

Inas Halabi: The Centre Does Not Hold

The Centre Does Not Hold is an exhibition in three parts by the Palestinian artist Inas Halabi. Across a sound installation and two moving image works that address different regions mired in colonial power structures, Halabi employs opacity and omission as strategic tools—following the Martiniquan writer and poet Édouard Glissant’s call for opacity as the refusal to be knowable, understood and rendered transparent by a dominant Western order. Centred on the landscape as a living archive, Halabi’s works attend to non-linear and non-visual modes of representation in order to excavate invisible sediments of slow violence. Importantly, as Glissant writes, “the opaque is not the obscure.”¹ An invitation to listen deeply and look closely, *The Centre Does Not Hold* surveys the malleability of sound and image, and in doing so, unearths histories hiding in plain sight.

Hopscotch (The Centre of the Sun’s Radiance) (2021) is a multi-chapter soundscape from which the exhibition takes its title. A dual-channel sound installation with video, the work takes listeners on a sonic journey across two continents—Africa and Europe—to explore how histories of labour tied to the development of colonial-era railways in the former Belgian Congo are embedded in the contemporary landscape. Emphasising the abnegation of a visual mode of representation, the work considers how sound can construct alternative narratives. Through ambient field recordings, oral testimony, popular music and radio broadcasts, Halabi traces the extraction and transport of uranium from the Shinkolobwe mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to a now-defunct refinery in Olen, Belgium. Uranium was discovered at Shinkolobwe in 1915, and continued to be transported by train and boat to Belgium for over fifty years, where it was processed at the Olen refinery. Both mine and refinery have their roots in operations controlled by UMHK—Union Minière du Haut-Katanga—a Belgian mining conglomerate that controlled and operated the (primarily copper, then uranium) mining industry across the Congolese province of Katanga between 1906 and 1966. Headquartered in both Brussels and Lubumbashi (then Léopoldville), its contemporary successors are a state-controlled entity in the DRC, Gecamines (Générale des Carrières et des Mines, from 1971), and the European iteration of the corporation now known as Umicore (rebranded in 2001). Umicore closed its Olen factory in 1970, burying up to 500,000m³ of radioactive waste in the red soil surrounding the site.

Recalling his claim to the right of opacity at a university congress in Mexico in 1969, Glissant states: “There’s a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparency and the projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West? ... As far as I’m concerned, a person has the right to be opaque.”² In his terms, opacity is the vocabulary of the fragment, the glimpse, or the partial frame. *Hopscotch (The Centre of the Sun’s Radiance)* does not follow a linear structure, instead borrowing its title and non-linear form from the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s eponymous novel that instructs its

¹ Édouard Glissant, ‘For Opacity,’ *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.191

² Édouard Glissant quoted in Manthia Diawara (director), *Un monde en relation (One World in Relation)*, 2009: <https://www.frieze.com/article/opazität>

readers on alternative chapter hierarchies, as well as the children's playground game. In this way, Halabi's own *Hopscotch* shifts between several chapters whose beginnings and endings are never the same, journeying across language, land and interlocutor to examine how the past continues to inflect the present. In an ongoing convergence of political, technological, and economic forces, these formerly colonised territories are marked by the nineteenth century railways that abetted Belgium's extractivist profiteering, while the rhythmic sounds of exploited human labour echo in the collective memories of their inhabitants.

The second part of the title is taken from Patrice Lumumba's independence speech of 1960, in which he vows to make the Democratic Republic of Congo "the centre of the sun's radiance for Africa," and to "keep watch over the lands of our country so that they truly profit her children," reflecting the ongoing struggle for economic as well as political independence from colonial oppressors. Lumumba's words would be echoed in 1983 by the Senegalese film director, Ousmane Sembène, when asked if his films were understood in Europe. To this question, Sembène replied (in French): "Let's be very clear. Europe is not my centre, Europe is on the outskirts. After 100 years here, did they speak my language? I speak theirs. My future does not depend on Europe. I'd like them to understand me, but it makes no difference. Take the map of Africa ... place Europe and America together and there's still room left. Why be a sunflower and turn toward the sun? I myself am the sun!"³ Rather than repeat pre-existing structures of knowledge production and eurocentric omission, *Hopscotch's* oral testimonies centre on those left out of history, and on the productive disruption of a singular narrative.

In its transcription of sound into text, *Hopscotch* is also attuned to the dynamics of what pioneering musician and composer Pauline Oliveros called 'Deep Listening'—a practice of listening as activism. A form of sonic meditation developed in response to the anti-war movements of the 1960s, Oliveros was interested in the difference between hearing and listening. As she put it, "Hearing represents the primary sense organ—hearing happens involuntarily. Listening is a voluntary process that through training and experience produces culture. All cultures develop through ways of listening. Deep Listening is listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, or one's own thoughts as well as musical sounds."⁴ Rooted in sound's power of "synchronisation, coordination, release and change", *Hopscotch* is its own call to deep listening, to imagine listening beyond the edges of individual consciousness.

As a counter to the illusion of transparency in imperial image regimes, *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (2023) looks to the idea of 'slow violence' perpetrated in the landscape surrounding the remote towns of Dalyet el Carmel and Isfiya in northern Palestine, a mountainous, geographically-isolated enclave of the Druze people. Druze are a Levantine religious minority whose esoteric, ritualistic practices have been co-opted and militarised by the State of Israel

³ Ousmane Sembène quoted in Férid Boughedir (director), *Caméra d'Afrique (African Cinema: Filming Against All Odds)*, 1983.

⁴ Pauline Oliveros, 'Quantum Listening: From practice to theory (to practice practice)', 1999: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/arena-attachments/736945/19af465bc3fc3c8d5249713cd586b28.pdf>

since 1948. Slow violence, as first described by environmentalist and literary scholar Rob Nixon in 2011, is a violence that appears indiscernible to many as it extracts wealth and power from the landscape and inhabitants. It is an incremental violence, which unlike 'spectacular' violent events, frequently goes unnoticed and can be physical, psychological and based on the propagation of social norms.⁵ Since 1956, as a result of an obscure deal between several community leaders and political authorities, the Druze in Palestine are subject to enforced conscription in the Israeli army. Young people are sworn to military duty at the site of a significant Druze shrine, Nabi Shu'ab, transforming the ground of religious ceremony into one of nationalist fealty. In the decades that followed, the Israeli Ministry of Education separated Druze education from its Arab counterpart, preparing a curriculum of invented history and culture that denied Druze autonomy and further separated its people from the wider indigenous communities of Palestine.

Engaging with the inner politics and lived experiences of this deeply private community, the film weaves together intimate scenes of various protagonists in shared domestic spaces and in the landscape, reclaiming a sense of ritual in the everyday. Eventually, we see a younger generation increasingly resist their inherited position. Unscripted, the work expands into territory in which the subject controls what the camera sees. *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* is structurally informed by Masao Adachi's *fûkeiron* (landscape) theory, a movement in Japanese avant-garde filmmaking in the late 1960s that posited that filming the landscape would reveal the forces of oppression acting upon society. Critical of the then-dominant modes of leftist documentary filmmaking, Adachi and others saw the camera not only as objects of witness to conflict but as an active participant in the imagining of alternative futures.⁶ Foregrounding a sense of continuous movement, *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* uses extended takes and panoramic shots to reveal entrenched systems of power and control within the landscape. In this way the land itself, and in particular Jabal al-Carmel (Mount Carmel), also becomes a protagonist of Halabi's film, a poetic gesture towards the interdependencies of all human and non-human entities that are subject to the effects and impacts of dominant political infrastructures.

We Have Always Known the Wind's Direction (2019-2020) grapples with subterranean violence as it probes the possible burial of nuclear waste in the south of the West Bank in the occupied Palestinian territories. A combination of interview, conversation, and footage shot on location, the work's documentarian impulse to catalogue the material effects of radiation (namely, the prevalence of radioactive isotope Cesium 137, a product of nuclear fission) instead pivots towards more insidious forms of representation. Fragmented conversations with a nuclear physicist and views of the landscape are uneasily underscored by what we hear; the camera's viewfinder overlaid with a spectrum of hallucinogenic red hues seemingly to reflect the levels of radiation found. Yet in various ways, the delivery of information is thwarted, withheld or delayed.

⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁶ Yuriko Furuhashi, 'Returning to actuality: *fûkeiron* and the landscape film', *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2007, p. 345. Quoted in Conor Bateman, 'The hills have ideologies: the *fûkeiron* tradition in Japanese landscape cinema', *4a Papers*, Issue 5, November 2018:

<https://4a.com.au/articles/the-hills-have-ideologies-the-fukeiron-tradition-in-japanese-landscape-cinema>

Radioactivity, invisible but deadly, is here a metonym for a more ungraspable invisibility—the systemic networks of power and control in the region. One of the most militarised zones in the world, radioactive particles move freely through the many checkpoints and borders just outside the camera’s frame. To return, then, to Glissant, in the hopes that one day, all bodies might move through the world with such freedoms: “We clamour for the right to opacity for everyone.”⁷

The permanent state of exception that is the norm for Palestinians living under occupation has been in full evidence for many years. Now, as millions of people around the world watch an unfolding genocide through their phones, there has never been a greater crisis of visual representation. A surfeit of evidence pours in daily, social media testimony and eyewitness accounts to atrocities have engendered humanitarian outcry and legal attempts at sanction. But as we have seen, the collective lesson of the case presented by South Africa at the International Court of Justice that alleged Israel’s contravention of the Genocide Convention is, as Iraqi-Irish film curator Róisín Tappoini recently wrote online, “that images don’t matter anymore.” As she continues, “This is not because they are inadequate proof, but because proof itself doesn’t matter anymore. How can it, when the direct witnessing of P[alestinian] bodies existing in the first place was always denied? Why did we think images could save us?”⁸

A note on the three works in the exhibition:

Hopscotch (The Centre of the Sun’s Radiance) (2021) is installed at Enjoy for the duration of 23 March–22 April 2024.

The feature-length *We No Longer Prefer Mountains* (2023) will be screened at Enjoy for one-night only on Thursday 11 April, from 6pm.

We Have Always Known the Wind’s Direction (2019-2020) is available to view online at <https://www.circuit.org.nz/selection/a-river-dies-of-thirst> for the duration of the exhibition, where it is set alongside moving image works by Aotearoa artists and in dialogue with a polyphony of practices similarly invested in the geopolitics of extractive colonialism.

⁷ Glissant, 1997, p.194.

⁸ Róisín Tappoini, Instagram story, 10 March 2024.