

VISITOR REPORT

by Ahmed El Gendy

on yasmine eid-sabbagh's *Frictional Conversations – The Script*

Opening performance and after talk
Saturday 20 June 2026, 20:30–23:30hr

If I Can't Dance
WG-Plein 881
1054SM Amsterdam

Frictional Conversations – The Script is based on the script of a radio broadcast, which continues yasmine eid-sabbagh's twenty-five year-long process of counter-archiving a repository of photographs from Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon. The event I attended was the opening performance and the first collective reading of the script. The reading included field recordings, archival fragments, conversations from the camp, and an electronic score by musician Sary Moussa. Both yasmine eid-sabbagh and Sary Moussa were present, and Moussa made live music as the audience entered the space.

The room was covered with 'borrowed' carpets. We left our shoes outside. White fabrics were draped from the ceiling forming a soft flowy container. There was no stage front. It was a warm day, we were sitting on the carpets and cushions, including the artists. We were encouraged to sit on the floor to listen better. The fact that the carpets were borrowed was a touching gesture to start an experience of 'collective' reading of a text that we were 'allowed' to read.

Before we started, just knowing that it would later be broadcast on Radio Alhara (an online radio based in Bethlehem, Palestine) made me think of our position quite tangibly. We were gathered in a space in Europe, geographically and politically distant, speaking 'of' and 'through' a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon. That distance sat next to the proximity and the intimacy of the conversation we were reading.

Each audience member received the script in a language of their choice: Arabic, English, or Dutch. It was written like a theatre script, it included dialogue and some indications of tone or delivery. Five volunteers were invited to read different characters out loud in the language they had chosen. I decided to participate.

"Which character?"

"Any is fine, I don't know them anyway."

"Which language would you like to read in?"

"Arabic."

"OK, you'll be Hamada."

The reading was unrehearsed obviously. We were voicing thoughts that belonged to other people, encountering the text for the first time while performing it for everyone else to listen and read along in a different language. There was an awkwardness and roughness to the proposal of a collective reading. I ‘became’ Hamada. There was a sense of responsibility for speaking Hamada’s words and being temporarily responsible for carrying them. The script I had was written in Palestinian Arabic, and I naturally speak Egyptian Arabic. So I found myself constantly negotiating between trying to pronounce the Palestinian expressions as written and instinctively shifting certain words into Egyptian when my brain had enough time to scan through the sentence before wording it.

One question If I Can’t Dance Co-director Sara Giannini posed in her introduction was: “how is memory transmitted across the body?” She then elaborated that she does not only mean through the human body, but also through environmental bodies and institutional bodies. These were questions I have also been increasingly occupied with in my own artistic practice, and hearing them articulated precisely and then manifested within this project resonated with me a lot.

Before the reading, yasmine described *The Script* as “a form that wants to be another form”, which was a formulation that I found exciting. It was clear that her long term engagement with Burj al-Shamali did not begin with the intention of producing a script. It emerged because of the material itself and the ethical and political conditions surrounding it. The project remained adaptable and capable of becoming something else.

Throughout the reading, different characters discussed the archive and how to care for it. One key point was that members of the community wanted their photographs to be taken, and they wanted them to become part of the archive, but they did not want them to be publicly exhibited. I was reflecting on the process of photographing a subject, and how it contains two separate moments of consent: the moment of capturing the photograph, and the entirely different moment of showing it to others.

What does a photograph do? And who can see it? Taking care of the repository was a notion of custodianship; to care for them on behalf of those who entrusted them. There was a reason why they wanted to keep the photographs. One of which is that every encounter between a person and their own photograph becomes an act of reactivation, where the past is rewritten from the perspective of the present. In this way, how is a photograph different from any other object that accumulates time and affect? If it is a scarf, a tool, or an ornament; these objects also evoke texture, smell, sound, imagination, and memory.

The script kept moving between Arabic, English, and Dutch. The same sentences, hearing them in one language while reading them in another, they would carry different emotional textures in each if I could understand it in both. The soundscape was not descriptive to what was being said, it was accompanying a sense of imagination and it was carving time.

Amongst the different sonic fragments that were interwoven into the reading, there were two moments of a guided meditation in English. Its familiar tone suggested calmness and nervous system regulation, which was as well what somehow happened in the space that we shared. But it also became uncanny with some wording referring to land and grounding with different meanings when imagined spoken from Burj al-Shamali.

At the end of the reading, I had two feelings. One was some sort of admiration for the position of agency that the community asserted over their own images, with the desire for the photographs to exist, yet without becoming visually accessible to everyone. It made me connect with my idea of that community beyond a visual image of what their physical life might look like. The second feeling was some sort of a mild frustration, which came from curiosity. I recognised that I felt like I was ‘missing out’ on seeing the images. Recognising this desire, and then immediately recognising that those photographs were not supposed to be for me to watch; it made me reflect on why we assume that historical images are systematically to be ‘available’ for viewing to begin with. That frustration revealed (my own, and an objective sense of) a colonial gaze within many notions of documentation. I thought

about the practice of anthropology itself, and the assumption that seeing/studying other's lives from a place of distance or comfort is considered knowledge.

Toward the end of the reading, after the sound of our voices through microphones was rounding up the content of the script, there came on the speakers the voices of the actual characters from *Burj al-Shamali*, and I could hear Hamada's real voice sing some words from a beautiful and familiar song.

Following the performance there was an after-talk with the artists, which was also recorded to be part of the radio broadcast. This brought in different perspectives, with people reflecting from their own cultural references around questions of migration, nostalgia, memory, authorship, and viewership. When the talk had to end, it dissolved into a more informal conversation, where I got to introduce myself to yasmine and thank her.

ABOUT THE EVENT

Using the script of an experimental radio broadcast as a starting point, the project continued a twenty-five-year process of (counter-)archiving and engaging with a repository of photographs from Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in the South of Lebanon. Blurring past, present, and future, the radio broadcast wove together field recordings, archival fragments, and conversations from Burj al-Shamali, along with an electronic music score created by musician and composer Sary Moussa. The broadcast was realized live at If I Can't Dance in the form of expanded collective readings over four weeks. The opening performance included live music by Sary Moussa and was followed by an aftertalk with yasmine eid-sabbagh and Sary Moussa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ahmed El Gendy is an Egyptian-Dutch interdisciplinary artist based in Amsterdam. Through moving-bodies and moving-images, they explore the wonders and weights of entanglement and encounter, engaging questions of agency and interdependence. They are interested in how our bodies are informed through physiological capacities and socio-political conditioning. In their practice, Ahmed has been developing a score-based material-driven practice that experiments with water, ropes, wheels, machines, and large objects to brush against the edges of intimacy, memory, proximity, and endurance. Ahmed holds a master's degree in choreography from Amsterdam University of the Arts. Their work has been shown at Mediterranea Biennale in Italy, Marres House for Contemporary Culture in the Netherlands, Dance House Lefkosia in Cyprus, and Festifreak Festival for Independent Cinema in Argentina.

ABOUT THE VISITOR REPORT

At If I Can't Dance we see the visitor report as a method of documentation. The affectual, relational and embodied nature of performance work is not always easily captured in audio-visual formats. To supplement such formats, If I Can't Dance commissions written visitor reports, which are meant to bring into the archive subjective responses to a lived experience of a work and its context.

The visitor report is, therefore, not to be confused with a critical review. It is first and foremost a form of witnessing. The people commissioned to write the report span a range of positions and practices within and outside the field of art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Process and script: yasmine eid-sabbagh
Sonic research and recordings: Sary Moussa and yasmine eid-sabbagh
Composer, musician and sound editing: Sary Moussa
Music researcher: Bahaa al-Jomaa
Singer: Malak Srour
Drums: Nailé Sosa Aragón
Assistants: Nour, Laytha, Salma, and Qamar

Voices

Khawla: Khawla Khalaf
Hamada: Hamada al-Jomaa
yasmine: yasmine eid-sabbagh
Tahrir: Hala Tahrir Omran
Somatic practitioner: Prathama Raghavan
And: Hasna Abou Kharoub, Shadi Ibrahim, Sheikh Abou Hamzi, Mahmoud al-Jomaa (Abu Wassim), Kamal Musherfih (Abu Fadi)

Script translation

Arabic: Mohammad Amal Nazeeh and Hala Tahrir Omran
Dutch: Judith Vranken
English: Rania Rajji and Karim-Yassin Goessinger
Copy-editing English: Janine Armin
Copy-editing Dutch: Annick Kleizen

Carpet lenders

Emily Bates, Emily Pethick, Janneke Raaphorst, Stéphanie Baechler, Stephanie Schuitemaker, Thom(y) van Hoek, Charlotte Timmer, woonruimte coöperatief, Titus Nouwens, Hans Schamlé

If I Can't Dance Team

Project curator: Sara Giannini
Fundraising: Sara Giannini, Annick Kleizen
Hosting support during events: Sancha Meca Castro, Marta Lopez Santos
Carpet-lending coordination: Sancha Meca Castro
Carpets transport: Sancha Meca Castro with Fujimaro Eligio Rademaker and Hans Schamlé
Production & AV: Fujimaro Eligio Rademaker

Affiliated

Space design: Andrea Verdecchia
Arabic lettering and script design: Farah Fayyad
Edition X graphic design: Maud Vervenne
Production support: Connie Walden
Documentation: Prins de Vos

Broadcasting partner: Radio Alhara

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