



Earthly Praxis, Marwa Arsanios, Ahmad Ghossein, and Sabine Saba
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Curatorial Text by Marie-Nour Héchaimé

On November 6, 2019, protesters gathered in front of the Lancaster Eden Bay resort in Ramlet el Bayda on Beirut's coast to demand its dismantlement and public access to the beach. The luxury resort was the latest of a series of private development projects on maritime lands in violation of zoning and building regulations that effectively limit the use and access to a common good—the sea.¹ These privatization efforts come hand in hand with the demolition of existing semi-informal constructions that were previously tolerated by the municipality, which housed fishermen and street vendors, furthering the slow and steady movement towards the total enclosure of common space.

This exhibition, while not directly concerned with the larger debate on common goods and public property, unearths some of the governing structures and dogmas which place the landowner at the center of both rights and relationships to land. By considering land as a 'capital' —an asset to be exploited, extracted, traded, and sold— absolute private ownership has had dramatic consequences on humans and non-humans alike, ranging from displacement and pollution to the destruction of our means of subsistence.

The works of Marwa Arsanios, Ahmad Ghossein, and Sabine Saba presented in this exhibition look at landed property and processes of territorialization, through their associated tools, disciplines, imaginaries and notions.

Ahmad Ghossein's video *The Last Cartographer of the Republic* (2017) portrays the meticulous work and craft of Mohamad Adeeb Kaleb within the Directorate of Geographic Affairs that provides the Land Registry Office —or cadaster— with territorial maps. Through the close documentation of this mapmaking process, the video implicitly attests to the biases and

¹ See Chehayeb, Kareem, and Lara Bitar. "Beirut's Last Public Beach Faces Creeping Privatisation." Al-Jazeera, July 9, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/7/9/beirut-last-public-beach-faces-creeping-privatisation>.

limitations of visual cartography: “All the lines have the same thickness and the roads have the same width”². Despite the aesthetically fascinating features of the maps –rendered even more striking by the vivid orange tint of the scribe sheets, they remain a flat experience. The land loses its thickness and particularities.

Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part 4: Reverse Shot (2022) by Marwa Arsanios evokes the elusive nature of the land which escapes absolute property. Rather than reifying the land, the artist animates it. It is composed of living, moving matter –plants, bacteria, and seeds– and is able to speak. The artist reminds the viewer of the geological time that is unfolding. The fossils are witnesses of a previous time when the land was submerged. The filmed fish, which are both fossils, and corpses, act symbolically and figuratively as a cautionary tool grounding us to the planetary³ age we now live in and the paradigm shift this implies. We cannot pretend anymore that resources are infinite and that we are their sole masters. Rather, we must take into consideration the fragile ecosystem of life on this planet.

Territorial Calendars [In which space-time is your land inheritance, or the lack of it, being delivered?] by Sabine Saba is a 35-min audiovisual diagram composed of extracts of conversations conducted by the artist with groups of her friends. The dialectic setup developed by Saba, infused with a deep attentiveness towards the politics of conversation,⁴ is a central component of the work, creating a conducive environment for the dialogical trespassing committed within the conversation. The animated audio, textual, and visual elements of the installation serve to underscore the recurrent threads and topics linked to the institution of land inheritance: an institution usually attached to the reproduction of a patriarchal lineage and the ensurance of transmission and consolidation of ownership but that can sometimes be negotiated and subverted.

In his book *Visions of Beirut*, Hatim El-Hibri retraces the origins of the cadastral registry in Lebanon, implemented during the French mandate. The previous Ottoman arrangement was based on *Defter Khani* which relied on narrative descriptions of villages and land use rather than visual cartography. According to Hibri, "There are two primary components of a cadastral system: a registry that records the ownership and legal status of parcels of land, and land use maps that present the exact shape and location of the parcels and buildings in question. These two components imply a system of private land ownership (often understood to be individually rather

² Mohamad Adeeb Khaled in Ahmad Ghossein, *The Last Cartographer of the Republic* (video, 15', 2017).

³ The planetary refers to a category that came out of Earth System Science (ESS) and was popularized by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Departing from the understanding that humans have become a geological force capable of imprinting the planet and in turn threatening our survival, this category decenters the human when looking at the planetary environmental crisis. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Planet, an Emergent Humanist Category", in *Critical Inquiry*, 2019 46:1, 1-31, doi:10.1086/705298

⁴ Saba's dialectic practice lies on strict principles of honesty, respect toward the speaker, engagement in the conversation, and acceptance towards disagreement.

than collectively owned), and detailed surveys work to establish fixed boundaries for parcels of land.”⁵ The passage from Defter Khani to the cadaster was instrumental in the consolidation and construction of our current institution of private ownership, a transformation bringing with it a shift in our relation to land, prioritizing individual rather than collectives or the state. Geographer Nicholas Blomey pinpoints a similar shift that took place in late 16th-century England. Back then, surveys of manorial lands used to be largely non-cartographic, and “entailed an enumeration and valuation of assets and use rights, with little emphasis given to the location or areal extent of lands.” Instead, the visual survey was “a rendering of land as a bounded parcel of space [...] whereby property, as a complex bundle of rights and relations between people, is reduced to a relation between owner and land, as is evidenced by the claims of the title-holder that ‘it’s my property’, as opposed to the more socialized relationality of property.”⁶

At one point in the video, Marwa Arsanios’ father attempts to explain the specific relationship that binds villagers of Kour⁷ to their plots of land: “*They lived from the land, when they didn't have any other income. All the villagers were living from the land and as you can see, the land here and everywhere else in the mountains has a limited capacity and is poor. Do you know how much they had to work then in order to make space for a little bit of cultivable land in order to survive?*” Here, the relationship to land derives from hard work, from agricultural labor, which in turn nourishes a specific interconnectedness to the land. It is this same labor-based relationship that Ahmad Ghossein's project uncovers. His video and light boxes look into visual mapping techniques which are part of a larger research project on unregistered lands –or lands that have not yet been mapped by the state. As such, they abide by a specific legal status, susceptible to being legally claimed if cultivated for the span of ten years, in the absence of any objection. In other words, labor creates rights, rather than money or inheritance.

With the advent of industrialization and global capital, the late 19th century to early 20th century was a period of rapid transformation of our regional landscape. This transformation took place at the expense of peasants, animals, and plants and led to multiple severances from the relationship to land through death, displacement and/or migration. As a discipline, environmental history teaches us to go beyond seemingly ‘neutral’ or ‘natural’ landscapes in order to uncover the invisible violence that often lies within idyllic settings. Viewed from above, the olive groves of Northern Lebanon seem to transcend territory –their cultivation spans across frontiers almost continuously, as shown in Sabine Saba’s *Territorial Calendars*. However, they hide military enterprises, extractivist endeavors, nationalistic logic of territorialization, and other forced severances. If we look south, to the Jezreel Valley (Marj Ibn ‘Amr) in Palestine, the Sursock

⁵ Hatim El-Hibri, *Visions of Beirut: the Urban Life of Media Infrastructure* (Duke University Press, 2021), 28.

⁶ Nicholas Blomey, “The Territorialization of Property in Land: Space, Power and Practice”, in *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2017): 239, doi:10.1080/21622671.2017.1359107

⁷ Kour is a village situated in the Batroun district of North Lebanon, from where the artist’s family is originally from.

family⁸ reorganized land and labor during World War I and consolidated rights on state-owned property, effectively practicing forms of absolute private ownership. This shift towards privatization, emblematic of the first globalization era, was in that case intrinsically tied to the 1902's promise made by the Sursock family to sell these lands to Zionist purchasing agents at forty times their original value. Presenting this exhibition and conducting this research in an institution that bears the Sursock name presents a conundrum, and leaves us grappling to find the appropriate words and means to tend to this wound.

The artists of this exhibition engage with the concrete conditions governing specific lands and their contexts. They look into geology, history, law, science, and personal testimonies to question the hegemonic nature of private property and apply queer, eco-feminist, and planetary frameworks to highlight the limitations of such modes of governance. Producing narratives, forms, and praxis, these works go beyond the confines of the art space. Arsanios looks at legal and practical ways to common her family's land to the benefit of the community around it, finally deciding to employ the tools and methodologies of the contemporary common. *A chart for the usership of the land* details the necessary agreement. It is no easy task to pinpoint the exact definition of a *common* because of its wide use and implementation: from the communal garden, to the creative commons, and cooperatives, to the legal protection given to our 'common goods' such as air, water, etc. A common is what is shared by a community and taken care of by the community, it relies on the will to work together and to share the fruits of the common. Often, *commoning* as a verb is the preferred reference: "commoning refers to the ongoing production and reproduction of commons [...] it is motivated by an ethic of care for what nourishes and sustains people and the planet both now and into the future."⁹ Consequently, a philosophy of commoning relocates the individual within a larger community, actively investing care in ecological sustainability.

Prominent in today's social and economic context, private ownership appears as a central concern and desire for the majority –as attested by the testimonies of the discussants in *Territorial Calendars*– as it allows for greater agency through societal status and economic advantage. This entanglement with the dominant paradigm of ownership becomes even more pervasive as landed property is intrinsically imbricated within aggressive regimes of nation-state territoriality. One of the most poignant reflections in the conversations evoke belonging and

⁸ See the work of scholar Kristen Alff that gives a detailed account of the land purchase and land sale in the Jezreel valley by the Sursock family and how their businesses, purchases and sales worked in redrawing administrative borders in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reorganizing land and labor during World War I, actively supporting Zionist land purchases, and, consequently allowing the foundation for the large-scale settler-colonial project in Palestine possible. Kristen Alff, "Levantine Joint-Stock Companies, Trans-Mediterranean Partnerships, and Nineteenth-Century Capitalist Development", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no 1 (2018): 150-177. doi:10.1017/S0010417517000445

⁹ J.K Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healey, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013)

having a place of one's own: owning a land consolidates the feeling of belonging to a geography, especially in contexts of migration and forced displacement. Although purely theoretical in that case, ownership opens up the possibility to hold on to an imagined future –with a land that might look more alike.

Although the current hegemonic system entraps us within its paradigms, this exhibition aims to reflect on these considerations, and invite us to actively partake in imagining alternatives better aligned with planetary imperatives.

Artist Biographies

Marwa Arsanios' practice tackles structural and infrastructural questions using different devices, forms and strategies. From architectural spaces, their transformation and adaptability throughout conflict, to artist-run spaces and temporary conventions between feminist communes and cooperatives, her practice tends to make space within and parallel to existing art structures allowing experimentation with different kinds of politics. Film becomes another form and a space for connecting struggles in the way images refer to each other. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna.

Ahmad Ghossein is a filmmaker and an artist. His practice utilizes a number of media, including video art, installation, art in public spaces and film. The starting point of his work stems from the collecting and analyzing of facts, documents, and found footage, which then feed into a body of work that draws on the potentialities of the moving image. He is interested in the connection between individual human experiences and shared historical and political realities. He is currently preparing for his solo show at Marfa' gallery to open in September 2023 and working on his second feature film.

Sabine Saba is an artist and a researcher born in Lebanon in real life and in Syria on paper. Her work is focused on contemporary modes and technologies of territoriality, both institutional and individual. She deploys tools from the esthetic regimes of futurity, to observe ancient, ongoing struggles and disputes. She is currently occupying the position of researcher in the newly established Febrayer/ Forensic Architecture lab, based in Berlin.