

Ala Younis: *Moving Images*

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World – without the mandate for conquest.

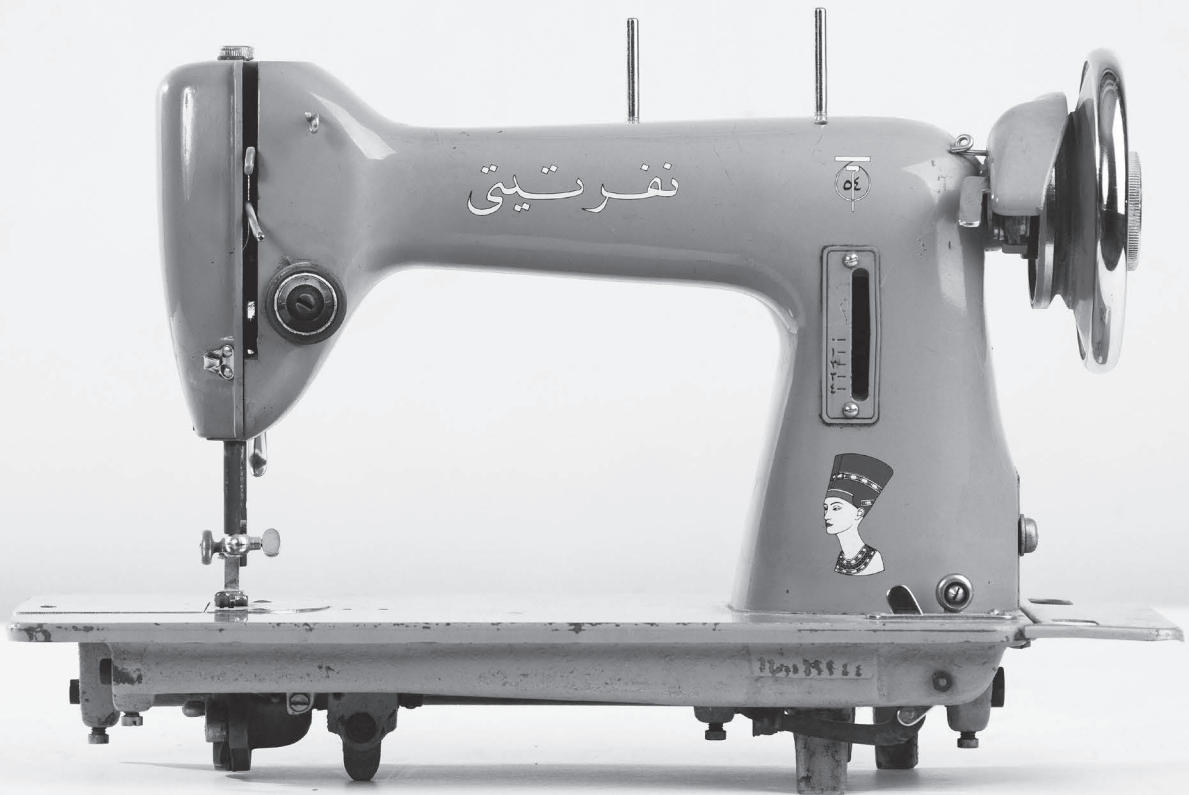
Toni Morrison¹

When we move from a definition, the definition moves.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak²

Over the past few years, art of the modern Arab world has received significant attention from both inside and outside the region, with many eager to embrace the experimental output of an era best remembered (perhaps, somewhat nostalgically) for its strident social and political transformation.³ Institutions have mounted major monographic exhibitions and historical surveys to bring the era's art to public attention; commercial galleries and fairs have raised awareness by leveraging the market to elevate the social and economic value of works; biennials have brought lesser-known artists into dialogue with their international contemporaries; collections have preserved works and expanded Western-centric canons; archive initiatives have made material more accessible and scholars have contributed critical depth through research and publishing. This text, however, does not aim to weigh in on the individual merits of such efforts, but rather to approach the modern Arab world as an inspiring moment of mapping critical geography that could be used to model similar endeavours of collective discovery and intellectual pursuit.

In many of these institutional engagements, the definition of the modern Arab world has not been explicitly or critically engaged, perhaps for fear of unnecessarily over-complicating efforts that could stifle or confine important work. Recently, however, the editors of an excellent volume of primary source material (published by The Museum of Modern Art) commissioned a text by scholar Ussama Makdisi, who takes up the challenge of historicising the Arab world over the past two centuries. In 'The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World', he offers an insightful account that proposes an understanding of the region's history through a dialectic tension between acts of self-determination on the one hand, and foreign manipulation on the other.⁴ As a scholarly intervention, the text succeeds in bringing to the fore the many people, cultures, classes and religions historically populating this region, as well as calling attention to the still apparent intervening influence of Western powers.



For artist Ala Younis, this history of the modern Arab world is often the subject of her work, and it is made and unmade in ways that augment both the aforementioned endeavours. It is a desire for ‘close exploration’ that best characterises the artist’s motivations and working method. Hers is an impassioned and intuitive practice of ‘study’, rather than a more formal interest in institutionalising a disciplinary field of ‘studies’ and reinforcing her place within it.⁵ In her artistic engagements, Younis locates the people and places of the modern Arab world in archives and the era’s material culture, and enlists their participation in a continual refashioning of this world in its own image rather than in response to outside interference. Many of her works advance historic projects of self-determination in order to cultivate an ever-deeper and more capacious interiority for a land, which in the past as well as at present, is challenged by the occupation of territory, foreign influence and intensely guarded borders. Through three of the artist’s works, this text looks at the cultivation of a shared critical interiority that could live up to its inherited potential.

TIN SOLDIERS

Perhaps no figure has captivated contemporary imaginings of the modern Arab world more than the soldier. The enduring symbolism, combined with the continued militarisation of the region, left Younis surprised to learn that representations of the region’s contemporary armies had never been produced as toy figurines. In her research, she realised that the manufacture of tin soldiers had peaked after the First World War, precisely when the Middle East was being remapped as a result of the Ottoman Empire’s collapse and the partition of land into British and French Mandates under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.⁶ *Tin Soldiers* (2010-11) was initially conceived as a response to address this absence in material culture, through a home-grown effort originally produced by Beirut’s Ashkal Alwan for *Home Works 5* (2010), and completed with the support of the 12th *Istanbul Biennial* (2011). The work materialises the nine standing armies involved in wars that have shaped the contemporary Middle East. Reflecting their numbers at a 1:200 scale, each of the 12,261 metal soldiers that comprise the artwork bears a hand-painted flag on its arm and is arranged, by nation, in orderly rows atop a five-by-five metre plinth. When presented in a gallery, the installation’s visual mass and weight commands attention on first encounter but also draws the viewer in for closer scrutiny.

Despite the formal composure of this and other works, there is sensitivity in approach to making and the means through which art might participate in the world. The care with which each toy soldier is hand-painted reveals another project of accounting that overpopulates a corrective gesture of ‘giving voice’ or a mechanical critique of militarism. Even before the work’s presentation, *Tin Soldiers* seemed to solicit the identification and interaction of those around the artist. As Younis enlisted family, friends and fellow artists to help paint the figures, stories emerged through them, and some of these people wrote essays for her publication. Turkish artist Cevdet Erek spoke of joining a jazz band during his compulsory military service, as well as the makeshift calendars fellow soldiers would create to countdown the days before they could leave the army. Collaborators on other projects had sharp memories of their compulsory training in Egypt. A Marxist spoke of a life that amounted to defeat. Over time, as she worked at home in Amman, or in Beirut and Istanbul in preparation for the work’s exhibition, *Tin Soldiers* accrued the stories of those around her and came to embody lived experience—the residue of militarism became the matter in which a solidarity of subjectivity could mobilise across disparate places and times. *Tin Soldiers* led to the creation of exhibitions and a publication, expanding the project by inviting others to contribute to conversations



its installation had set in motion. It is this edited volume that examines the militancy associated with the era's emancipatory struggles. Through text and images contributed by a multigenerational group of peers, the book explores the history of not only those who served their country or saw combat but also the many 'incidental soldiers' – those who trained but never reached the battlefield, those born into a period of war but came of age in times of peace, and those who continue to resist ongoing forms of dispossession, from the spectacular to the mundane. The emotional complexity of Younis' endeavour is elucidated by fellow artist Ahmad Ghossein, whose recollection resonates the installation's visual weight and introduces the language of loss and fragility:

*Regarding your project, I have to say, Ala, that I grew up with unfulfilled fighters from the communist party in the south, fighters that fought against Israel, and especially two brothers, one of whom was the head of the resistance during the eighties... a man who has lost most of his friends. Well, it is very emotional when it comes to this subject, the idea of losing and how to continue life. In the south there are many fighters who felt lost after 1990, because they had spent fifteen years fighting. But the weird thing is that all these films talking about those fighters filmed them from the back or with covered faces. Now we can see those faces, but how?*⁷

Younis also invited writer and curator Rasha Salti to contribute an essay, adding the ‘poet-fighter’ to the artist’s ‘incidental soldiers’. Far from a symbolic device or romantic turn of phrasing, Salti’s text shows that the written word was instrumental in mobilising the Palestinian struggle. The sheer size of the historical record, “the collective cultural canons and icons that make up the body of Palestinian cultural and artistic expression,” is testament to the fact that “the universe exists.” For her, as for the artist, the question for today is a philosophical one of “how it could have practically been shared by all Palestinians across the world considering statelessness and dispersal.”⁸

Poetry would serve as a carrier of collective experience that could be “cross-fertilised, conjugated and combined” to sustain the movement and prepare its people for evolving phases of the struggle. In 1930, the poet Ibrahim Toukan (1905-41) provided a name for the Palestinian yearning for freedom, in the figure of the “*fida’i*”. Although perhaps most commonly translated in English as “freedom fighter”, Salti explores its many meanings – commando, guerrilla, redeemer – noting their militant and prophetic resonances, personalising the figure with men from different chapters of the struggle: Izz-ad-Din al-Qassam, for example, the first identifiable person to be associated with this figure, a man well-known for stressing that armed struggle would be the only way to defeat the British occupiers and Zionist coloniser; Abdel-Rahim Mahmoud, who fought in the Great War and died in combat in 1948, became one of the “first poet-fighters” and “poet-martyrs”. His plain and potent verse in *Al-Shaheed* would introduce the “willing martyr” to the figure of the “*fida’i*” and would circulate for years after his death, as an “incantation” or “anthem” to take up arms.⁹ From the 1960s, poets such as Mahmoud Darwish would take up the challenge of developing language for the revolutionary project, and with that, the articulation of a new sense of self. The Lebanese poet, Khalil Hawi, offers an intimate look at the poet’s place in this world-making endeavour:

*How lightly they cross the bridge
In the morning.
My ribs, a bridge, stretch out for them,
Reaching from the caves, from the swamps,
of the East to the new East.*¹⁰

In the unfolding horizon line of emancipatory struggle, personal observation is reimaged through collective action and feeling. Hawi trusts in the complexity that poetry permits, as if to suggest his vision could be carried further out by the advancing “*fida’i*” – a formulation that could be easily dismissed as pure metaphor if history had not spoken otherwise.

Just how far that vision would be carried out, and the distances travelled to be a part of it, is a question taken up by artist Oraib Toukan in her contribution to the publication. To the ‘incidental soldier’ and the ‘poet-fighter’, she adds the ‘radical filmmaker’ in her text on Masao Adachi and Koji Wakamatsu’s 1971 film *Red Army/PFLP: Declaration of World War*. Following in the footsteps of contemporary Maoists, the two Japanese filmmakers first visited Lebanon on their way back to Japan from the 1971 *Venice Film Festival*. They were received by Leila Khaled and Ghassan Kanafani, who offered access to the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) in the Saida and Shatila refugee camps. Their trip ultimately led to a joint production by PFLP and the Red Army Faction of Japan’s Revolutionary Communist League, in which sweeping views of natural landscape and scenes of domestic life are interspersed with scenes of guerrilla fighters training for battle. The film would circulate as a political film about Palestine, yet as Toukan reveals, none of this footage was filmed on Palestinian soil. Toukan conceptualises the value of this act, which for the filmmakers, seemed an

unimportant detail. The subject of the revolution was not located in any specific type of depiction; instead, the moving image sutured revolution with daily life and landscape “on the one hand, as it is supposed to have existed, and, on the other, in order for it to exist.”¹¹ Toukan also recalls that French writer Jean Genet wrote about living with resistance fighters, even though he never spent time in Palestine. Taken together, these observations suggest a widely accepted idea that the frontline of the revolution was not simply located in Palestine proper, or at the borders of neighbouring countries that stood in solidarity, but ran through the land writ large. Any ‘incidental’ piece of earth beneath one’s feet was ample ground from which to launch The Revolution.

ENACTMENT

The human figure recurs throughout Younis’ artworks. *Enactment* (2017) is a ten metre-long series of framed photographs and drawings that trace the individual and the collective through history, and the permutation in meaning of those social constructs over time. Originally conceived as an investigation into the history of performance art in the Arab world prior to the 1990s, Younis began by consulting a book that surveyed artists working in Iraq, which then had a thriving art scene. In a section on artist Ibrahim Zayer, she encountered a brief mention of his untimely suicide in 1972, which had coincided with an exhibition opening in his adopted city of Beirut. The timing reminded her of artist Xiao Lu’s performance, in which the artist fired a gun at her artwork during the opening of the now infamous 1989 *China Avant-garde* exhibition in Beijing.¹² As an aesthetic gesture, Lu’s action is remembered for enacting critical questions about a moment in history of which she was a part, but that are not reducible to personal experience or biographical narrative.

Younis neither conceived of Zayer’s suicide as an artwork, nor wished to glorify his death as a hero, but rather aimed at granting this person the critical reception befitting a life given over to political commitment. In other texts and conversations with Zayer’s friends, she discovered he had moved from Baghdad to Beirut to join the PFLP, where he worked as a writer and illustrator for *Al Hadaf* (*The Target*), the magazine started by well-known writer Ghassan Kanafani in Beirut in 1969 that enjoyed wide distribution in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. She also learned of the artist’s earlier imprisonment in Baghdad due to his involvement as a member of the Communist Party, as well as his criticism of limited state-sponsored exhibition opportunities. Others spoke of his deep disappointment in the dwindling promise of political movements in the Arab world, citing the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, his break from the Party in Baghdad, the splintering of the PFLP into two factions in 1969, in addition to weakening pan-Arab solidarity. Although Zayer does not appear in Younis’ work, his life and death directed her attention to political archives in search of embodied intent and collective gestures. Instead of a work on performance art, she found herself with a work of performances.

At one end of *Enactment*, Younis has incorporated a cover image from a 1969 issue of *Al Hadaf*, featuring two *fedayeen* leaping into the air, with only the open sky behind them. The image most immediately recalled Yves Klein’s photomontage, *Le Saut dans le vide* (*The Jump in the Void*) (1960), that featured the artist jumping into air from a building on a quiet street. Like the image of the leaping soldiers, Klein’s also enjoyed front-page placement in a publication, in this instance, *Dimanche—Le Journal d’un Seul Jour* (*Sunday, The Newspaper of a Single Day*), on 27 November, 1960. There is an element of staging and construction at the core of both photographs: Klein worked closely with two photographers to document the action and compose the photomontage, and the PFLP had an active film unit that would have possessed the knowledge and capacity to compose



such an image. In this way, both function as speculative studies but from different vantage points. Whereas Klein's image framed a definitive action by the artist, *Al Hadaf's* focused on routine combat training by Palestinian fighters. Significantly, the soldiers' informal rehearsals are serialised in the work as recurring performances, which multiplied by thousands, could be recognised as a process of mobilisation. That image of synchronised performance would stay with Younis throughout her research.

During a visit to the Berlin Wall Museum, Younis found resonances between the entangled bodies of the two *fedayeen* in flight and an image of East German officers and athletes physically supporting each other's efforts to scale the Wall as a test of its fortification. Athletes and gymnasts performing in the 1973 World Youth and Students Festival in East Berlin also recalled young men training in Palestinian camps. In the English-language press, she found journalists fixated on the liberatory athleticism that marked the celebrations, while a festival-produced publication highlighted the diverse participation of delegates from Palestine, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria and even Kuwaiti students studying in Moscow.

By the 1980s, the promise of the collective body had been overrun by political ideology and party politics. For *Enactment*, Younis surveyed cultural production from the period that registers this disillusion as bizarre mutations of human form and behaviour. Taking inspiration from artist Ahmad Nawash's paintings that parody the moment in his depiction of comically disfigured bodies, the artist's line drawings wield a dark humour: an arm grows a rifle, two bodies share one head, three heads must live with two arms, four legs and only one body. In the work and a related lecture, Younis refers to Mohammad Tommalaih's 1984 collection of short stories, *The Scoundrel Enthusiasts*, which examines rampant complacency. Born in 1957 in Karak, Jordan to a Palestinian family, Younis speaks

of the author as a colourful figure, who came of age during a moment of conscious commitment to a larger struggle and futilely attempts to stem a new collective desire characterised by normalcy. After briefly attending a Baghdad university in the mid-1970s, Tommalaih returned to Jordan, where he continued studying at Jordan University and is said to have repeatedly failed classes for a decade in order to remain active in the student movement. His book includes a number of tales that resemble early performance art. For example, a man wanders throughout a city calling everyone by the same name, or an entire population suffers from insomnia due to an epidemic of leaky taps, resulting in societal collapse. Tommalaih's writing carves out a perspective increasingly estranged from his environment. Younis' work goes on to explore the consolidation of leadership figured in stoic, unmoving monuments and other elements of material culture, and in some cases, their destruction.

FROM THE NEEDLE TO THE ROCKET

Accompanying the five sewing machines that comprise the work, *Nefertiti* (2008), a video begins with Younis reading a statement from a speech by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of pan-Arabism, following *al-Naksa* (*The Setback*), the Arab nations defeat in 1967. Nasser asserted that whatever investments had been made in industry had been reaped as the fruits of industry. Following the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, which ended the constitutional monarchy, British occupation and led to the establishment of the new republic, Nasser saw the nationalisation of major industries as key to strengthening Egyptian sovereignty. The construction of factories was an important part of his vision to mobilise the country's workforce and limit dependence on foreign goods. A state-issued guide from 1963 recorded a total of 457,600 employees, working in 3,280 factories across 132 towns or large villages in Egypt. Each of these factories employed ten or more workers and produced everything from processed foodstuffs, tobacco, leather items, building materials, television sets and refrigerators.¹³ Among these many goods was the Nefertiti sewing machine (made between the late 1950s and early 1960s), which was manufactured at a military factory along with meat grinders, surgical tools, hunting rifles and agricultural equipment.¹⁴ In this work, Younis writes the history of this sewing machine, and in so doing, charts a spiritual exploration of the country's aspirations to domestically produce everything, as Nasser touted, "from the needle to the rocket."

In *Photo Cairo 4* in 2008, the biennial platform organised by Contemporary Image Collective, Younis presented five shiny, curvaceous, pistachio-coloured examples of the sewing machine along with an accompanying video. Despite overt allusion to ancient Egyptian glory, the artist presented *Nefertiti* as part of a decidedly modern enterprise to enable women to contribute to the nation-building effort while their men were away at war. Within the pages of the state-run publication, *Al Musawar*, known for its richly illustrated reports of cultural, industrial and political productivity in the new republic, Younis found an advertisement for the machine touting its practical operation – "by hand, foot pedal or motor" – seemingly by any means necessary, given a woman's respective abilities, household conditions and financial resources. The machine also appeared in films of the day, picturing it as a source of household income and everyday fixture in homes.

In Younis' artwork, *Nefertiti* finds a fan in another female icon of the era. Following the country's 1967 military defeat, the singer Umm Kulthum toured the Arab world and Europe to raise funds for the country's war effort. Kulthum was so taken by all that *Nefertiti* represented that she gifted the sewing machines to the families of fallen soldiers. In the video, Younis not only brings historical depth but also pathos to this relationship between woman and machine, by incorporating a song by Kulthum singing, "*Misr tatahaddatho 'an nafseha*" ("Egypt Speaks of Itself"). Based on a

poem by Hafez Ibrahim (1871-1932), a writer from the late Ottoman and early colonial era committed to preserving the Arabic language, the singer's performance recasts his words in a modern context, while connecting the present to a historical commitment to self-determination: "I am the crown of dignity/on the forehead of the Orient /and its jewels / are the gems in my necklace." Kulthum's revisitation of these lyrics amplifies and refracts Ibrahim's poem in much the same way Younis' presentation of the sewing machines as art, as opposed to an artefact or utilitarian object, offers critical distance. Taken together, the formulation enables consideration of whether the land is the soul of a people or the people are the soul of a land. Is the present the product of history or is history the product of the present?

Although Younis' project has elevated the Nefertiti sewing machine to celebrity status, she had difficulty evaluating their significance when first stumbling upon a few examples at a Cairo flea market in 2008. The machine had all but disappeared from public view. She first approached a sewing machine repair shop for answers, and they tried to sell her a Singer. Others only had parts and said they were notoriously unreliable and had serious design flaws that never addressed in all their years of production. Sight of the Nefertiti triggered memories of entire households that lived off the repair of these machines or the income earned by selling goods made with it. The men, especially, spoke as if they were the products of a household once supported by a machine. Younis' project asks: what if the soul of a nation was not locatable in any specific industry, figure or idea but that which ran through it?

There is a dreamlike quality that pervades Younis' work, which in speaking about Nefertiti on her website, the artist describes as "a disheartening disappointment for the older generation yet a nostalgic icon from the heyday of nationalistic sentiments." For younger generations, her work attempts to navigate a current impasse that is characterised by now obvious pitfalls of mining the past for exemplars of political resistance (the commodification of symbols, gestures, positions of contestation), as well as grappling with an inability to dream up the means for building a more desirable future.¹⁵ In her scrutiny of the history of the modern Arab world, the artist's work models key forms—armed struggle, social and political movements, industrial projects—revisiting ideals and the ways through which entire worlds were set in motion.

For Younis, this exploratory project is best pursued in terms of culture rather than straightforward historical research, since recent interest in modern history speaks to the lack of a shared imaginary. Useful here for thinking about the value of not only looking at culture but working through it is the late British theorist Mark Fisher's 2014 text, 'Going Overground', which discusses the importance of making work that has a critical stake in mainstream culture: "one of the problems with many of the horizontalist models of political action is that they assume that we already know what we think and feel, and we are simply prevented from expressing ourselves by oppressive power structures." He continues: "yet mass mediated art could name and focus feelings that were not only suppressed—by 'internal' as well as external censoring agencies—but which were inchoate, unformed, virtual."¹⁶ Although Fisher's text most specifically addresses the role of popular music in mainstream culture, Younis' work also attends to the relationship between emotion and the formation of recognisable ideas that impact the world in which it inhabits. Through her work, she mobilises collective study of the modern Arab world's rich history. She takes this subversive interiority overground.

Notes

¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, New York: Vintage, 1990, p. 3. The author first encountered the Morrison quotation in the essay, 'Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstractions' by the late curator Okwui Enwezor, who Younis worked with on multiple occasions. Enwezor's use of the quote in that essay was formative to the framing of this text

² In her extemporary talk entitled, 'Still Pushing for the Humanities' at the London School of Economics, 29 May 2016, she spoke about the imperative to create definitions. She argued that we produce definitions "so that we can hold [an] idea in a single breath" in which we participate, where the institution has formalised learning through competition, granting degrees, etc. Remaining with this acknowledgement that we live in a particular world and not one of theory, she recognises the imperative to define in order to develop better definitions. The task of the humanities, according to Spivak, is to constantly provide the "incalculable supplement"

³ By "social and political transformation", I refer to a wide-spread interest in the era's liberation movements against colonial powers, anti-imperialist struggles, state projects of economic uplift and political imaginaries that mobilised self-determination

⁴ See Ussama Makdisi, 'The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World', in Aneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout eds, *Modern Art In The Arab World: Primary Documents*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008, p. 28

⁵ This text owes much to the formulation that makes a distinction between informal 'study' and the formalisation of disciplinary 'studies' in academic institutions (area studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, etc.) introduced by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their now widely read text 'Debt and Study' published by *e-flux Journal*. This idea was elaborated in their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, particularly in the sections 'Debt and Study' and 'The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stephen Shukaitis'. See Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, 'Debt And Study', *e-flux Journal*, no. 14, 2010; <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61305/debt-and-study/> and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013

⁶ Anticipating the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom and France met in secret to define their respective spheres of influence and control in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement

⁷ Quoted in Ala Younis, *Tin Soldiers*, Amman: self-published, 2012, p. 10

⁸ All quotes Rasha Salti, 'Once Fida'is. Of Redeemers, Poets, Insurgents from Palestine', in Younis, *ibid.*, p. 19

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 29

¹¹ Quoted in Oraib Toukon, 'A lecture in three parts, in between the odd discussion', in Younis, *op cit.*, p. 115

¹² In Western art history these two acts recall Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) in which the artist was shot in the arm by an assistant with a .22 rifle

¹³ K. M. Barbour, 'The Distribution of Industry in Egypt: A New Source Considered', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, no. 50, 1970, p. 169

¹⁴ AbdelAziz EzzelArab, 'And as You Listen: The Oral Narrative of Muhammad Abdel Wahab, Minister of Industry of Egypt, 1984-93', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no. 1, 2009, p. 3

¹⁵ The artist has been influenced by the writing of the late Mark Fisher (with whom she studied) on the relationship between culture and capitalism, which informs her artistic intervention outlined in the introduction of this text. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher develops Fredric Jameson's conceptualisation of postmodernism as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" marked by the absence of or inability to imagine a future. He writes, "Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious." See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010, pp. 7-8

¹⁶ Mark Fisher, 'Going Overground', *K-Punk*, 5 January 2014; <http://k-punk.org/going-overground/>. Within the context of this text, Fischer must also be acknowledged for his penetrating diagnostic of late 20th century capitalism, and in particular, his foresight in identifying culture as the arena in which the battle for twenty-first century freedoms would play out