HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Afterall

A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry

Exhibitions, Works, Events

Jumana Manna
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Afterall, Volume 51, Spring/Summer 2021

Jumana Manna, Wild Relatives, 2018,
HD video, colour, sound, 64min, stills.
Courtesy the artist

SYRIA AND/AS THE PLANETARY IN JUMANA MANNA'S WILD RELATIVES

Edwin Nasr

It has almost become self-evident to approach Syria or, rather, what could be called the Syrian condition as a metaphor for and a diagnosis of our planetary predicament. Exiled political dissident and writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh frames it the other way around, recognising a contagion of 'criminality at the heart of the current international order', a process he refers to as a 'Syrianization of the world', through which a state's systematic *extermination of life* avails itself of the imperatives of international human rights treaties and intergovernmental organisations.[1] It might be deemed unhelpful, at this point in time, to assess whether it was the Syrian war that wrought forth conditions of impunity now being reproduced across continents, or whether the ontological violence of the world had undiscerningly submerged Syria along its way in the first place. And yet, both affirmations can hold true. The Assad regime and its regional allies' sheer barbarity and the unprecedented scale of destruction the country continues to suffer from were hyper-mediatised at the beginning of this past decade. The first wave of war-crime documentations that had emanated from Dara'a, the Rif Dimashq Governorate, al-Qusayr and Aleppo altered our collective understanding of what it meant to witness the unfolding of an historic atrocity. A couple of decades back, Jean Baudrillard contentiously declared that the Gulf War (1990–91) was the first video game war.[2] It would follow, logically, that the Syrian war is the first social media war, whereby abstracted aerial imagery of expendable peoples and territories comes to be replaced by amateur footage of state crimes being enacted in real time, the veracity of which remains debatable and is predicated on the online feedback loop one is exposed to.[3]

Over time, the impulse to denounce – or, within more sinister political formations, to apologise for – the Assad regime's ceaseless suppression of entire dissident populations waned, a mute complicity of the world in which, as al-Haj claims, 'the Syrian exception has become a basis upon which new boundaries of power can be explored, in these countries and globally', adding that, 'after Syria, extermination has become a sovereign possibility in the world of states'.[4] While bombings of hospital and schools and state abductions by the thousands continue to routinely take place on a weekly basis, the majority of geopolitical operations being conceived and implemented on Syrian soil has recently shifted from strategies of counterinsurgency, to engagements with its post-war landscapes as sites of optimal *extractability*. 'The dirty business of extraction', as political theorists Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson call it, '[refers to] historical and contemporary processes of forced removal of raw materials and life forms from the earth's surface, depths, and biosphere.'[5] But what is there left to extract from Syria, when substantial processes of extermination have seemingly condemned all of its life forms to premature death? One might argue that it is precisely within the nothingness of post-war landscapes – where infrastructural ruination encloses possibility and necropolitical forces stifle human and nonhuman life alike – that local, regional and international state and non-state actors produce value and accumulate capital. Transnational consultancies have joined the Assad regime in inviting architectural and environmental firms as well as public and private think tanks to submit proposals for the 'reconstruction' of Syria. At the time of writing, cities worn-out from battles, such as Aleppo, are already being entirely redesigned to host real estate interventions and market maximisation schemes. This, in itself, can be attributed to what decolonial theorist Macarena Gómez-Barris has labelled an all-pervasive 'extractive view', i.e. that which, since the colonial project, 'sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking', and 'facilitates the re-organization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation'.[6] It is such a view that allows us to engage with the Syrian condition as a localised manifestation of an undeniably planetary predicament, whereby implications of the Anthropocene and the entrenchment of the permanent war economy give rise to entwined realities.

Wild Relatives (2018) is a documentary essay on Syria by Palestinian visual artist Jumana Manna. Although the video wasn't filmed there, it weaves disparate geographies as well as various forms of human-nonhuman associations that manifest the Syrian condition in relation to the matrixes of power and extractive processes that structure it. The film's ominous opening sequence reveals a loud and dirty coal mining operation in the Arctic Archipelago of Svalbard, a territory under Norwegian sovereignty and which has long been exploited by the European coal industry and whale hunters. The archipelago's only populated island, Spitsbergen, houses the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a secure seed bank that develops cryopreservation protocols to preserve a wide variety of plant seeds that are duplicate samples of seeds held in gene banks worldwide. The bank, which formally opened in 2008, was conceived in order to prevent the potential loss of seeds in other gene repositories that could result from future natural or man-made disasters. Manna's inquiry into the Syrian condition begins at the point where, on September 2015, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas

(ICARDA), a non-profit agricultural research institute and a member of the CGIAR (formerly Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research Centres) located in Aleppo, decides to temporarily relocate to the Bekaa Valley, in eastern Lebanon, due to ongoing military conflict.[7] Though first established in Lebanon in 1976, due to the Lebanese civil wars a year later, ICARDA permanently headquartered in Aleppo, at the invitation of Hafez al-Assad, former Syrian president and father of Bashar al-Assad, who'd been on a quest to modernise his country's agriculture in an effort to subordinate peasant classes. The cruel irony of these successive relocations have not escaped Manna; they are but a mere testament to the region's avowedly interminable torments. ICARDA's urgent evacuation to Lebanon had disallowed it to move its gene bank of biodiverse seed samples, alongside the research centre's staff and equipment.[8] To this end, it decided to 'reconstruct', through the arduous labour of female Syrian refugees, its collection of 40,000 regional seeds in the fertile Bekaa Valley and, in order to do so, withdrew safety duplicates from the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. To this day, ICARDA remains the only centre to have formally requested the withdrawal of its seeds from Svalbard.[9] This process of reconstruction – the hidden narratives of dislocation it foregrounds as well as the geographical and material interdependencies it exposes – is at the nucleus of the documentary and aesthetic unfolding of *Wild Relatives*. It also brings attention to articulations of violence that evolve over vast, and therefore impalpable, temporalities that have long informed artistic and cinematic endeavours that questioned the crises of their representation.

This recalls Rob Nixon's conceptualisation of 'slow violence' by which the author means 'violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, and attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.[10] Referring to '[C]limate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of war, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes', Nixon goes on to urge engaged practitioners across different sectors to refigure dominant modes of representation so as to produce an alternative grammar of *representability* able to capture these processes' spatio-temporal occurrence.[11]

The past decade or so has witnessed a growing commitment among artists towards 'resolving' these representational shortcomings. Engaging with the practices of film-maker Francisco Huichaqueo and artist Carolina Caycedo, Gómez-Barris has argued that their work proposes a counter-visuality to the regime of extractivist capitalism and its invisibilisation of slow violence.[12] In his film *Mencer: Ni Pewma* (2011), Huichaqueo addresses the generational displacement of Indigenous peoples in the southern territories of Chile as a result of pine and eucalyptus export production by decentring the human gaze from the cinematic apparatus, resituating, instead, ancestral natural landscape at the heart of what the film attempts to represent.[13] As for Caycedo, in her video *YUMA, or the Land of Friends* (2014), she adopts a 'fish-eye perspective', a literal view from below, in order to represent the Magdalena River in the Colombian Andes as a site of contestation between the material interests of Indigenous communities and those of multinationals aspiring to convert the river into a source of hydroelectric power.[14] Similarly, art historian T.J. Demos has recently attested to aesthetic digressions aiming to render visible that which extractive operations consciously concealed and dispersed across space and time.[15] Referencing Ursula Biemann's eight-minute video *Deep Weather* (2013), Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's sculptural project *Blackout* (2017), and Angela Melitopoulos's four-channel video installation *Crossings* (2017), Demos identifies in these works a willingness to record seemingly disparate phenomena in remote geographies and subsequently outline an aesthetics of transnational solidarity, which he situates within intersectional investigations of global extractivist processes and their geopolitical consequences. Demos locates a site for potential emancipatory politics within said practices, which, in his view, perform a 'cultural politics of opposition', i.e. 'ones suggesting and building toward a politico-ecological paradigm shift, a self-governing movement overcoming privations and manipulations of disaster capitalism'.[16] For both Gómez-Barris and Demos, then, the illegibility of slow violence and its unfolding within our present moment invite art historians and visual culture scholars to theorise the manyfold aesthetic digressions devised by artists and film-makers in a politicised attempt to challenge visualities kept at the thresholds of visibility.

Where, then, could Manna's practice be situated in relation to other emerging aesthetic propositions that work towards refiguring the representational impediments of planetary processes of extraction of natural resources and labour exploitation? *Wild Relatives* journeys between Svalbard and the Bekaa Valley and traces a transnational process of seed preservation, traversing discrete spatio-temporalities as it simultaneously examines and lends voice to rural rituals, people in situations of mass displacement, discourses of reconstruction, and the political economy of catastrophism and peace-making. However, any attempts to inscribe Manna's film within a ubiquitous body of artistic and cinematic works tending to ecological urgencies, might prove unwarranted.

The artist herself asserts that, through *Wild Relatives*, she is 'making a claim that the colonial freezing of time also extends to life at large'.[17] This affirmation is most manifest in the film's durational sequences that embalm its subject within a *slow motion*, itself attuned with the chronopolitics of slow violence.

This is exemplified, for instance, in its deployment of freeze frames and wide-open shots where human actions slowly reveal themselves amidst domineering natural landscapes. Working against the 'urgency' of ICARDA's reconstruction of its seed archive, but also, in opposition to the high-speed visual regimes of war and catastrophe, *Wild Relatives* instead navigates a field of representation where time is out of joint, pacing slowly across various historical moments. This, in turn, allows Manna to inscribe her film and her field of investigation within a continuum that also finds her grappling with sculpture that allows her to uncover the cracks and fissures of history through its object-like quality and stillness. In *Post Herbarium* (2016), an installation at the Liverpool Biennial, the artist proposes a still life composition of cut-out flower stencils, landscape collages and the overbearing bust of George E. Post.[18] Post, an American missionary and botanist, travelled extensively throughout the Levant at the end of the nineteenth century, collecting over 20,000 plant specimens from Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and the Sinai region. Today, his collection is meticulously kept at the American University of Beirut, acting as an archival repository of flora that has gradually gone extinct due to the various environmental developments the region had experienced. Through Post's scientific endeavours and attempts to archive Syria's biodiversity – a sort of orientalist precursor to preservationist schemes later wrought forth by institutions such as ICARDA – Manna encourages a critical reading of the ways in which biodiversity in and of itself operates via colonial logics of producing difference and otherness, which, as history has taught us time and time again, often lies in rendering territories conquerable and/or expendable. *Post Herbarium* positions early practices of cryopreservation and their impulse to freeze and archive what the colonial gaze deems preservable in continuation with present-day outbursts of violence and subsequent reconstructive enterprises that *Wild Relatives* aims to record.

While *Wild Relatives* could be engaged with as a work that exposes processes that govern precarities and morph living territories into zones of sacrifice, it does not, throughout its one-hour duration, express a willingness to manufacture political consensus. In other words, Manna does not concern herself with aesthetic and formal limitations in representing that which is rendered illegible, nor does she seek to confront the viewer with any frontal ethico-political framework. The reparative futures and past injustices the artist alludes to are fraught with extractivist manoeuvres and authoritarian underpinnings, but no ideological grammar of contestation is being constructed or proposed anywhere. Rather, Manna unearths – both literally and figuratively – the ability of seemingly conventional modes of documentary film-making, with its staging of processes and people working towards a coherent narrative, to activate epiphanic encounters and spatio-temporal junctures wherein a localised 'condition' and a planetary predicament can converge.

In 2003, veteran Syrian cinéaste Omar Amiralay directed his final feature documentary, *Tufan Fi Bilad el-Ba'th* (*A Flood in Baath Country*). A year earlier, the Zeyzoun embankment dam, originally built in the Hama Governorate in 1996 with the aim of impounding water pumped from the Orontes River, suddenly collapsed and flooded environing villages, causing widespread material damage as well as killing dozens and displacing more than 10,000.[19] Amiralay's film is the closing chapter of his trilogy on the Assad regime, which also includes two documentaries he had directed in the seventies – *Film Essay on the Euphrates Dam* (1970) and *Everyday Life in a Syrian Village* (1974), both of which championed the regime's construction of the Tabqa Dam in the Euphrates valley and its wider implementation of agrarian reforms as part of the Green Revolution, which, consequently, also led to the implementation of ICARDA. What separates this last chapter from the two earlier ones, however, are decades of state repression and a growingly tangible collective disillusionment with the early promises of Ba'athism. Triggered by the ultimate failure of the Zeyzoun Dam, Amiralay decides to revisit a village in the Euphrates valley where Lake Assad, a reservoir created when the Tabqa Dam was closed, passes through. There, he encounters a crumbling public school system that still firmly enforces a politics of public dissimulation as well as a cult of leadership towards Hafez al-Assad among its young students; as well as impoverished village-goers who claim the lake had engulfed thousands of hectares of traditional crops.[20] *A Flood in Baath Country,* unlike its sympathetic counterparts, is a staggering confession of regret and a militant takedown of the Assad regime. 'Our condition now lies in the depth of history, but there is no way we can forget it', a fisherman tells Amiralay in the film's closing sequence. They're both sitting on a boat at Lake Assad; by the end of the monologue, the fisherman points towards a seemingly indistinct parcel of water, where he says his ancestral home once lied. Amiralay never got to witness the Syrian war; he died a couple of months before the first recorded anti-regime demonstrations occurred in Dar'aa. Manna picks up the task of excavating Syria's well-dug histories of slow violence right where Amiralay had left them off. Many pundits attribute the outbreak of the Syrian revolution to the supra-seasonal droughts that affected the country for more than five years, from 2006–11, and which led to 'countless instances of crop and livestock devastation and the dislocation of Syrians'.[21] The devastating consequences of these droughts are inextricably intertwined with the Assad regime's implementation of extractivist and neoliberal policies throughout the decades, further consolidating ecological injustices.[22] At the time of writing, the Idlib province is traversing

the worst humanitarian crisis in Syria's nine-year war, as Assad's forces, through Russian military support, attempt to take back the country's last opposition-held bastion.[23] There's no answer to how we can even begin to grapple and reconcile with the impossibility of extending a hand and voice in solidarity with the extermination of the life environments of Syrian and Kurdish communities. But, as Manna shows, there are, perhaps, ways to understand how it is that these atrocities come to be in the first place, why seemingly disparate events and phenomena in space and time can inform the way our shared present unfolds, and what their often-ambivalent resonances and afterlives can teach us about our planetary predicament.

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13 M. Gómez-Barris, ibid.
14 M. Gómez-Barris, 'Inverted Visuality: Against the Flow of Extractivism', Journal of Visual Culture, vol.15, no.1, 2016, pp.29–31.
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21 Efe Can Gürcan, 'Extractivism, Neoliberalism, and the Environment: Revisiting the Syrian Conflict from an Ecological Justice Perspective', Capitalism Nature Socialism, vol.30, no.3, 2019, p.9.
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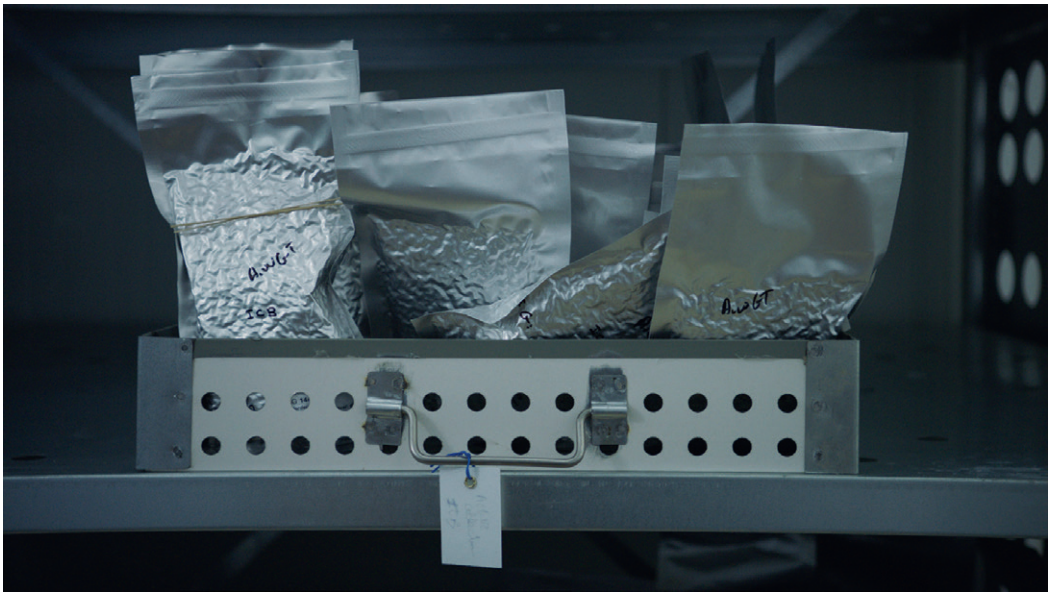
Jumana Manna, Vase with Festoon of Flowers and Dictionary, 2016, mixed media installation (lab table, ceramic set based on the bust of George Post, plastic containers, wooden print cut-outs, books), dimensions variable, detail from Post Herbarium, 2016. Photograph: Richard Ivey. Courtesy the artist

Jumana Manna, detail from
Post Herbarium, 2016.
Photograph: Richard Ivey.
Courtesy the artist



Jumana Manna, Wild Relatives, 2018,
HD video, colour, sound, 64min, stills.
Courtesy the artist

Omar Amiralay, Tufan Fi Bilad el-Ba'th
(A Flood in Baath Country), 2003,
digital video, 46min, stills.
Courtesy Ismat Amiralai