

**In Focus Conversation with Basma Al-Sharif (BA), with Sarona Abuaker (SA), hosted by Viviane Saglier (VS) at the 19th Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, 7 - 10 March 2024.**

**VS:** Hello everyone, so welcome to the in-focus conversation with Basma al-Sharif, Sarona Abuaker, and myself.

Today is a... I don't know if you're familiar with the format, so basically we're going to have a conversation, but the idea is that there's no separation between our conversation and your input. We're going to ask a question and then you're very welcome to raise your hand at any point and to respond to whatever point we're making. So, hence the little circle, we're trying to be intimate here, so I hope you feel comfortable and welcome.

I also wanted to start by thanking Peter again, I don't know where he is now. Ah! He's hiding. For echoing what Basma said yesterday, really thanking him for making space to talk about Palestine, to show all these wonderful works that don't get to be shown or talked about these days - quite the contrary. It's been really, really nice to be able to discuss Palestine, to say the word Palestine, without even thinking twice about it, so thank you so much.

So, let's start the conversation. I just wanted to start... We've been talking a lot, I guess, a bit in the Q&As, about how Gaza relates to the rest of the world and Gaza's positioning in your films. I wanted to maybe switch the question and think about how you position yourself, vis-a-vis Gaza or Palestine, and I know it's been part of the discussion around your work very early on, that Eyal Sivan, the Israeli filmmaker discussed your work in relation to the idea of post-Palestine, which is something that you've sort of taken on to redefine your position, so I don't know if you want to say a few words about that.

**BS:** Yeah, thank you. It's such a complicated term that he sort of applied to my practice and my work. So I worked with Eyal Sivan as a producer for *Ouroboros*, and around that time he sort of suggested it, as part of an essay he was writing on an exhibition that I had in Paris. Initially I was offended, I just thought, especially as an Israeli, you don't get to decide that. I mean, he's very pro-Palestinian and makes incredible work, but I was thinking that it was a powerful word - it doesn't mean that the struggle isn't ongoing or that there isn't hope for liberation, but that to recognise the position specifically that I was working from has someone in exile, someone who can go back, but is really living through the, yeah, like seeing the erasure of my people, of my home, of the possibility for hope actually, and to really confront it, like to own what privileges I had also.

I mean, he often, you know, we spoke about it and he said, "you're also from, like you belong to the Palestinian bourgeoisie", and that's something that we don't talk about very often. We often

talk about the, you know...even with Gaza today, it's like we are constantly talking about "this is the 48 refugees who are living in Gaza", but that's actually not my family. My family is actually from Gaza and weren't, they weren't refugees from 48s, and that there's this whole class of Palestinians who do have a lot of power within the occupation, and that me as an immigrant or in that...yeah, an immigrant in the West also had certain advantages or, you know, but based on languages I could speak, where I was educated...and that I think we're often used to thinking, Palestinians are often used to thinking of it as a kind of defeat that once you assimilate or become part of a different society, that you're kind of giving up a little bit of the struggle. I think in that sense it woke me up to what is it that I have at my disposal, I'm not going to speak as someone on the ground in Palestine or in Gaza, even though I have access and can make films there, but I also have this, the possibility of moving, of traveling, of American citizenship, and I mean interestingly I had no citizenship until I became an American at 14. But it allowed me access to a lot more in the possibility of thinking of this perspective and identity in other places and in relation to other histories, and in even encountering Israelis outside of Palestine and having to, yeah, navigate that world outside of Palestine - which is complex...and can be really difficult, but also allows for, like complicating my perspective on Palestine and their history and how they look at this land without justifying it, but like putting me in a space outside of it.

I mean, my work doesn't deal with this at all, but it's just to say like, I'm not, I have to recognise where I'm speaking from, and that was really apparent to me before I was making work professionally as an artist, like as a student in school, that people were always going to look at me not as an American and not as a Westerner, no matter how good my American accent is, no matter how long I lived in the West, that I would always be a foreigner, that I would always be identified first by this struggle and in a very patronising or just hostile way, and to kind of rely on, yeah, having infiltrated their culture and using their language to say the things that I wanted to say. So, yeah, it was like this ongoing conversation between he and I about this term that maybe isn't so fitting because it really does make it sound like, "oh, I'm beyond the occupation," and that's really hard to say because it's affected every part of my life, but in a way I *am* outside of it by being an immigrant and by having an American passport and by having certain privileges that someone exactly like me who just didn't have the trajectory that my life did, even from the bourgeois upper class, has a completely different experience of Palestine. And, I think, just one more thing I guess is that I think amongst Palestinians we try not to differentiate our different statuses because it's so damaging actually, and it can be very hard, like I have very, very close friends who are what we call "48 Palestinians," the ones who have Israeli passports and are nevertheless second class citizens within Israel, but they have so much access, like they can fly into the airport in Tel Aviv, they can move around more freely than most Palestinians, and there's a lot of envy and anger, I think, you know, especially from Gaza, like if we take the most extreme, like Gazans versus 48 Palestinians. I think more, for me, the older I get, the more I recognise it's very important to make these distinctions because also our perspective on the

future of Palestine is radically different, and we don't necessarily agree, and that that shouldn't be a weakness for us, that it's actually a massive empowerment that have these different perspectives and this different understanding of the struggle and the land that I think more than ever now we have become united actually in the violence we're seeing.

**SA:** I'm going to kind of shift gears a bit, but I think related out of what you were just saying. The imposed fragmentation, the, you know, the kind of classic divide and conquer methods upon which Israel has imposed upon Palestinians, on us, but also reckoning with those very real differences and conditions, it got me thinking a lot about *Capital*, actually. I know it's not about Palestine, it's about Egypt, when I watched it though, it made me the - sorry [laughs], I'm not looking at my phone because I've notes, not because I'm like doing anything else, I just wanted to clarify - but the line in it, "we're nearly done, I believe it takes 15 to 20 years to build a country, and I'm trying to do it in eight." It makes me think of the violence of state building. I'm not super familiar with the case example of Egypt, however, thinking of the language that that particular spokesman of the state was saying, "we've been planning and we've been developing, we haven't been quiet." I thought that's so, the kind of insidious violence of this kind of administrative planning, which obviously within your film is focused on Egypt, but thinking in parallel to that of Palestine, specifically of the West Bank, and the development of Rawabi, the Qatari funded kind of bourgeois city, and thinking along those parallel lines, and how...is that, I suppose, oh god, I'm going to be that person: "this is more of a comment than a question." I'm so annoying, but yeah, it just, it got me thinking a lot about, I was watching your film and I was like, "this is what I'm really terrified of, that's already taking place in Palestine on so many levels - one in the West Bank, but two in the early days of the genocide, we had Israeli state companies advertising billboards for what, for what they wanted Gaza to look like, with flats, and..."

**BA:** It was a joke actually.

**SA:** Was it a joke? Really?

**BA:** It was a state company that just was like, "put this out as as a joke," which I actually think is worse, because they think it's funny to be like...

**SA:** Oh my God...

**BA:** "Oh, we're, we're waging this war against terrorism, but like, let's also daydream about..."

**SA:** I didn't know..

**BA:** And they put out a statement after apologising, but...

**SA:** Oh God, I'm going to vomit, okay...but maybe the question within that is, within that work, within *Capital*, with the spokesperson saying, "it takes 15 to 20 years to build a country, I'm trying to do it in eight", the question I had was then how many years does it take to make one disappear?

But then also, I kept on noticing the site of the sofa, or the chair, Diego sitting on like, near, like on the sofa, the chair, with the puppet, and then the, the woman in the central kind of living room on the chair, and I didn't know what the sofa/chair meant within that particular landscape, and what it served as a site of. But also the overview, the kind of the process of you examining accumulation throughout *Capital*, and maybe reckoning with the fact like, even as Palestinians, like there are, as bourgeoisie, there are forms of capital that we accumulate, and yeah, maybe thinking about the future, about like, how do you actually reckon with those class differences, especially for thinking about return, for example.

Massive question, you can just kind of choose whatever you want to talk about, and then we'll leave the rest.

**BA:** [laughs] I can think of a way to respond. Actually I was just telling, I think one of you, this story. So, I live in Berlin and I like running for exercise, and I kind of stopped running in the last four months, and a few weeks ago, I went running where I normally go, near the central station. And, since I'd been in Berlin, there's been a camp of people who are homeless, people who are camped out near the central station - and it seems quite established, like it seemed like they've been there for a while, and I've run past there several times. And then a few weeks ago, when I started running again, I ran past, and it was completely gone, the camp was gone, there were no people there anymore and it had been fenced off, and there were all these advertisements, these CGI advertisements for, like, luxury buildings, and all these white people sitting on the lawn, enjoying their Sunday, or I imagine it's Sunday [laughs]. I thought, yeah, this is the same thing, this is Palestine, this is Egypt, this is how the state thinks about people: it doesn't care, it just thinks about real estate, it thinks about capital, about money, about building.

I have no idea, we have no idea, I didn't hear anything come up about removing these people from where they had been camped out, it's just...it just happens, they just disappear. For me, there's no difference actually. I think it's dawned on me during these last four months, but actually, what's happening is just a massive violent gentrification project, that's all it is. It's in your face, like, it's land, it's resources, and we're inconveniently there. There's nothing to do with religion, it has nothing to do with it being a holy land, it has nothing to do with terrorism. This just

has to do with...I mean, even though it's a joke, what they posted, I mean the fact that they can even joke about this in the middle of war, supposedly when they're terrified, it says a lot, it says that our lives are worth *nothing*, and that's not unique to Palestine.

I think it was what I recognised also in Egypt. I lived in Egypt in 2008 to 2010, and then again from 2018 to 2020, and the first time I was there, these new, sort of luxury compounds, were being built outside of central Cairo, and I thought like, "oh, they're so ridiculous, no one's going to move here", and ten years later it's a flourishing, expensive, very Westernised look. I mean, they look like settlements, you know, it's like these model homes that are identical to each other - gated communities only the upper class can afford - it's completely, it's unsustainable.

I don't know, it's really selling you a Western idea of what wealth is meant to be, and the advertisements are white people in Egypt, and they're all in English, and they have these ridiculous names...So I don't know how many people were in the *Capital* screening, but the names that are being said are actual names of neighborhoods in Egypt, nothing is an Arabic, and none of the architecture looks Arabic. If anything, they're mimicking sometimes like Spanish architecture, because that's, you know, more...that's more upper class than Arabic architecture, and all the descriptions of the homes are not things I wrote, I took them from real estate companies, all of those videos are from real estate companies. So, yeah, for me, it's just the same thing, it's exactly the same thing, I mean, they're not occupied, Egypt is not occupied, but Sisi, who is the current president - that's actually taken from an interview with him where he's describing this project, because it's doomed, it's driven the country into severe poverty, and it's just barreling forward into an unsustainable future that is clearly only thinking about the elite.

For me it was like, yeah, I don't actually need to make work about Palestine, like, I think being born into that identity, you have an acute sensibility to that. I mean, also growing up in Chicago and seeing the way that projects were just demolished and people disappear, and then you get this bullshit of like, you know, I don't know, like a mobile store and a pharmacy, like these chain stores that pop up that have no identity, and mean nothing, and the people who were previously living there are just gone, they've just disappeared.

I think, yeah, for me, I don't know if that answer is, it's just picking one thread, but I think that's how I, yeah, I don't know how to wrap that comment in the answer.

**VS:** No, to build on that, I was trying to think about, I guess, the domesticity and the politics of desire, in this film and in relation to your other films, and of course it's a very different engagement with home and domesticity and that sort of imaginary. Sort of, yeah...desire for home is very different when you look at your version of Palestine, or reference to Gaza as a

deeply personal space, although also obviously mythical and unreal in many different ways, but, yeah, I don't know. I guess it's also a comment more than a question - but this idea, obviously the real estate videos and the whole play with the actors is very much about how do those images produce a particular type of desire that potentially also override other types of desire for the domesticity that could be also part of different political projects, I guess. So, yeah, sorry, that's very open, maybe you don't have to answer that.

**BA:** I mean, I think you answered the first thing, yeah, it's an interpretation of how I'm working with those things. I mean, yeah, I kind of feel like I don't have to explain this kind of over-exaggerated erotic simulation, or I don't know what to call it, actually. [laughs] Like bad phone sex for real estate, I guess. I mean, actually, what's interesting about that film is when I wrote it, for the part of the woman, I wrote that she's meant to be really ambivalent, that she's receiving all this information through these different channels, and that actually her reaction is ambivalence, and to talk about - I mean, you didn't bring this up yet, I guess - but the collaborative element of my work was that when I was casting, I actually had a different actress in mind who was too expensive, and my production manager suggested this woman, and I saw a YouTube video of her and thought she's terrible [laughs], and he kept pushing me, like, "no, no, please, just have a casting session with her", and it was COVID, and she asked if she could film herself and send it to me, and I said, yeah. So, we didn't actually have a conversation about the script, and I think I hadn't written that it should be played out in ambivalence, and I think she just had the lines that the real estate developer should be saying, or the real estate agent, and then her lines in [response], and yeah, I think I just blanked on that. There was no direction in the dialogue script, and there's very little for her to say, and she sent me back, for some reason in three languages. [laughs] She did it in French, English, and Italian, and she did this crazy erotic acting out of the scene that's way more [audience laughs] explicit than this. Also - just an anecdote - I was watching it on my laptop in a cafe, and I opened it up, [laughs] and I immediately shut it and went home, called her up immediately, and I was like, "did you just interpret what was written on the page?" And she was like, "yeah, it seemed obvious," and I thought, okay, this is my actress. Actually her response was - I mean she asked me a little bit about the film - and I said that, yeah, it's really actually about Egypt, but I'm transplanting the politics of it onto Italy, because you actually can't speak about this stuff, and I was still living in Egypt when I'd written the work. By that time, by the time I was shooting, I was in Berlin, and she was like, yeah, "I just want to thank you for critiquing Italy actually," and completely missed that I was doing anything on Egypt, and there was a synergy, I think, between her and I, and I felt immense trust in her interpretation, and how she had her own kind of fire to want to communicate something also through a different means than just to speak about it, and I think it shows in the film.

**VS:** [to the audience] Just a reminder that you're very welcome to also ask for the mic at any

point in the conversation.

**Audience:** [inaudible]

**BA:** Yeah, I don't know actually [laughs] [audience laughs]

**VS:** No, because there was - I just saw this presentation by Morgan Adamson, who's a scholar of real estate media recently, and she was talking about real estate porn, and apparently that's an actual genre of like...I think if I'm not misrepresenting what she was saying, talking about how we have to develop a new desire in our current economy, because I guess sexual desire is no longer representative of our aspirations [laughs], but actually, like...wanting to have a home, which is extremely sad in so many respects...but anyways...

**SA:** I had the misfortune of going to Dubai last year [audience laughs], and it was exactly that. It's just all highways, and all of the highways are covered in billboards [with] these signs about what a great life you can have if you move to this complex. Each one advertised itself as like, *everything you need is here*. I found that to be one of the most terrifying things [about] the kind of future [that] is being posed. It reminded me of, he's annoying, but has a good point - Adorno - who talks about the prepackaged life ready and waiting. It made me think a lot about what's destroyed in that, and I think especially when the character is dancing with the landscapes like actually being gutted behind her...yeah, it was quite terrifying and so, good job [laughs]. But it also made me think of, for some reason when I was watching that, it made me think of the farm animals in *Home Movies Gaza*, and I don't know why, maybe I was thinking about like the fact [that] settler colonialism doesn't just want to replace and eradicate the actual indigenous people, or those who are racialised as indigenous, but also everything that comes to represent their lives: the soil, the animals, everything. So, I think when I was watching *Home Movies Gaza*, it just made me think about those animals, and I don't know, I just found it to be quite an interesting choice in that film. I mean, what was the choice behind including them in that, were they just on your family farm or?

**BA:** No, actually when I went to Gaza, when I recorded that footage, I hadn't been to Gaza in ten years. I was going back with my grandmother, who was kind of the last remaining person who was still living in Gaza. She had been in Jordan for four years, and when she decided it was time to go back, it was 2012, and I said, "Oh, I'll accompany you, [it's] been ten years, it's crazy," and we went, and I took [my] film cameras with me, and I thought like I have to make a film in Gaza, which I was uncomfortable with actually, because I never at that point [had] made a film inside of Palestine, and I had no ideas for what to do, and I just left myself open to it. As soon as I arrived, the thing that really struck me was [that] I couldn't make sense of it anymore. I just couldn't, it had changed so much, and there seemed to be something at work that was invisible, that kept people functioning, and like, just the domesticity, the everyday...it felt like this

place outside of time that I couldn't make sense of, but also that people had developed these insane ways to survive and smuggle things in. Or, I don't know, like, I mean, one of the things was - it is on my relative's farm - who had horses, and it's very hard to get medicine for animals, and so she was like, managing to smuggle, I don't know, drugs for humans that she would use on them, and learning how to, I mean, like how to stitch up injuries. So people still care for animals, and yeah, care beyond their everyday survival.

I felt like I was in this complete, just overwhelmed observational mode, which was also really violent for me, because it's this place I grew up in, it always felt like home, and suddenly I felt really alien to it, and kind of shocked by how much it had changed, and how I wasn't part of that change, that you know, I hadn't like lived through these years under the siege or the first war, and so I just decided to start recording.

While I was recording - I would go out every day. Interestingly, someone from Hamas was taking me around so that I could record, because you couldn't just, you can't just like record freely, or people thought I might look suspicious, I look kind of foreign, I don't look typically Arab, and so family suggested like, "why don't we put you in touch with someone from Hamas to take you around." So, I also had his perspective on how they had also taken over a place like, where settlements used to be, and what they had developed, and like "look at this playground, and look at this, this farmland", like really boasting how much they had developed, and how much they had helped people survive, and not even survive, but like, what do you call that...Like, that there was growth and development that Palestinians could be self-sufficient, [inaudible contribution from audience] thrive, yeah, thank you. So, yeah, I was, I was recording a lot of these animals, and at some point I thought, actually I should just make a film that's just animals, like forget humans, I'm just gonna focus on like agriculture, and animals, and these farms, and show just this side that we never look at actually, because we're so focused on humans, and, you know, nobody really owns land, and it's a ridiculous concept, and to me it seemed like the best way forward.

Then, ten days into being in Gaza, the 2012 war started, and I had all this material, so all the material in that film was shot before the war started, and then we got housebound, and it was a short war, very humane [laughs], according to Israel, because they were just bombing, like administrative facilities, and empty lots, and empty homes. I mentioned this in the Q&A [for] *Ouroboros* - our house had been empty for four years, and so we were a bit terrified that they were gonna bomb it, so another family came and stayed in the house with us while we were there during the war, because they lived in a high rise, and we were staying in the basement - the house is a villa, so we could stay in the basement - and to pass the time, I started looking at the footage and started editing the animal material together. I described to the youngest daughter of this family that was staying with us what I was doing, and she basically cursed me



out, she was like, [laughs] "What do you mean you're gonna make a film only about animals?" Like, kind of fuck you, actually, like...[laughs] And I was like, you're absolutely right, and she was like, "you have to show the whole thing, because it's all the same, there's no difference between a house and a turkey, and the sea, and a person", and actually it's a girl who appears in the film playing the cello, who... Yeah, so it gave a very good studio visit with her during the war. [laughs] [audience laughs]

Yeah, so I mean, so that's why it's weaved in, and I think - on that particular footage - I wanted to [particularly] show the surveillance that's happening, because one of the things I didn't understand about war and about Israel's tactics is that they're constantly surveying, even though they had signed agreements in the 2009 war to stop drone surveillance, but when they do it, they continue doing it. They're really high, so you can't hear them, and when war happens, they drop low, and it's not because they need to, but it's their tactic for terrorising you. So you hear it constantly, and even like, when I've been watching the news now, when I hear the reporters and I hear this drone, I get nauseous because I remember it was just this, again, eight-day period that is nothing by comparison to what's happening now, but it's like you're in a horror film for the entire duration of that, because you're constantly aware that they're above you.

I think in that particular scene, I wanted it to be specifically on animals, to just show that there is nothing that is considered innocent in this territory. *Nothing* can escape their gaze and their bloodthirst, ultimately.

**VS:** Do we have a mic? It's good for the people in the back, I guess, it's in the circle.

**Audience:** Hi, thank you. I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about...like, bring some threads through that you've talked about in a few of the other talks around proximity and distance, but also what you just spoke about, about the girl in your film, telling you, you know, making a kind of formal intervention into the film, and then, like, the aesthetics of gentrification that you just described, and when you're talking about class as well, and your own positionality, and just maybe your relationship with form, and, like, the spaces in which your films circulate, and, like, the conversation that you have about that with yourself. It feels like those things are so deeply connected and came out so beautifully through this conversation with someone that you were in a position of risk with at that time. So, yeah.

**BA:** I can try [laughs]. Because I think it's shifted throughout the time that I've been working. When I [was speaking] earlier about recognising my position - or the power that I had rather than the vulnerabilities or risks that I had. I think I was really, first of all, in other artists' work mesmerised by form, first and foremost. I always thought, like, the form is the thing that brings us into a work, and I'm saying something very obvious, but I think, you know, there's a range of

how present that is in certain artists' work versus, where content can be more significant, where it's the reliance on, yeah, a form that's familiar in order to deliver a message, and I think I wanted to do exactly the opposite. I knew that I spoke English well, I knew that I was educated in art schools where, like, there was a formal language that was very clear, that that's what gave people a sense of...how do you say that...they respected the work based on its form, this kind of thing, you know, "you speak like we speak, and we'll buy this story", and I just thought, like, "that's how, that's where I should operate."

Also, when I was first starting out, I mean, there were definitely Palestinian artists and filmmakers, but it still felt like a minority, and in the experimental art scene [there] wasn't, or [in the] film scene, [there were] very, very little at the time. So I really felt that I wasn't going to be making my work for an Arab audience, even though they could very much engage with it, not because they didn't know the form, but just that the politics of the work was really geared at everybody else, in a way, because also I had grown up, like, in a very militant family, a lot of activists and people doing things for the cause, inside and out. I had also been overwhelmed with the amount of, like, sorrow and just, like, violence that we were constantly engaging with, and so I wanted a different route, and I wanted to, yeah, be beyond everyday survival. I need to get this story out so that, like, this stops - because I could see it wasn't going to stop. I think I wanted something else, I wanted to, like, have something that was a testament to our existence and our survival, and so really to do it in this language that, um, yeah, I mean, it's weird...I want to cringe saying [this], but yeah, that would be understood by the West, actually, um, yeah. I don't know, you brought up so many things, I can't, I sort of, I don't know what else to respond to, um, yeah, yeah.

**Audience:** I want to ask what it's like working in contemporary Berlin, talking of everyday violence, um, and yeah, you plural, how are you coping, what are the devices, what does it look like, and what does it feel like?

**BA:** It feels like it did in the States. I mean, when I moved to Berlin, it was 2020, and I became really quickly aware of the hostility towards Arabs, and specifically Palestinians, and this narrative that, like, they're never going to critique Israel because of their own sins, based on German history, their violence against the Jews, that they were never, ever going to speak up for Palestinians. So I was already aware, when I moved there, that [this] would be the case, and I kind of felt like, yeah, well, I grew up in the States, like, I was eight, and someone asked me if I was a terrorist, and, and, um, yeah, tons of stories I won't bore you with: growing up in the States where Palestine just didn't exist, and they love Israel, so it didn't seem super new to me, like, I thought I will survive this, I know how to fight. There was [also] still space, I was funded for a project, I'd been showing my work a little bit, I'd actually already shown in Berlin quite a bit, so it seemed manageable, and just like, different city, different struggles kind of thing. Because I

found a vast and very strong Arab community, and not just Palestinians, but people from Lebanon, and Egypt, and Yemen, and Syria, and [I] was actually speaking more Arabic in Berlin than in Egypt. It felt like this is a good place to work, and that there was a lot of support from curators and film programmers, and, yeah, it felt like a really strong community.

So then when October happened, it was actually a huge slap in the face to see how many people who had been supportive suddenly disappeared, went silent, or like outwardly expressed, yeah, despise for us, and made very clear that there would be no future, actually, for Palestinians in Berlin or pro-Palestinian supporters.

I had this very, yeah, I mean, I was like waking up in cold sweats thinking like, "oh no, this is ridiculous, I have to leave, otherwise even I look stupid if I stay here, I mean I have an American passport, I can leave, I'm not bound to living in Germany," and then I don't know why - in the last month, I just thought, you know, that has been my whole life, actually, is feeling that no place wants you, you don't have a place to go back to, and that you're just very easily swept from one place to the next. Like, unhappy and yearning for more, and I'm [just] tired of it, actually, I don't want to, I don't want to leave. I want to be in a thorn in the spine of Germany, I want to be inconvenient for them, I want to be uncomfortable, because even before October, I mean...So I have a kid, and like, even [in] the first days when I was bringing him to daycare, if people would ask like, "oh, where are you from?" I would say, "I'm Palestinian," it's like, oh...like, I don't know what to do with that, just by virtue of the fact that I say I'm Palestinian, and it's not necessarily because they're even anti-Palestinian, it's because they really don't know how to deal with this. They really have no idea how to deal with their past, they never have dealt with it. There's incredible racism, deep-seated racism in Germany, because they don't even believe that they're racist. So that's where we are in Germany at the moment, but yeah.

I just have this feeling like it's going to be a fight no matter where I go, and it actually feels important to be there for it, because I have more privileges than a lot of the Arabs that are there, that don't have passports that make it simple for them to move. It feels like I'd rather be facing the fight than go somewhere where it might be easier, but actually it's not much better for our cause, so that's what I'm telling myself for now [laughs].

**AS:** As you were speaking, I just got the image of the snake eating its own tail.

**BA:** I don't think that's what I'm doing! [laughs] [audience laughs]

**AS:** [laughs] No, it's just you're saying no matter where we are, this is what we're going to be facing, and when that clip came up of the snake eating its own tail, I was like what will it take to make it stop? And I was like actually, I mean, logistically, how do you make a snake stop eating

its own tail? But then also, obviously, historically, and for future, what will it take to make any genocides stop? That's not for you to necessarily [answer], just putting it out there.

**VS:** Thanks, how do I follow this? Ah! Thanks, you are taking it on.

**Audience:** It was interesting just hearing you talk about now, consciously making work, or putting work out for a Western audience, because yesterday you spoke about how with *Ouroboros*, you kind of rid yourself of the burden of explaining. So, there's both, and so I guess I'm curious about your relationship to legibility: if you find power in withholding or providing or making yourself legible or not, how you think about them?

**BA:** Yeah, thanks for the question. Yeah, I think that's not like...making work for a Western audience was something that I started with in the beginning, and that's changed. I think, much more in my recent work, and definitely with *Ouroboros*. I don't know if I was conscious who I was making that film for, except myself, and it was just kind of like, I don't care how much an audience can decipher, that's no longer my responsibility. What I said in the Q&A was very much the present at the time, "I don't have to explain this to you. In fact, I need you to do the work at this point to make sense of this, because I can't make sense of it," and it seems like you, not you specifically, but the West have had a very leading role in this conflict. So, it's something - again, I also talked about this in the Q&A of *Ouroboros* - I don't feel that I have to defend my work or every decision I make, I think every work is kind of like a set of problems and a set of solutions, which works better than others, and leaves possibility for exploring in future works. So I think that the question of legibility has changed, actually, more recently, where I have a desire to be more legible, but not necessarily on the cause or the politics of the work, but I think in the form of the work, I think I want things to be a bit more immediate, or more readable, or more accessible.

I worked a lot previously with literary references, or codes, or songs, or things that you kind of have to know, or do a bit more reading on, and I think recently, I've started feeling like actually my work is done in withholding information, there is power in that, absolutely - I mean, maybe withholding is not the right word - but it's like saying I'm the one who holds this information, and I'm giving it to you in a code that you can engage in deciphering, so it's not like a power move, but for me like a move to really signal an invitation into something if you're willing to take it.

I think that the experimental film world is so much about that, actually, like not wanting to just be entertained and not wanting to like sit back and be spoon-fed information, but to really dig, and to question, and to discuss like what has been presented, because it's not in an immediately legible form, and even that, I think for me, has changed recently, is I guess what I'm saying. I think I have this weird feeling that I don't need to keep - it persists - that I don't need to keep

making work about this, because yeah, I feel like I've been imprisoned by it in a way.

For my career as an artist is like constantly being told that your politics need to be more clear, even by supporters of the work, or “how come it doesn't show how Palestinian you are,” or “how come you don't film in Palestine more”, or have things in the Arabic language, which I do, but not all my films, and so it's like really trying to pin me into something: be the good occupied Palestinian, or represent your country properly. Even in the support, you're just boxed in this way that's not fair, I think as a person or an artist. So I think I'm shifting out of that now, in this phase of my practice. I'm trying to find ways to talk about other things, again, because I think my perspective as a Palestinian will be in there and will be readable. I think, I'm not sure actually, but that the kind of bitterness or anger is gone and trying to resist these things anymore...and that has so much to do with how much solidarity there is for Palestine and recognition that what we have been living is so connected to other struggles, and if anything, [this is] one of the biggest reliefs now: just to feel this connection with people from different parts of the world, for whom it's completely obvious what's happening, and really speaks to them, and, yeah, feel this part of our shared struggle.

**VS:** No, and to build on that, actually, I was just thinking about the shift in representational strategies and how this informs the type of material you engage with as well, and then potentially also how you can take on different topics than just Palestine.

Thinking about how maybe in your earlier works you engage more with, I mean, I guess *we began by measuring distance* and *Story of Milk and Honey* really engage with archival material, found footage, and then you sort of move on to having your own material. I felt like with *Renee's Room* and *Capital* you're sort of investigating the possibility of using, like, CGI versions and video games...so I'm wondering what are the possibilities of exploring these other types of images, and how does this relate to your, I guess, yeah, other types, yeah.

**SA:** Specifically in Renee's room, the use of the sim character, or just a video game character.

**BA:** Yeah, it's [laughs] Grand Theft Auto.

**SA:** Sorry?

**BA:** Grand Theft Auto [laughs].

**SA:** Grand Theft Auto. Yep, that's my knowledge of video games (!) Yeah, because I felt it was, yeah, I'll let you answer...

**BA:** Why I specifically use that?

**SA:** Yeah, yeah, because it...[laughs]

**BA:** [laughs] Wait, what was the first question then?

**VS:** Just the different types of images that you think are archival to digital and all this, yeah.

**BA:** Yeah, I think, yeah, maybe I'll just answer that quickly.

I think actually I'm also, like, less interested in working with archives and much more interested in shooting my own material. So, *Capital*, for the most part except for the CGI advertisements, was all shot by me or by [the] DOP that I directed and myself - and there's so much pleasure for me in shooting. Actually, the whole making of art for me, like, the whole pleasure in being an artist or making work *is* the production. It's like, that's where the magic happens, [laughs] not to sound terrible...but like, no, it's where I think all my energy is really focused and it feels really...I feel really alive and interested and engaged because I just think it's creating something and I really feel it in that moment. I think before, that was in the editing, that's why, you know, using archive materials felt actually...It was driving that because with archive material it's like you haven't shot it, but you want to impose your vision on it. So it's really like kneading dough or something until you get the shape that you want.

Now, I think I'm way more interested in filming all the material and having maybe clearer, not super clear, but clearer, linear narrative structure and really creating the scenes during the filming and not the editing as much.

I think with *Renee's Room*, using the CGI character - I mean that film is such a weird mess. It was actually a film I made as a study for *Ouroboros*, and it was part of an installation. So, normally you see it in a room that's a black box with white carpeting and there's a surveillance camera that's pointing at the viewer looking at the film, which is on a monitor. Then it's fed back onto a camera that's behind the viewer, if that makes any sense. So you can see yourself if you turn around, but then you only see your back as you're watching the...There are all these layers of things that are happening in that work, but I was really just trying to work things out that I was thinking about in the film. I was thinking for *Ouroboros*, I don't want characters - I really want to show it as a landscape film, but we need these characters to navigate us through these spaces. And what does that mean? And what does a character mean? How does it read? When it's like, can you attach or attribute emotion or, I don't know, connect through something that isn't even a real person?

I think Grand Theft Auto, it's really, I mean, it's known as this video game that you can kind of,

you can play it traditionally, or you can just like wander off and explore. And artists have actually done this, so I explored the sort of landscape that's created in this video game and it's really hypnotic, like I was really obsessed with playing it just to go and walk around LA through the video game [audience laughs]. And I thought, like, no, of course, this is, I mean, [these are] puppets, this is like shadow theatre. It's like the ability to believe in something that is completely abstract and devoid of life is actually incredible. As humans, through this medium that is cinema, and I think that's sort of what I'm playing with in the film, is like, what happens when you put one landscape over another? How does an empty landscape read versus a destroyed one? How do you force them together? How does sound affect the space that you're in? Like, when we're in the car footage that's going backwards and we hear someone singing, I just, it's really just like...I don't know, undoing all the things that I was working through in *Ouroboros*.

**VS:** I still have this song in my head by the way, it's in an earworm! [laughs]

**Audience:** I just want to ask a bit more about what you said about *Renee's Room* being an installation, which is to invite you to speak a bit about working between visual art and film contexts, both in terms of how you think about spectators and audience differently: in terms of people who might be visiting and walking through galleries and museums versus seated in setting like we are here in a more traditional cinematic setting. Also if you want to speak some to funding in the different economies of the art world and the film world.

**BA:** Yeah, I mean, so my installations are not necessarily single channel in a gallery. They often involve other elements, like what I was describing: photographs, drawings, like *mise-en-scènes*, often with furniture, plants, this kind of thing. So it's about actually creating an environment around the material and I have works also that have no moving image, installation works [that] have no moving image. I do think there's a radical difference between a cinema, like a traditional festival audience and a visual art audience - I hope that's not dramatic to say. I've just noticed that when I screen films in traditional, especially the festival context that people are way more traditional in what they're expecting and way more frustrated actually with my work.

When I premiered *Ouroboros*, which was at Locarno, and the first question I got asked was - it wasn't even a question, but it was like a guy stood up to ask the question and said like, and had his arms like this when he was asking it [laughs] [audience laughs] "why are you insisting on making us suffer, like if you want to make weird films you should just make films like Jodorowsky" [laughs]. And actually it was a great question because the audience started defending the film [audience laughs]. I mean I said what I wanted to say like "I don't need to explain this and the reason for making it is to withhold information" - like what you were asking - and to present something else that really...whatever, the answers that I've given for that film.

And different people started arguing about why it should be more or less legible, why are we expecting a certain format, it was very clear that I wasn't using a traditional format, that I was defying genre. It was just like it actually produced a really interesting conversation.

I also showed it at the Whitney Biennial and that audience was completely different, like they asked - I mean like Locarno's audience would ask things about, and not to demonise Locarno - but the audience there would ask things about like "how come you have actors that aren't acting and how come there's no narrative" and just like looking for something that I wasn't making basically, or hadn't pretended to be making. Whereas at the Biennial people were really, yeah like discussing the form, talking about duration, talking about sound, dialogue, references, literature, language. I think they were just much more open to seeing something that wasn't a format that they would necessarily be familiar with, and so I don't know...I mean for me, I like working in both of those spaces but I think I've started to recognise that making moving image that is not traditional cinema or classical cinema, like there should be more space in the cinematic world for this kind of work that's not traditional. Or that the art world - really just like the art spaces - need to have proper cinemas to show this kind of work and that it shouldn't just be installed in a gallery for people to walk in and out of, because there's so much work that you shouldn't be walking into the middle of and seeing in this way I think - and not just my work a lot of people's work.

So the film that was in that programme is...I mean he's a visual artist predominantly working with film and cinema, that film was shot on 35mm and has CGI and it works really well in a cinema, it's an experience. I had never seen it in a cinema, I've seen a lot of his work but not that piece in a cinema and yeah, it's so impressive how tense...like how being captivated in the cinema seats in the darkness anticipating this flash and not really knowing what you're looking at, is so powerful and to have that in a gallery wouldn't work. Even if you make a black box and people wander in and out, it completely - in my opinion - ruins it. So, it's like in some way those worlds have to catch up with what artists are doing and it's long overdue. Certainly there are spaces that do accommodate [this work] but it's slow.

**Audience:** I kind of have a filmmaker question. I'm really fascinated by the work that you did shoot on location, like the cinematic space produced from that work - and you know, you said that you have this process of reversing footage to actually do the *visionnage*, and I'm wondering if you have any kind of ritual when you shoot on location, if you approach location in a specific way

**BA:** When you say "on location" - meaning specifically with the workshop in Palestine? Or just generally, like when I actually shoot?



**Audience:** Yeah, generally. And like *Ouroboros*, like all the locations, I mean - and other films, yeah. Do you have anything, like any ways, that you approach how you approach place? Because how place is rendered in the film is very specific, there's a feeling to that, it's so site specific but also so decontextualised and the tension there...I wonder if you have a process?

**BA:** Yeah, I don't know if we can call it a process, it's just...I think I create these communities around the work that I make and sometimes they're very small, like it's just two or three other people that are helping me shoot or performing in it or doing sound, it could be one other person doing sound. Or it's a huge cast, not huge - by my standards, it's huge - like 25 people and production assistants and gaffers and all this stuff. I try as much as I can to build a community with those people, especially the ones most involved in the shooting or what we're working on. And I'm not saying like I make soup and we have conversation, but there really is a dialogue that's ongoing, there's not much rehearsal, there's not much planning first, I mean there's, I even forget the word for it...When you block scenes is what it is? Yeah. The technical work is less important. I mean, once I know that I can trust the person who I'm working with *technically speaking* then it's really about spending time and understanding that person. It's like a particular vibe where we don't, I don't really need to know how much the person, my cast or crew, let's say - speaking in production terms - know about what I'm after or politically what I'm after. But just that there's this trust, I think about it, I mean it sounds so, it sounds kind of cheesy - but as a Palestinian I think we create our homes and our environments wherever we go and in the process of shooting, I feel like I'm constructing something that doesn't exist and I have to do it through the people that I'm working with so that we become really intimate with each other in terms of the process like they're being led in. Which is not actually like a very easy thing, I mean I'm a control freak actually and micromanaging everything all the time, so relinquishing that control is really hard, it's really difficult. But I put myself in that space every time I shoot in order to have the people I'm working with also determine what the film is and even in a way mess things up for me that I have to go back and fix, and deal with mistakes and things shot incorrectly or that [isn't] what I was after. It sounds really cheesy now that I'm saying it out loud but it's just a way of creating an environment around the location that I'm shooting.

**VS:** So you sort of open the door, I mean you already started talking about it but I don't know if you want to say more about collaboration? There's Diego Marcon who you've worked with, at least in two films, and I don't know if there are other collaborations that you've sustained and how they've informed and changed maybe some of your projects as they were being developed.

**BA:** There aren't so many people that I've worked with more than once, Diego is one and the person who does sound actually also for Diego. When I filmed Diego for *Ouroboros* he insisted that the sound person be his friend and the person he collaborates with - a sound artist named Federico Chiari - who's incredible. I mean he basically handed me the most incredible sound

recording in the world, or just the right person for me, because he felt more comfortable having him around and I also continued working with Federico on different projects. But because I've moved so many times in the last 15 years, it's different people every time. Diego and Federico are kind of the exceptions. I've kind of talked about it, it's like what happened with Francesca, the woman in *Capital* - or interestingly, in *Ouroboros*, in one of the scenes, there's a woman in the California desert scenes, there's a blonde-haired woman - she was actually my production assistant in the Mojave Desert - but the person who was going to be in the shoot didn't materialise and so I had to approach her to be in it. Which didn't feel ethical actually, but she was very willing and happy to, I guess, participate. It was like this person that I hadn't really brought into the process, she was just there for the day to [be] production assistant and so I had to spend time with her to get to know her, and for her to feel comfortable with me and me with her. Because I'm...not a good director, like, I don't know how to direct people and I don't like that position. I mean with Francesca it was hard, like I always feel guilty about how much I'm asking of the person, and I don't want to do too many takes and I'm always like "are you sure you want to do this, are you sure this is okay?" And they're like, "you are paying me for a job, [laughs] like, yes".

So, I think it's something that...it's not collaboration in a traditional sense but it's like I have to find a way for there to be a sense that the person working participating in the piece is really participating in the piece - not just a hired person, but as someone whose opinion and vision I value. I mean crews are incredible, like they, DOPs or sometimes gaffers will suggest things and it'll be the thing that makes the piece work. So you can't take anyone for granted because everyone's watching what's happening. Even when they're hired for a one day thing, someone else's eyes and vision will contribute to how the thing is made and what it becomes. So, for me that's also collaboration even if it's not, you know, the entire thing.

**SA:** Finally, I have a question, not a comment. I noticed throughout your films that the narrator [often] references the template of the day throughout the film. So, in *we began by measuring distance*, the narrator says "a day is any other day" and then in *Ouroboros* the kind of holders for the film is dawn, noon, dusk and then same again in a few of the others. I was just wondering in *Home Movies Gaza*, the woman references the slow dawn to the dusk or something...so I just didn't know for you what that meant, and why the day tends to be the place within which the film tends to emerge or be held within.

**BA:** That's such a good question. I'm going to tell an anecdote, because when I was working on *Ouroboros* I was invited to...it was maybe like a university in Colorado or something...I was doing studio visits, and they asked if I would do a program of short films and they picked the films and I think I was beginning to edit the film and I hadn't watched the films in a while. I sat in the audience and one film after another started playing and I thought "oh my god, first of all I've

just been remaking the same film. Secondly, *Ouroboros* is a combination of all those things” and I just felt I was just a one trick horse. “You don't know how to do anything, like you just...you move countries and that's what informs the work, is that what's happening here?” [laughs] And I blanked during the Q&A. Every time someone would ask a question all I could think about was like “yeah you have done that move before and okay...so everything plays in reverse, that's your thing (!)” [audience laughs]

It was horrible! I hadn't seen *Home Movies Gaza* in a bit and all of a sudden I was like “oh my god I just re-shot that” because in *Home Movies Gaza* there's this like backwards filming of the house, and I hadn't even thought about the fact that I re-did it for *Ouroboros*. It never crossed my mind. I was like “oh, I have this original scene that I'm gonna shoot” [audience laughs] and I was mortified when I saw it.

And, like an asshole, the audience was reassuring me, like “no! this is what great artists do!” [audience laughs] you know...think about Godard...” I'm like “no, okay...” [laughs]. It was such a disaster! [laughs]

I went back to edit the film feeling so down about my entire career as an artist, and was just kind of pushing through editing to just be like “well, yeah that's what you do, like this is how you edit things (!)” So when you're saying this, [it] never occurred to me that I have used time over and over again - where the day is something that's so significant but I've now, with age, learned to recognise that it's a good thing actually: when things persist and repeat. To actually question what drives one to be curious about this thing - because all artists do it, it's actually a little bit strange when you find an artist that like one minute is into this, and the next minute completely [into a] different form. It feels that they're lost and they're looking for something or, some artists do it well, but I think I'm comfortable now with the idea that there's something that persists, there's something in the subconscious - because, genuinely, I've never thought about [this] fact, I don't think anyone's ever asked that about this. I mean, they'll ask [about] it in the particular film, but not across films and I think there is something really poetic. I was trying to figure out what my answer would be about this, since I haven't thought about it consciously...I think just the really basic, benign mechanisms of our everyday are not innocent for Palestinians: the rising and the setting of the sun, the expectation that there will be a tomorrow, that time is a reliable thing that moves forward and things get better. This is not something we grow up with. I think maybe that sounds like a pretty solid answer [laughs], but maybe it's just lyrical also - the setting sun, the rising sun, the marking a *thing* that is actually artificial in order to make sense of...I mean, that's how it's used in *Ouroboros*. I don't know, I could probably answer for each piece but it's probably better to leave it open to how the viewers see it - that time is an artificial construction that's applied onto a film...that we can see 2,000 years [represented] in a film or 6 million years...or we can spend 2 hours unpacking a 10 minute scene, and that's also the

beauty of cinema: to plunge into that world and just be living it in the cinema.

**VS:** I think we're done with time, thank you so much and let's thank Basma, thank you.

[applause]