

THE ART OF THE ARCHIVE:

THE NECESSITY FOR
CONTEMPORARY ART WITHIN THE
PALESTINIAN ARCHIVAL CANON



ALLIE MAHER



1. THE

ARC-

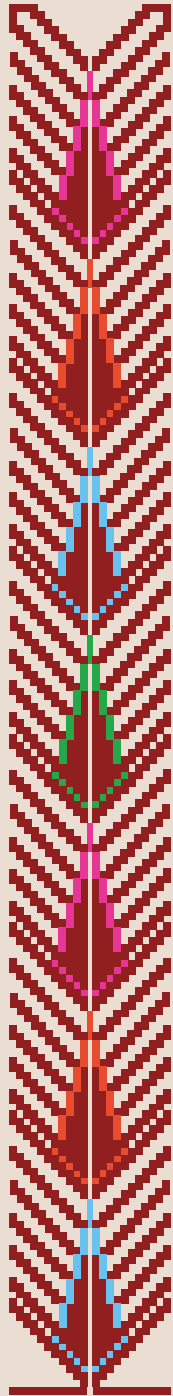
HIVE

**SITUATING THE
INSTITUTIONAL
ARCHIVE IN A
COLONIAL CONTEXT**

In March 2023, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who has administrative oversight over the occupied territories of the West Bank, controversially stated that, **“Is there a Palestinian history or culture? There is none...There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.”**

His declarative statement of denial -- an inarguable form of erasure -- is just one of a myriad of similar statements echoed since the emergence of Zionism in the late 19th century, and mirroring centuries worth of the Western tradition of colonial rationalization. In 1969, for example, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously shared this sentiment with an almost eerie familiarity: “When was there an independent Palistinian people with a Palestinian state?...It was not as though there was a Palestinian people considering itself as Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. **They did not exist.**” (Bunton).

Although Israel’s statements are flagrantly untrue (evidenced by the fact that there exists a land conflict at all), by assessing its history of violent militant control and suffocating policies upon the Palestinian people, it appears determined to make it true -- to alter the narrative of history. After all, land cannot be stolen unless it has an owner or inhabitant it can be stolen from. Currently, Palestine exists in an incredibly vulnerable position, wedged within a highly-intensifying geographic proximity to Israel, and caught in a cycle of economic dependency on the state as Palestine suffers the depletion of its own natural agricultural resources and rights. Now, in December 2024, as Palestine undergoes a genocide on the world stage, it is clear that means of cultural survival are critical. One method of securing the future for Palestine is to secure the past: to maintain a voice in the narrative and to solidify the historicity of the region and its struggle **necessitates the responsible maintenance of a cultural archive.**



In “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits”, Achille Mbembe writes that **“the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state...the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past...It is a radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt. The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt”** (23).

In other words, the “winning” or “dominant” state or institution holds the power of deconstructing and confusing the archive, which is to say, the power of rewriting, organizing, or erasing certain unfavorable histories which may disadvantage or damage the image of the dominant body. In several colonized spaces, this process has already occurred; for example, many cultural artifacts and documents were damaged or lost upon the European arrival to Central America. An erasure or manipulation of the perception of the past, as seen



in the case of both the New World as well as with present-day Palestine, diminishes the obligatory diplomatic guilt and consequently, inhibits accountability and the necessary execution of proper reparations for the colonized peoples.

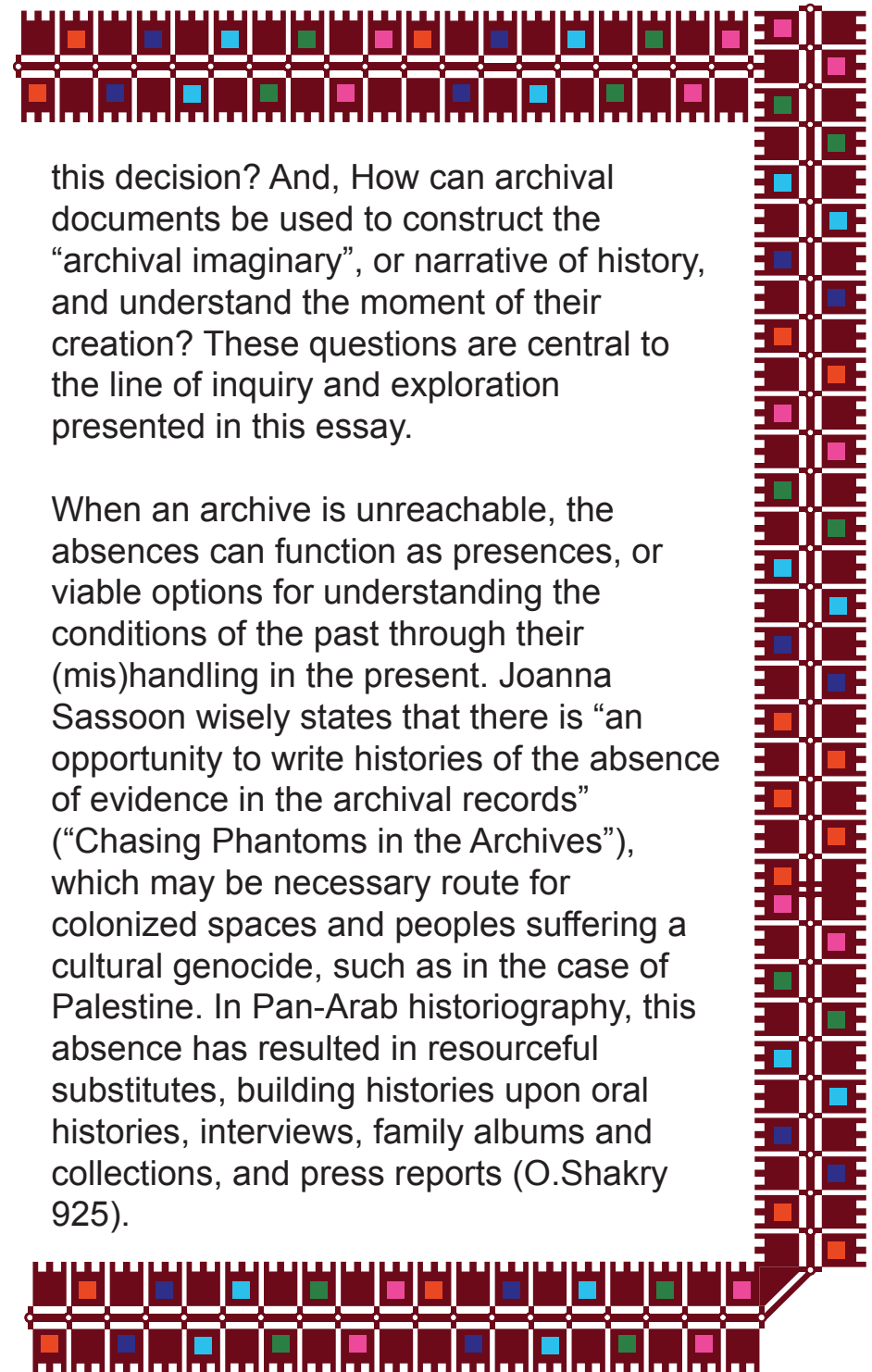
The irreplaceable nature of the archive, which realizes history in a formal sense, means it needs to be preserved in cases of cultural genocide; but in post-conflict or during ongoing conflict, how can missing contributions be supplemented or understood, as destruction or disappearance of a colonized peoples’ archive is likely under the supervision of the colonial state?





*artwork
missing*

Or, additionally, what is the best strategy for construction historicity if the archives are made inaccessible. Omnia el Shakry writes “We might start [conceptualizing the archives of decolonization] by focusing on the two senses of the term, first my exploring the material inaccessibility of particular post-colonial state archives, and second, and more importantly, by questioning the compositional logics of archival imaginaries” (“History Without Documents: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East”, 921). This brings up a few questions: What constitutes an archive as “inaccessible”, and if it is “accessible”, accessible to whom? What is the “archival imaginary” comprised of without an accessible archive? What is determined to be worth archiving? Who makes



this decision? And, How can archival documents be used to construct the “archival imaginary”, or narrative of history, and understand the moment of their creation? These questions are central to the line of inquiry and exploration presented in this essay.

When an archive is unreachable, the absences can function as presences, or viable options for understanding the conditions of the past through their (mis)handling in the present. Joanna Sassoon wisely states that there is “an opportunity to write histories of the absence of evidence in the archival records” (“Chasing Phantoms in the Archives”), which may be necessary route for colonized spaces and peoples suffering a cultural genocide, such as in the case of Palestine. In Pan-Arab historiography, this absence has resulted in resourceful substitutes, building histories upon oral histories, interviews, family albums and collections, and press reports (O.Shakry 925).

Artists have even seized upon this opportunity to formulate their own alternative archives, such as with Lebanon's Walid Raad and his project "The Atlas Group", a fictional collective. In this way, Shakry characterizes the archive as having "elasticity" -- the ability to fluctuate between literal and nonliteral works -- which opens the door to explorations of what constitutes valid historical documentation. In the circumstances of incomplete archives, a creative approach of redefining the formal, academic archive may be necessary. In the same essay, Shakry remarks that: "As Foucault argues, the archive constitutes the limits and forms of the sayable, as well as its memory and appropriation, then what currents of thought and intellectual traditions belong to the archives of decolonization?" (925). Is it time for the archive to transcend what has been the traditional "limits and forms of the sayable"?



Image from the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.



2. THE

ART

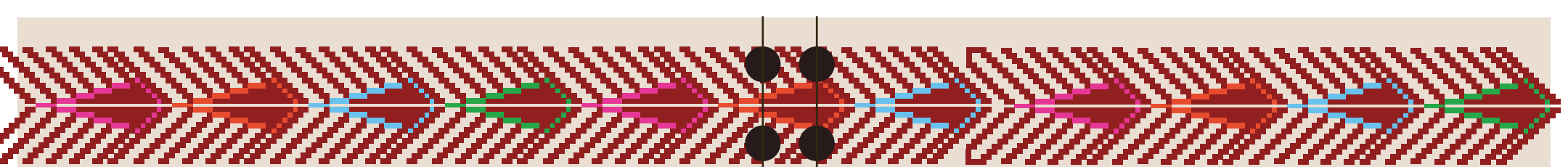
**EXPLORING THE
LEGITIMACY OF
ARTWORK
(VISUALITY) AS
DOCUMENTATION
WITHIN THE
PALESTINIAN
HISTORICAL CANON**

If, as Achille Mbembe says, the archive is inherently a threat to the state, then so is art, as it is a record not always of the tangible, but of the human reaction to the tangible; it frames events through the lens of an individual, offering insight into the popular reactions towards events, and decidedly providing evidence for a cultural presence of a people. Just as the archive and artworks can be used to the advantage of the state, such as with propagandizing, it can also powerfully combat the credibility of the “archival imaginaries” fabricated by the dominant state. States know this, as is obvious within the conflict between Israel and Palestine, due to Israel’s past policies which deliberately suffocated Palestinian art initiatives. One of these policies included a ban on the use of colors red, green, white, and black in a singular art piece, as this color combination was seen as too connected to the instantly recognizable themes of the Palestinian flag, and thus, Palestinian identity.

Art, situated within the discussion of the archive, has a certain accessibility unavailable to other kinds of documentation. It can possess a universality, as it doesn’t require language; it can be performed by almost anybody, as opposed to the output of academia which is restrict to certain populations of the public; and it can frequently be seen and engaged with on a much larger and less exclusive scale -- such as the art exhibited illegally along the partition border between Palestine and Israel.



Image from the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.



Although not explicitly “artwork”, the analysis of Jawhariyyeh Wasif’s photo albums as performed in *Camera Palaestina* by Nassar et al. serves as fantastic example of interpreting and intrinsically based visuality as a rich form of historical documentation within the archive. They write that “Whether an oeuvre, an archive, or an individual enunciation, **we are compelled to consider photographic collection and visual narration as an act, as a document and as a testimony**” (1), later encouraging a thorough consideration of the photographer’s (or artist’s) motives and choices. Artwork can be translated into a comparable form of “testimony” -- the response of a person bearing witness and recalling, with the same unavoidable lens of personal experience, their experiences as they know them to be. Although not objective, it represents a form of the “truth” -- the ideas, expressions, and recollections of a real human being, inevitably influenced by the social state at the time, embedded in a contextualized period. Nassar et al continues to explain an appropriate line of questioning when analyzing a photograph through a historical lens, suggesting that the historian/viewer ask, “To whom are [these albums] speaking, and how do they communicate to us within their multiple contexts?”

What is the discursive, class, gendered, and political work that each of these photographs do, individually and collectively as albums? In this way, photos and artwork are almost always political, as they hold a mirror to their creator, and thus, the world in which their creator is situated. The importance of asking why a piece was created (taken, erected) is also stressed -- as it leads towards a responsible and multi-faceted study of its messages while working towards a fuller understanding of the historical context. However, the potential for reductiveness arises when the examination of a body of artwork within a politically charged Middle Eastern region is confined to strictly political motives. While this essay focuses on and discusses politically-informed work in the next section, it should be noted that a pure focus on this vein of work within the canon is, in and of its attempts to be anti-Orientalist, *still* Orientalist, as it homogenizes the creative expressions of swaths of people under the assumption that every individual is monolithically compelled by the same drive. The idea that this political drive is the line of reasoning behind every Palestinian paint stroke feeds into the Orientalist sentiment of barbarism, that the Middle Eastern region is characterized by conflict, violence, brutality,



and injustice alone -- this is a gross oversimplification. As this essay plans on discussing political work, the inaccuracy of its depiction of all Palestinian artists should be kept in mind.

Simultaneously, it should be noted that Orientalism *sells* in the West, and has for over a century. For this reason, artworks, much like photographs, can be tinged with the motive of attractive Western attention and economic appeal, as a piece of work fitting into Western expectations can be more marketable at times. Nassar et al addresses this conflict of Orientalism:

“We, therefore, explore a historical Palestinian visuality, identifying that it is inextricably entangled within a hegemonic Orientalist, Zionist, and colonialist visuality. But also, **like Arab modernity itself, we mark Palestinian presence in the construction of this visuality and amplify how that presence grows from and is riveted to Palestine, historically, geographically, socially, and culturally**” (2). In other words -- what can the motivations to intentionally exaggerate Orientalist tropes tell us about the individual, the society, and the economic and cultural influences upon that society?



Images from the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.



**3. IN
PRACTICE/
SUMUD**

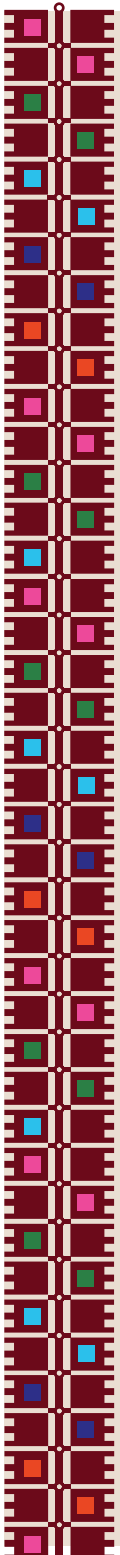
**ANALYZING
ARTWORK
EXPRESSING AND
REPRESENTING
SUMUD**

Much of Palestinian political works (most specifically those produced in the post-Arab War and Post-Oslo Periods) embody the cultural concept of **Sumud**, or steadfastness, which Hoda El Shakry defines as “perseverance...to oppose or resist” and “often carries the connotation of everyday survival, endurance, and resilience” (“Palestine and the Aesthetics of the Future Impossible”). Despite the existential threat towards the Palestinian tradition and people, *sumud* “nonetheless often entails a hopefulness”, which strangely allows Palestinian artistic expression to address both the past and the future simultaneously.

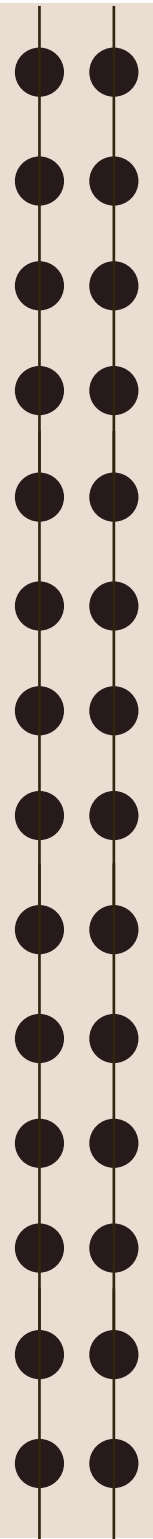
In 2003, Khalil Rabah, a Palestinian artist, established the multi-site *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* as a piece which parodies museumification and the politics of archival practices. The *Museum's* collection includes a blurred array of the fictional and the factual, of artifacts and fabricated news clippings, for example. The museum's website reads that it is “occupied, exiled at home, and everywhere abroad. An entirely new place, it rests nowhere while waiting for our return...it is only this impossible” (PMNHH). Rabah and the PMNHH manipulate innovatively, celebrating its seventy-fifth



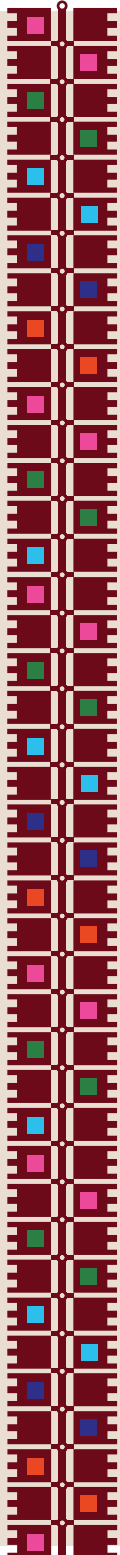
Artworks from *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* by Khalil Rabah. Images from *Juliet Art Magazine*.



anniversary in 2004 and its hundredth anniversary in 2005. In creative ways like this, the project mirrors the warped nature of time experienced by the Palestinians; H. El Shakry writes, "Scholars have noted the asymmetrical ways in which the occupation delimits not only mobility, but also the experience of time, particularly for the Palestinians in the OPT. Checkpoints, permits, curfews, and closures..." (673). Rabah's Museum turns these concepts on their head and de-chronologizes the archive, subverting the conventional understandings of its linear narratives. Paradoxically, in its rejection of the conventional archive, it becomes an important chapter within it, demarcating the Palestinian perception of history from that of the colonial world, and thus informing through its lack of "accurate" institutional information. Rabah's work also intersects the emotionality and intergenerational collective memories of a people with the formal notions of Western artifact preservation and archival, combining these two perspectives of the past with one another in both a provocative juxtaposition and peculiar smoothness. His work represents a re-imagining of the archive, and highlights the significant contributions artwork makes possible, as it can supplement the gaps left by the state and infuse the historical narrative with a vein of humanity and the expressions of the popular voice. In other words, it's a rehandling of the past, a wresting of control of the Palestinian historical canon by means of abstraction of chronology and institutional principles.



Palestinian identity-based artwork centralized around the concept of *sumud* in and of itself intrinsically breaks the bounds of the present, as it laments the past, trudging up the archive of the institutionally deliberately forgotten, while also fundamentally gazing towards the future, with the understanding that their time is being devoured at a faster rate than that of a sovereign state. H. El Shakry writes that, akin to Afrofuturist works, Palestinian *sumud* artwork refers to "the simultaneous erasure of the historical past with the foreclosure of futurity" (688). By way of this complex and elastic multi-chronopolitical nature, Palestinian art demands an abstraction of the Middle Eastern historical archive as we know it, requiring a questioning of the Westernized angle of archival and forcing a reevaluation of perceived sequential and concrete history. The past is clouded and fractured, the future is an increasingly twisted question mark — where does that leave the dynamic archival of the present? In regards to a people robbed of simple chronology, documents restricted by time cannot accurately represent the entirety of their archive in authenticity. In other words, the flexibility and often conceptual timelessness of art -- grounded in context of materiality, date, and creator -- allows for a deeper, more humanity-centered, and de-colonial approach to the archive. Artwork circumvents the conventional boundaries of the archive, expands its access, and empowers the voiceless.



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