

Stephanie Saadé.
The Encounter of the Fist and Last Particles of Dust

Text by Anne Davidian

Have you heard about the theory of the apple in a box? Here is a thought experiment, or a playful metaphysical gamble. Imagine placing the fruit inside a perfectly sealed container. No energy exchange, no interference. Just the fruit, locked in with its eventual collapse – subject to entropy, a slow choreography of decay. Molecules unravel, atoms scatter, structure unknits itself into particulate chaos.

Theoretical physics leaves us here with a strange loophole: within an infinite timeline, every possible configuration of matter must eventually recur. So, the apple, dissolved into dust, reappears. Not as a cyclical return or resurrection, but matter reconfigured anew. *Az-Zahr*¹, chance itself, animates this uncertain throw of the dice: an alternate order, a mode through which matter reshapes otherwise.

Two galleries, facing each other like Borges' mirrors, are set in a museum that was once a house, someone's private cosmos. Doors removed, windows revealed, floors covered. To walk through this exhibition is not to follow a timeline, but to step into time's irregular tempo: circular, granular, disjointed. Your movements draw loops, asymmetries, misalignments. Memory ceases to narrate; it begins to behave like matter: unstable, diffractive, reverberant.

Traversée des états (Crossing States). Entering the galleries, the floor lifts beneath your feet. It is memory made spatial: a cut, a 1:1 recreation of the artist's family apartment floor, rendered through similar patterns and materials. A radical gesture of domestic twinning: laying down a familiar playground for the show, paired with the artist's attention to what is often overlooked, mistreated, minor – the humble floor. The walls have vanished; only the marks of thresholds remain. The result is a fragmented geometry of surfaces – tile, terrazzo, carpet – held in simultaneous visibility. A quiet vertigo of impossible vantage.

This is not a replica, but an invocation. The materials aren't archival, they are prosthetic: quasi doubles, stand-ins, placeholders. What matters here is the visual logic, the formative rhythm of a terrazzo – imported from Venice and fully naturalised, traversing Lebanese homes and social strata alike, omnipresent; the first abstraction to enter the artist's eye as a child.

¹ From Andalusian Arabic الزهر, *az-zahr* ("die, game of dice"), named after the Arabic زهر, *zahr* ("flower") because the winning face of the die bore a flower.

In the exhibition, the installation becomes the entry point, setting the pace of displacements and recompositions, a grounding device that holds nothing still. You move, disoriented, through the imprint of someone else's domestic time. The floor itself has crossed states: kitchen to bedroom, carpet over terrazzo, carpet replacing tile, each substitution marking the metamorphosis of a habitat and a country. Fragmented modernity sediments in pattern.

Across the room, in *Traversée des états*, terrazzo panels stand vertically, embedded with compressed debris from Fairuz albums. Lebanon's soundscape reconfigured into image, the auditory into mineral form. If memory is material, then transmutation is its mode of persistence.

The Encounter of the First and Last Particles of Dust lends its name to the exhibition. Four curtains from a set of ten and dislodged from the artist's family home, are now suspended in two galleries. The fabric pools on the floor, misfitting, testifying to spatial scales they no longer belong to. Their surfaces are embroidered with white lines, cartographic transpositions mapping significant routes of the artist's adolescence. A numerological loop: 37 paths equal the artist's age when the work was made, spanning the years 1995 to 2001, the interval between the curtains' original installation and her departure from home.

The threaded lines are freed from geographical referents and appear like abstract patterns. They enact memory as movement, forming a scaffolding through which a narrative might begin again. Family visits, coastal drives, archaeological detours – mobility regained after war and the curated erasure of its memory. These are re-entries into fractured geography.

The embroideries interfere with stains, creases, and sun marks on the fabric as personal and collective histories diffract on the same surface. The curtains engage with vertical incisions in the gallery walls – once sealed, now reopened – channeling light, movement, contingency. A reordered field of perception emerges, where memory no longer encloses.

Dust gathers at this junction, settled into the textile over its lifespan at home. A minimal unit of inhabitation, a frictional indicator of the unfinished, dust here is matter in suspension. Measurable yet defying measure, residual and uncontainable, each particle binds what it touches into a spatial-temporal knot, vibrating across unstable durations. *First* and *Last* are not positions on a timeline, but coexisting intensities that reframe chronology as a set of overlapping rhythms.

Elsewhere, *Petits papiers* (Little Papers) collects fragments: labels, tickets, business cards, adhesive scraps, offcuts from artworks, a child's drawing. These are remnants of lived time, recomposed into an improbable cohesion. The artist's practice is reduced to its minimum, with materials at hand forming, in exile, a new home that is also the studio. "Traces of a civilisation obsessed with not leaving traces," says Saadé. The figure of the *chiffonnier* – a Parisian ragpicker – hovers here: a counter-archivist gleaning value from what's discarded.

No archives, no narrative arc. In *Word Count*, each word of a poem is measured in centimetres, its length inked below. Language, stripped of interpretive weight, becomes spatial rhythm: words are intervals, as if inscribed by a metronome attuned to linguistic irregularity. The paper's thinness allows the verso text to show faintly through— illegible, yet present as spectral afterimage. In another numerological manoeuvre, the artist recodes the poem into an alternate register. Meaning recedes. What remains is a pre-poetic state, before sense congeals.

It has been said that catastrophe interrupts narrative continuity. Saadé works from the breach, inventing compositional logics within disorder. Durations migrate into spatial arrangements, units of time take shape. Measures are transposed into the scale of lived experience, private arithmetic takes place of random choice.

This material is familiar, acutely present. Saadé offers cues: titles, factual notes, yet these touch points remain oblique. Nothing settles into story. A method of narrative oscillation, held between what cannot be told and what refuses to disappear.

Her gestures lean closer towards notation. As in concrete poetry, the force here lies not in what is written but in how each element claims its space. More than simple inscriptions, they are sites of attention, where the political is an undertow.

Finally, *It is...*, or the grand calligram. 3600 seconds of an hour, inscribed by hand, letter by letter, over the course of months, forming a circular movement. The wrist tires, the line drifts, blurs, bearing the ache of repetition. A 0.5° deviation per line gradually grows into a spiral of instability. The title trails off. This is not clock time.

The calligram enacts friction: its rhythm binds minutes, hours, war, love, waiting, longing. Time weighs, thickens the line, interrupts the gesture. Measure gives way, and another temporal register begins to surface. Time here is not merely conceptualised, but physically negotiated. Duration condenses into lived substance.

It is one hour and one second, It is one hour and two seconds... Each *It is...* initiates the count, layers overlap, and repetition acquires mass. Time here is not a flow, but density, compressed into a gravitational core.

Saadé does not rely on universal measures. She performs a situated, bodily temporality, each second an abrasion. Writing becomes time itself.

Other images come to mind: *the misbaha, komboskini, malas, rosary*. Circular devices of retention. What passes between fingers is the capacity to remember: an act sustained through bodily repetition. The beads do not keep records; they hold rhythm. 2,832 beads, one for each day between the artist's birth and the official end of the Lebanese war, will be enough *To Build a Home with Time*.

At the end of the loop, or maybe its beginning, you see a family photograph sealed in gold. *Golden Memories* is an alchemical surface: a luminous obstruction that diffracts memory and reroutes nostalgia.

One last discrete work remains: *Scarred Object*. A metal bar, segmented and re-welded, bearing the seam of its cuts and the strength of their reassembly.

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Zaira remembers not through tales, but through the city's fabric: the distance between a lamppost and a hanged usurper's feet, the rips in a fish net, the curve of a gutter holding the memory of both a fleeting cat and a bomb that destroyed it. Memory is absorbed, a wave soaking into stone.

Saadé's works too are carriers of lived time. But she moves further. These are acts of transfiguration. Traces, fragments, dislocated times and disjointed spaces retain agency. They persist. And because catastrophe seeks to erase, what persists matters.

* The text was written for Stéphanie Saadé's solo exhibition at the Sursock Museum from 25 July 2025 to 15 January 2026, curated by Anne Davidian.