oppressors.

Stop Interviewing Me

[Names in this section have been removed]

- You aren't contributing an equal part of the work yet. I expected something else from both of you. But you were just asking questions. I thought it would be a conversation. So are you writing about our work or are we collaborating?
- You're right. This is a new kind of work for me. I am trying to figure out voice and collaboration. I get stuck wondering, when do I talk? What do I say, and with what authority?
- I appreciate you holding yourself back not to talk too much. But I would love it if you did. Because what I want from this kind of co-operation is as a practitioner, right? I want someone to slow me down and say, let's sit and think and look. That gives me awareness about what I'm doing and why.

Intuiting Absence as Art Practice

AMM I think absence as an object tends to be very slippery; firstly, because it seems to lend itself to almost any context: religion, personal grief, marginalisation, transitional justice... there are so many things absence can be, which is something we have seen in these conversations. In the end, we get frustrated and want to grab it and pin it down. My impulse is to resist the urge and observe it. What's the desire in the conversation? To lend order, that's definitely one piece of it, but when it comes to art specifically, it might be useful to distinguish between art that fills in – showing or telling the person, story or image that has been erased – and absence itself as the object of art. I tend to see your work as playing between these two functions. Your art advocates for the disappeared and the dead, so it overlaps with transitional justice, which needs to render the absent present: what has been devastated, who has been killed or taken from us. It is a hopeful gesture, that some form of justice, which could never fully replace the absent, could at least do something to tie the community back together in a situation of total loss and destruction. So that is filling in, and I see works like 'Relentless Images' evoking that gesture in art and politics. But there is the possibility that art can also do something else, which you get at by approximating the form of filling in, but then *not* showing the bodies, not exhibiting the images. This is something different, maybe making the edges of absence visible – or the edges of living with absence, which is a different thing. What do you think?

KB I was trying to get at this feeling of living with absences in the online installation I curated last year.⁵ The six artists came to me wanting to work with absence because of different things they were going through in their lives – exile from their homelands, the coronavirus pandemic, the loss of a father. I tried to think critically about my position and not give the impression that I was using their work to present an idea. That is why in the first video, you have the presentation of a vision or atmosphere for the installation. But the last five videos focus on the artwork. I wanted to give the artists a platform to dive into their thoughts and emotions.

AMM I noticed the opening presentation is full of questions instead of trying to offer a programme or an agenda for what absence is. I also noticed the artworks aren't signed. It gave me the feeling of a cohesiveness to what the artists were trying to get at, like an ambient body of emotion around absences, which is interesting because of course you were all working across distances in the lockdown.

KB I wanted a kind of randomness to the flow of their emotions and the moments that connected the installation. That came up again when I compiled the book for the second installation. I imagined it like a musical band playing for six months, with everyone playing from their side, sometimes together and sometimes solo. They have distinctive voices, and if the viewer pays attention they can tell them apart.

AMM Have you ever read *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf? Every character has a musical inflection. You never know who's speaking, but you can feel it.

KB That's exactly it. It got more complex when the artists started to play with sending each other their works and developing on top of each other's drawings. The works got layered with two or three artists' imprints. It felt like a really playful and jazzy mode of communication...

AMM ... over absences, about absences. Did you feel they were connecting to one another in a way that overcame some of the feelings of absence or isolation?

⁵ 'Absence' was an exclusively online installation in May 2021, featuring the works of artists from Syria, Egypt and Palestine. Barakeh reconceptualised it as a second, in-person installation, 'Presence is not the Opposite of Absence', in October 2021.

KB I don't think I can answer that. I don't know what they were feeling individually.

AMM One thing that is coming to mind for me is this idea of absence as a feeling or experience, one that's very relational. Even when we share over experiences of absence, it doesn't cancel the experience out. The opening questions of the original installation were all in a 'we' voice, right? So we began with this sense of a shared experience, or maybe you interpolated the viewer into this community and their absence.

KB So what would you have done if you were curating?

AMM That is a really hard question! I have no idea.

KB OK, then how would you describe absence if you pretended to be one of the six artists, or if you wanted to draw it or sketch it or write about it? I think in art concepts, but you do something else.

AMM I think you're also asking why I care about absence. One of the verbs I tend to use for it is that it 'sediments'. As soon as you say 'absence', the first impression is something has been destroyed, cleared away. A person or city or collective is gone. Like something is flattened. In one way, you and Guevara were talking against this idea when you brought up crowded experiences of absenting, as well as in your 'Absence' installation, where the artists were experiencing entangled forms of absence: lockdowns, living outside their home countries, native languages, personal losses. These are living experiences that change with us every day. I am making it sound pretty easy, but I think these are actually deeply painful experiences, living always with the knowledge of other possibilities, other lives, what might have been if the trauma hadn't happened, if the cut hadn't been made. There's a beautiful passage in Claudia Brodsky's *In the Place of Language* about the remains of concentration camps that were destroyed.⁶ She is talking to a man who is pointing to where the wall of a camp would have been, and he's saying 'right here', showing her, when there's nothing there. She starts to talk about the people who have been absented: not just their killing, but all of the things that *could* have happened if their lives had continued. And this is so much more than a physical absence; it is infinite and incalculable because every person is a world. I think it is very, very difficult to put that into any kind of representation. We live with so many times operating within us at any given moment, and absence is a word that starts to scratch the surface of that complexity and emotion.

KB I agree, that's very difficult to represent. How do you see art interacting with that feeling? Or what is the role of art, if you see absence this way?

AMM I think there is something initially quite isolating about the experience. There is something empowering, or maybe I want to say validating, about bringing absence out into the public sphere and naming it, making it visible. Art can evoke these experiences, as we have been talking about with yours and Guevara's projects, which is a powerful thing to do, both for people grappling with absence, and to pull the discourse on Syrian art in Europe towards new terminologies and priorities.

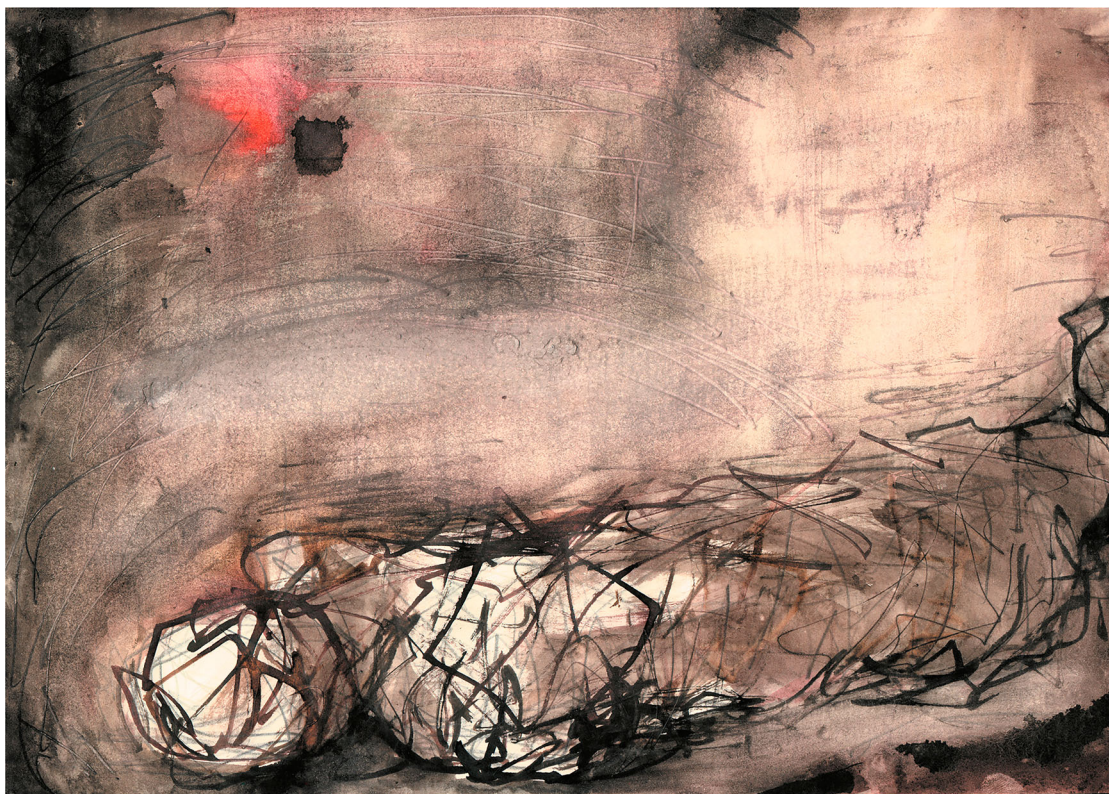
KB Right; this struggle to change the narrative. So is your role as a researcher to just write about our works?

AMM I think it is partially that. To amplify and connect the works and ideas that you are, respectively, bringing into existence. I also want to connect what you are doing to a broader context, as so many people are grappling with a sense of devastation creeping everywhere and becoming increasingly normalised. Indigenous and Black scholars point out that techniques of violence and neglect once reserved

⁶ Claudia Brodsky, *In the Place of Language: Literature and the Architecture of the Referent*, Fordham University Press, Fordham, New York, 2009



Khaled Barakeh, *Ink on my Hands*, 17, ink and watercolor on paper, 30 × 21 cm



Khaled Barakeh, *Ink on my Hands*, 13, ink and watercolor on paper, 21 × 30 cm

for specifically racialised groups are becoming generalised and overpowering in a way that makes dignified human life impossible on a new scale. Some scholars approach it today by writing about war in the contemporary Middle East, where the violence is so apocalyptic and racialised. But my feeling is that they often do so without a strong sense of local context or historical memory, focusing on spectacles of destruction and erasure at the expense of attending to life in the intervals of those explosions. Achille Mbembe is an example of someone who thinks about the devastation and militarisation of contemporary politics differently: with his idea of necropolitics, he talks about people getting separated from one another, a dynamic of ascending inequality and division.⁷ For me, the conversation we have been having about absence is also about a feeling of becoming isolated, as the conditions for a decent life are systematically eroded in ways we can all feel, but we are also struggling for the vocabulary to say: this cannot continue. This is not human life. Something is deeply, deeply wrong. In this regard, sadly, Syria is an exemplary case, and works by people like you and Guevara need to be understood as part of that global conversation, not just in terms of a Syrian particularity.

KB I would like to make an art book of abstract drawings that only represent the rivers of space between words. Like a parallel to this book about absence; a book with no words about absence. When you use words, you describe ideas in a direct way to a certain extent, although poetry gets away from that way of speaking. What I love about art is that it stays in an abstract, suggestive mode.

⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2019



Khaled Barakeh, *Damascus*, 4

AMM Gérard Wacjman argues that language can never represent absence, only the visual arts can.⁸ Since you are mentioning text, I am wondering if we can return to the project you are planning on the missing camera. I remember in an earlier exchange, you described photographs as having a power that texts don't, but storytelling and words are going to be in the frames of these images. Can you talk about how you are using words to reflect on art as medium, or perhaps on representing absence?

KB The story of the woman who lost her children at sea made me think about so many absent cameras, especially in the Syrian context, but also in general history. All that was needed at that moment to change the whole thing, to change the world, was a camera. I'm thinking about iconic images from the Vietnam War, for example, which affected history. So imagine, how many moments we are not aware of? How many effective, brutal or treasured stories? I want to provoke that feeling through the exhibition, which is why the photos stay missing. We don't see the photo. We need the story. At the same time, I'll be exploring the question of whether words can become as effective as, and as much as, images, in the absence of images.

AMM I feel like absence isn't just a theme, it's almost a strategy in your work.

KB Maybe. I would say it's something that I have been intuiting in my practice over the past decade... no, actually since the beginning of my practice. When I look at works from 2003, I have absent faces. So it wasn't a conscious decision, but I think absence was something I was working towards. Then later, when I got more politically aware during the Syrian Revolution, absence became a much more explicit aspect of my work.

⁸ Gérard Wacjman, *L'objet du siècle*, Editions Verdier, Paris, 1998

AMM So it is sort of a through-line for your practice. For the ‘Missing Camera’, it seems to have a lot to do with evoking what can’t be fully represented. At least that is how I am reading you, when the viewer grasps the absence of the image – the one that could have changed the world but didn’t – by seeing the story in text-as-image, they are also encountering the enormity of what happened on so many individual levels. We can’t grasp it because it is so terrible; we can only see its edges. So these images try to draw attention to their absence to highlight the losses, which are so singular. But there is also the implicit critique here that, well, we’ve all become numb to the images of loss and devastation. You’re forcing a viewer to stop and think about the missing image instead of just saying, oh, another image from Syria.

KB Yes; I want to reverse this process where people go and expect to see a certain kind of image. You go to the exhibition and all of a sudden you find empty frames. In terms of the text and the image, I am interested in the zone in-between. For this work, my main media are a frame and its glass, which we usually look through to get to photography, and then words. So I present the content with a photographic reference. But there’s a missing image. And instead of an image, we just read a story with words. So this is where the viewer becomes the image, they choose the face of the woman who lost two children. The viewer creates the scene, gives them clothes, becomes the director, right? It becomes their story. Which makes it relevant, because the viewer isn’t stunning themselves with images of a reality they don’t belong to. I’m just giving them the power of narrative to create an image.

AMM Do you feel a danger in giving that power away?

KB No. As an artist, I am setting the terms. We’re facilitating new narratives.

Research reported in this article was supported by Starting Grant SYRASP (851393) of the European Research Council.
