

Rewiring Narratives

New Media Art from the Arab World

Edited by Haytham Nawar & Ala Younis

مركز الدرعية لفنون المستقبل
DIRIYAH ART FUTURES

HATJE CANTZ

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Preface

It is with profound pride that we present this volume as a pivotal contribution to the evolving discourse on New Media Art in the Arab World. Born from a collective urgency among scholars, curators, and artists, this publication seeks to illuminate a field that has long been underrepresented in global media art histories. Grounded in meticulous research and critical reflection, the book serves both as a comprehensive record and a forward-looking proposition—mapping an alternative media genealogy shaped by Arab perspectives, technological infrastructures, and sociopolitical contexts.

While the exhibition *Maknana: An Archaeology of New Media Art in the Arab World* provides a foundational context, this book stands independently as a rigorous scholarly endeavor. At its core lies a critical imperative: to challenge prevailing art historical narratives by centering the material realities, cultural lineages, and sociopolitical urgencies that inform media art practices in the Arab World. Rather than depicting Arab media artists as mere respondents to global trends, the contributions herein reveal a field defined by its own conceptual vocabularies—where craft intersects with code, memory animates perseverance, and experimentation becomes a mode of survival, storytelling, and speculative inquiry.

The chapters in this volume encompass a diverse range of inquiries—from archival studies and institutional analyses to artist interviews and critical essays. These voices, drawn from across the region and beyond, collectively disrupt

inherited timelines and challenge assumptions of technological lag. What emerges is not a linear narrative, but a textured map of intersections: between analog and digital, aesthetic form and societal imperatives, historical absence and speculative presence.

Rewiring Narratives: New Media Arts in the Arab World transcends the boundaries of a conventional book; it is a foundational resource for understanding a dynamic and evolving field. It offers tools for future scholarships while honoring the ingenuity and resilience of those who have long navigated shifting technological and cultural terrains. As we look ahead, may this volume continue to inspire new modes of thinking, creating, and remembering.

Mona Khazindar
Chief Advisor to the Minister of Culture

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New Media Art from the Arab World

This volume emerges from a need to account for practices in art and media that have long existed in the Arab World, but remain unacknowledged within dominant global histories of media art. *Rewiring Narratives: New Media Art in the Arab World* is both an inquiry into and a proposition for understanding New Media Art practices practices not through imported paradigms, but via localized historical, cultural, political, and technological frameworks. By looking at multiple practices, temporalities, and geographies, the contributions in this volume connect a dispersed and complex field of activity: artists experimenting with technology, institutions making space for intermedia practices, and artworks challenging linear notions of modernity, authorship, and progression.

"Notes Toward an Arab Media Art History," the editorial text by Haytham Nawar and Ala Younis, sets the stage by questioning the exclusions and blind spots in canonical media art histories. The chapter argues for a methodological shift that reads the development of media art in the Arab World through its own material conditions. From early experimental cinema and television archives to curious camera experiments and forgotten computational art exhibitions, the text frames Arab media art as a dynamic and plural formation rather than a derivative or delayed model. While being conscious of its context and the forces that pushed for it—from early twentieth-century image experiments to technopolitical implications of

postindependence state media infrastructure to the emergence of post-2011 digital art practices—numerous examples of artist projects are linked in this text to their political and technological eras.

Yasser Mongy's two-part lecture, **"The Historical Roots and Transformations of Arab Media: From the Printing Press to Digitization. A Lecture in Two Parts,"** offers a broad historical analysis of media transitions in the Arab World. He traces how colonial legacies, state-building strategies, and transnational infrastructures shaped both the form and function of media in the region, linking early print cultures to satellite broadcasting and digital media economies.

In her essay, **"The Dark Side of the Moon: Amal Abdenour's Photocopy Artworks, 1970–1979,"** Melissa Gronlund examines the work of Amal Abdenour in 1970s Paris, when she used the photocopy machine to create artworks. Abdenour's experiments were part of the wider political and aesthetic struggles of the time, while her self-portraits, made through electrostatic imaging, functioned as solitary, introspective, and deeply political interrogations of exile, gender, and image-making.

Samia Halaby revisits her experiments with the codes she wrote on her personal computer in the 1980s. In **"A Conversation on Painting with Code,"** she talks about her research and the positioning of her digital experiments within Arab aesthetic genealogies as inseparable from broader global trends. Halaby's reflections highlight a moment when she realized that a new tool, the personal computer, was taking over, and she utilized it to think of abstraction, resistance, and diasporic imagination.

In **"Refreshing Electronic Flows in Arab Artists' Videos,"** Laura U. Marks traces the flow of ideas and media practices across the Arab region to argue for a re-scripting of digital aesthetics rooted in embodied knowledge and trans-local experience. Through her theoretical lens, Marks argues that a surprising precursor to video quasi-liquidity would be the water gardens catching light in traditional Arab homes.

Akram Zaatari reflects on his early engagements with audiovisual media in the technologies and regional television broadcast during the Lebanese Civil War. **"When New Turns Old: A Conversation on Media Beginnings, Tools, and Influences"** offers insight into the artist's early reel-to-reel recordings, absorbing neighboring broadcasts

and documenting the 1982 Israeli invasion with rudimentary cameras. The artist expands on the convergence of the ordinary and the extraordinary as groundwork for distinct artistic practice and investment in image infrastructure.

In **"Prognosis: A Life in Media, Medicine, and the Making of an Image, 1979–2020,"** Ahmed Mater weaves memoir and method, tracing four decades in which media, and personal history intersect with Saudi Arabia's transformations. Mater treats art as diagnosis, attentive to the symptoms of societies, bodies, and cities while emphasizing care for evidence, as every fragment becomes part of a living archive that preserves memory and informs what comes next.

Yasmin Desouki explores the subversive humor and experimental techniques of Egyptian popular cinema in her chapter, **"Stumbling around Normality: Experimental Tendencies in Egyptian Cinema, 1980s–1990s."** She references these practices as precursors to the rise of early video art in Egypt, showing how filmmakers negotiated censorship, low budgets, and shifting cultural values through absurd and satirical moving images.

Meanwhile, in **"A Conversation on the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Egypt"** Bassam El Baroni maps the independent institutional interventions that supported the emergence of media art in Egypt in the 2000s, particularly focusing on the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum and the pedagogical aims of events oriented toward media art. His contribution identifies the tensions and openings between traditional art education and contemporary media-based practices.

In **"Glitching Tradition in Arab Digital Art,"** Laila Shereen Sakr (VJ Um Amel) offers a survey of Arab digital arts in relation to social upheaval, data activism, and network culture. Her essay positions "the glitch" not only as a technical error, but as a methodological tool to rethink knowledge production and power structures in digital contexts.

Abdelaziz Taleb's chapter, **"Nomadic Visions and Digital Frontiers: The Evolution of Media Arts in Morocco and the Maghreb,"** charts the emergence of experimental media art in North Africa starting the 1990s. He focuses on grassroots networks and regional festivals, while tracing a shift from screen-based practices to site-responsive

works. Examples and stories from the Maghreb demonstrate the interconnections between migratory identities and infrastructural precarities.

Ahmed El Shaer draws from his experience as an artist to reflect on the role of gaming and animation in shaping not only a new visual language in the Arab World, but also the communities that engage with it. His contribution, **"Video Games as an Art Form: History and Contemporary Practice in the Arab World,"** explores Machinima and game art as artistic strategies and modes of survival in contexts marked by surveillance and precarity.

Shumon Basar's **"The Axis of Posting"** is a wide-ranging meditation that critiques the state of contemporary art and its institutions in light of a world saturated by screens, feeds, and disinformation. His essay explores the psychological and perceptual impact of digital oversaturation, arguing for new forms of attention and critique suited to mediated contemporary life.

This volume is a cartography of practices and conversations that resist containment, standardization, and positioning on the peripheries of New Media timelines or in preset categories. It opens a space for reading Arab media art as a critical and generative field—one that continues to shape, and be shaped by, the evolving relationships between technology, society, and artistic innovation.

We hope this volume contributes to a growing discourse that recognizes the Arab World not as a periphery to New Media Art histories, but as a site of original thought, experimentation, and struggle over meaning and representation. It comes out parallel to *Maknana: An Archaeology of New Media Art in the Arab World*, an exhibition curated by the editors of this volume, with the participation of more than fifty artists and seventy artworks, organized at Diriyah Art Futures.

Haytham Nawar & **Ala Younis**
May 2025

HAYTHAM NAWAR & ALA YOUNIS

Notes Toward an Arab Media Art History

The idea of new media arts emerged primarily in the latter half of the 20th century, catalyzed by the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the growing intersection between art, science, and communication. Major themes that initiated this field include interactivity, virtuality, networked communication, and the dematerialization of the art object. These concepts were driven by a broader cultural shift toward systems thinking, cybernetics, and a fascination with the aesthetics of technology. Artists began to explore the possibilities of computers, video, and the internet not only as tools, but as mediums in themselves, reshaping traditional notions of authorship, audience, and temporality.

–Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*[1]

The history of New Media Art and digital art has largely been framed through Euro-American genealogies, structured around technological innovation, institutional exhibitions, and conceptual movements. Since the 1990s, a growing body of scholarship has attempted to theorize and historicize this dynamic field. Foundational texts, such as *Digital Art* (2023)[2] by Christiane Paul and *New Media in Art* (2005)[3] by Michael Rush, have provided accessible yet rigorous overviews of the emergence of New Media Art's—from early video art and cybernetic installations to Internet art, generative algorithms, and virtual and augmented reality practices. These texts offer a broad survey of key movements and

1 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 43.
2 Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, 4th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023).
3 Michael Rush, *New Media in Art*, 2nd ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

figures, presenting digital art as a coherent and evolving field within the larger contemporary art world.

Texts such as *Digital Art* have become standard references in media art education, tracing the field from Conceptual Art and cybernetics to Internet art, bio art, and augmented reality. Paul rightly situates digital art as a continuum of post-conceptual practices, and her chronology begins in the West—with artists such as Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941), Jeffrey Shaw (b. 1944), and Nam June Paik (1932–2006). She, however, rarely ventures into non-Western contexts beyond cursory gestures in her final chapters.

Edward Shanken's *Art and Electronic Media* (2009)[4] and Frank Popper's *From Technological to Virtual Art* (2006)[5] seek to map the intellectual, technological, and artistic developments that define the post-analog age. While differing in approach, these canonical texts often rely on genealogies that trace innovation through Euro-American institutional histories, Cold War-era research labs, and avant-garde aesthetics rooted in Fluxus, Conceptualism, and cybernetics.

Complementing these historical surveys are critical theoretical frameworks, such as Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001),[6] which situates digital aesthetics in relation to cinema and software cultures. His emphasis on the database as a "symbolic form" has had an enduring impact, while Alexander Galloway's *Protocol*[7] (2004) interrogates "protocols" as governing logic for digital networks.

In *MediaArtHistories*[8] (2010), Oliver Grau calls for a more comprehensive historicizing of new media, arguing for the recognition of media art's intellectual traditions, cultural memory, and institutional legitimacy. His book assembles a range of essays that trace the *longue durée* of media experimentation—from Renaissance illusionism to contemporary immersive environments—and advocates for a historically grounded and interdisciplinary method for studying digital art. Crucially, Grau also identifies the fragility of media art's archive and the marginalization of its histories within broader art historiography.

Despite this critical gesture toward inclusivity, the scope of *MediaArtHistories*, as well as the abovementioned canonical works, remains largely centered on European and North American case studies, leaving many global and postcolonial media art practices underexplored. As a result, artists and experimental practices from the Arab World and the Global

4 Edward A. Shanken, *Art and Electronic Media* (New York: Phaidon, 2009).
5 Frank Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).
6 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.
7 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).
8 Oliver Grau, ed., *MediaArtHistories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010).
9 Barbara London, *Video/Art: The First Fifty Years* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2020).

South are rendered invisible in the global narrative of media art.

While recent efforts, such as Barbara London's *Video/Art: The First Fifty Years* (2020),[9] have solidified video's place within the institutional genealogy of New Media Art, they largely reinforce a Euro-American narrative centered on artists emerging from MoMA, The Kitchen, and related circuits. Similarly, Omar Kholeif's *Internet_Art* (2023)[10] marks a significant shift in tone and geography—drawing attention to the cultural politics of digital art in the age of NFTs—but it remains more reflective of contemporary curatorial discourse than a recovery of overlooked media art histories. Both highlight the ongoing need to bridge early experimental practices from regions such as the Arab World with the canonical structures that have defined media art to date.

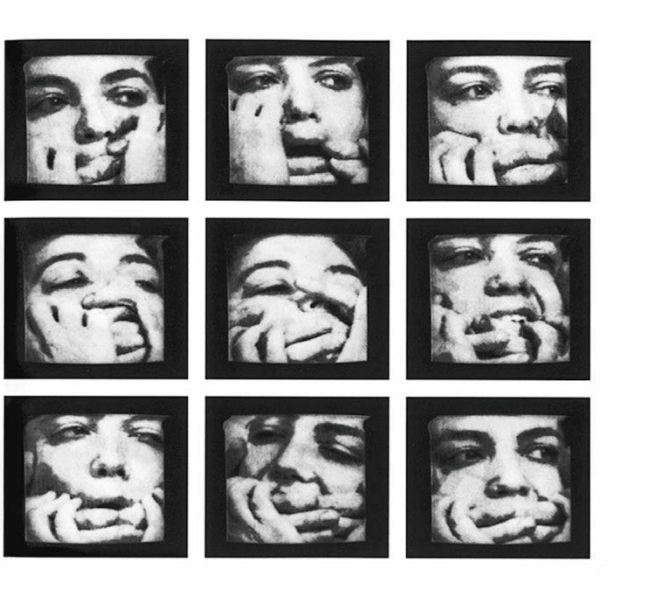
Early New Media Art exhibitions presented works from outside the norms of modern art prevalent at the time. *Cybernetic Serendipity* (ICA London, 1968), curated by Jasia Reichardt, was among the first exhibitions to showcase interactive computer art, algorithmic composition, and robotics.[11] *Software* (Jewish Museum, 1970), curated by Jack Burnham, emphasized systems thinking and dematerialization, framing "software" as both code and concept.[12] MoMA's *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (1968) linked modernist aesthetics to technological innovation.[13] Meanwhile, *New Tendencies* (Zagreb, 1961–73) and *Ars Electronica* (Linz, since 1979) created platforms for technologically oriented experimentation in art, often emphasizing computer graphics, cybernetics, and information aesthetics.[14] The pattern of geographic exclusion is visible in these exhibitions and their archives. Moreover, while *New Tendencies* invited artists from socialist and nonaligned countries, its engagement with the Arab World was minimal. The Kitchen's early video art programming under Woody Vasulka and Steina Vasulka in New York further solidified the centrality of Western networks.[15]

Despite their international framing, the absence of Arab and Global South artists not merely reflects curatorial oversight, but also creates infrastructural and epistemic conditions for how New Media Art history is constructed—through the geographically biased archival presence of New Media Art histories.

10 Omar Kholeif, *Internet_Art: From the Birth of the Web to the Rise of NFTs* (New York: Phaidon, 2023).
11 Jasia Reichardt, *Cybernetic Serendipity* (London: Studio International/ICA, 1968).
12 Jack Burnham, "Software," *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (1969): 40–44.
13 Pontus Hultén, *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (New York: MoMA, 1968).
14 Darko Fritz, "Amnesia International: Early Digital Art and New Tendencies," in Grau, *Media Art Histories*.
15 Woody Vasulka and Steina Vasulka, "The Kitchen: A Brief History," *Leonardo* 20, no. 3 (1987): 241–44.

This essay aims to address this geographical and historical gap by excavating histories of new media practices in the Arab World, not as peripheral or derivative, but as central to the global unfolding of digital art. By placing Arab media artists within broader technological, historical, and cultural currents, the goal is not only to fill in a missing chapter, but also to reframe the perimeters of the field itself. Achieving this requires both archival excavation and theoretical innovation, drawing on local knowledge systems, transregional networks, and the complex histories of media and modernity in the Arab World. Only by broadening the scope of inquiry can we begin to craft a truly global history of New Media Art—one that is as polyphonic, networked, and generative as the field it aims to describe. This research connects closely to the context, access, and effects of the emergence of new media globally, along with the ripples it sees in the Arab World and its artistic practices.

Mona Hatoum's use of surveillance technology and interactive installation—such as in *Measures of Distance* (1988) and *You Are Still Here* (1994)—offers a profound critique of displacement, embodiment, and state control through technological interfaces; yet her contributions are more often situated within identity politics than media art histories.



Mona Hatoum
So Much I Want to Say, 1983
Video, 4 min., 49 sec.

Artists such as Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, whose work engages deeply with digital archives and the politics of memory, are crucial to the region as much as the global new media discourse. Similarly, Samia Halaby's early experiments with computer-generated art in the 1980s remain under-discussed in how she researched Arab art histories parallel to the technology of her time in this body of work.

Moreover, the groundwork for new media practices in the Arab World can be traced to early pioneers of experimental film and animation whose contributions remain largely under-researched in global media art histories. Egyptian cinematographer and filmmaker Mohamed Bayoumi (1894–1963), active in the early twentieth century, established foundational aesthetics in regional media well before video art gained traction in the West.

Nagy Shaker (1932–2018), best known for his scenographic design and work in puppetry, also incorporated kinetic light art into stage and multimedia projects before moving into experimental film. His brother, Ihab Shaker, was a pivotal animator whose films, such as *The Song of the Bee* (1974), experimented with abstract storytelling and movement, paralleling trends in computer-assisted animation.

Nadia Saikali (b. 1936) exhibited her light-based art in Beirut in the early 1970s, while her contemporary, Rosevart Sisserian (1924–2016), titled her 1974 painting *Pixels*. By the mid-1970s, pixels were central to emerging computer graphics and digital display technologies. Engineers and researchers working on raster graphics, image processing, and early digital photography used the term to describe the smallest addressable unit in a digital image or display. The appearance of the term in the work of the Lebanese artist signals its early arrival and its meanings to the region. At the time, video technology, satellite imaging, and military reconnaissance were the types of digital photos starting to circulate on television, which in itself was an experimental space for production and graphics.

In Egypt, Ali Moheeb (1935–2010) and Hossam Moheeb (1930–1996) explored intersections between television graphics, animation, and motion design from the 1970s onward, producing work that parallels early forms of media art in the West. These artists did not simply adapt Western technologies to local contexts; rather, they developed critical, regionally rooted approaches to form, media, and

infrastructure that challenge the very frameworks through which New Media Art is defined. Yet their practices are still absent from the exhibitions and publications that historicize and thus define media art's canonicity.

The consequence of this exclusion is not simply a lack of representation, but a narrowing of how New Media Art is conceptualized, historicized, and critiqued. If the "language of new media" is to be fully understood, it must account for multiple languages—technological, cultural, and political. If the database is a symbolic form, then it must include entries from beyond the Western canon. It culls sites to include archives, artifacts, and epistemologies from the Arab World and beyond. Scholars such as Jussi Parikka and Wolfgang Ernst have urged media archaeology to unearth forgotten or suppressed media pasts, yet these efforts often remained Eurocentric in scope.

The following parts of this essay attempt to create a chronology of New Media Art practices as they intersect with historical events, technological applications, novelties, and movements across mediums and geographies.

1960s

Pre-Media Art History

The Machine and the Mechanical Transitions

Depicting the machine has served as a powerful metaphor for modernity, transformation, and human agency.

Artists globally began to engage with machines in the mid-nineteenth century, first through painting and drawing, animating them symbolically within the flat surface of the canvas. Influenced by movements such as Futurism, artists including Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, and Fortunato Depero foregrounded the machine and mechanized movement in their contributions to Futurist aesthetics. Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) reimagined the human body as a fluid, aerodynamic form, shaped by the energy of industrial progress.[16] Balla, in *Abstract Speed + Sound* (1913–14), visually articulated the sensation of motion and mechanical rhythm, capturing the sonic and kinetic effects of modern transportation.[17] Depero extended the Futurist fascination with machines into performative realms, producing mechanical puppets and set designs that celebrated the playful potential of automation in art.[18] Also, in the context of Soviet Constructivism, artists Vladimir Tatlin,

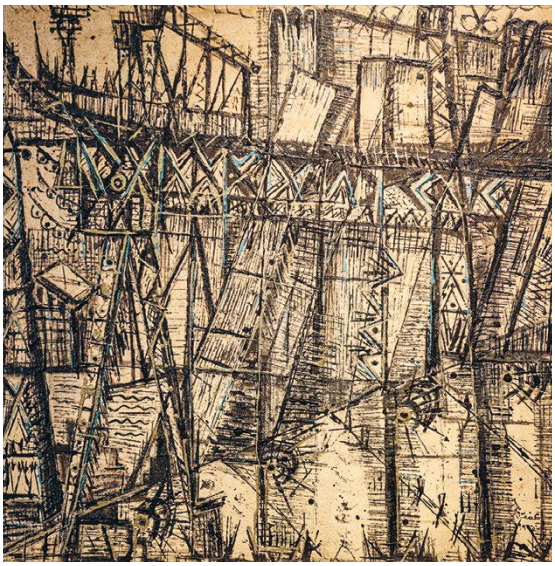
16 Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), 146.
17 Giovanni Lista, *Futurism* (Cologne: Taschen, 2001), 89.
18 Ester Coen, *Futurism* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2001), 58.

El Lissitzky, and Alexander Rodchenko redefined the role of the artist in relation to industrial society. Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1920), although never realized, was conceived as a functional and symbolic structure embodying revolutionary energy and industrial future.[19] Lissitzky's *Proun* series (1920s) advanced a spatial language of geometric abstraction that merged artistic form with mechanical logic, signaling a shift toward design as social engineering.[20] Rodchenko's engagement with photography and graphic design emphasized utilitarian aesthetics, often highlighting machines, factories, and mass production as integral to Soviet modernity.[21] Artists Alexander Deineka, Isaak Brodsky, and Yuri Pimenov, working within the framework of Socialist Realism, depicted industrialization as a heroic and ideological imperative. In *The Defense of Petrograd* (1928), Deineka portrayed industrial workers and military forces as unified agents of revolutionary defense and progress.[22] Brodsky, known for his portraits of Lenin and Stalin, also rendered idealized images of industrial labor, aligning technological advancement with political authority.[23] Pimenov's *New Moscow* (1937) presented a sanitized and optimistic view of Soviet urban life, in which automobiles and modern infrastructure symbolized the triumph of industrial planning and state-controlled modernization.[24]

In the context of Arab art, particularly during the periods of rapid industrialization and sociopolitical upheavals in the second quarter of the twentieth century, this engagement took on urgent national significance. The shift from static two-dimensional representation to the physical construction of moving, kinetic forms would come later; however, in the mid-twentieth century, artists were already visually animating machines in their work as part of a broader negotiation with state power, labor, and progress. One of the most compelling examples of this dynamic is the Aswan High Dam project in Egypt (1960–70), during which a generation of modernist artists created a visual representation of the machines and the construction site, centering on themes of mechanization, modernity, and national transformation, as well as on the place of the human within these technological realms. Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar (1925–1966), a founding member of the Contemporary Art Group, often portrayed workers enmeshed with machinery, using the machine as a metaphor for both technological progress and existential alienation,[25] a contrast

19 Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 104.
20 Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 77.
21 Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 132.
22 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.
23 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 55.
24 Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 102.
25 Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 50.

Effat Naghi
The High Dam, 1966
Acrylic on wood
dimensions: 120 × 120 cm



brought in as a national project under Nasser's industrial modernization program. On the same topic, Hamed Ewais (1919–2011) adopted a Socialist Realist approach, glorifying laborers alongside industrial equipment. His work presented machines as symbols of collective progress and national unity, aligning with the political ideals of the era. Effat Nagy (1905–1994), known for her interest in folkloric forms, incorporated industrial motifs and geometries that echoed the rhythms of mechanized labor. Her works created a symbolic dialogue between the mythic and the mechanical. Zeinab Abdel Hamid (1919–2002), a key figure in Egypt's postwar modernism, rendered scenes of construction using dynamic compositions that centralized the machinery—cranes, scaffolding, engines—not only as tools, but as icons of transformation. Her treatment of the machine was infused with a sense of optimism about national progress, tempered by an underlying attention to its social cost.

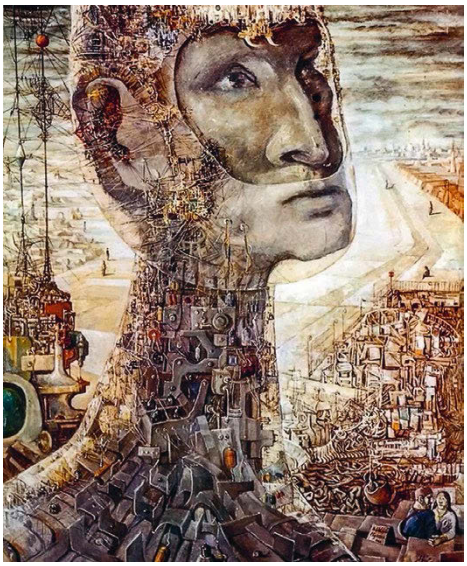
In sites adjacent to the High Dam, Tahia Halim (1919–2003) focused primarily on documenting Nubian life prior to displacement due to the project. Her omission of machinery served as a powerful counternarrative to the rhetoric of development. Her focus on preindustrial life foregrounded what had been lost in the name of technological advancement, rendering the machine as a silent, yet pervasive, force of disruption. Collectively, these artists articulated a complex

and politically engaged visual archive of Egypt's transformation, where the machine operated as both an engine of modernity and a contested symbol of state power, identity, and displacement.

Expanding on Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar's work as a case study provides a compelling example of how the motif of the machine was used to navigate the promises and threats of industrial modernity. Initially recognized for his early Surrealist-influenced works that drew from popular spirituality and folk imagery, El-Gazzar later produced paintings turned toward the social and political changes shaping Egypt in the 1960s. His iconic painting, *The High Dam* (1964), presents a stark visual narrative in which the machinery of progress—turbines, cranes, concrete structures—dominates over diminished human figures. In this work, El-Gazzar appears to depict the dam not solely as an engineering feat, but as a site of existential tension, suggesting a complex interplay between the collective triumph of the nation and the possible erasure of individual subjectivity. In 1964, he received the Medal of Arts and Sciences and the National Encouragement Prize for this work. Another significant work, *Aswan* (1964), created in India ink on paper, illustrates a construction site where traditional Egyptian life and industrial encroachment collide. In both works, El-Gazzar brings the machine to life within the pictorial field, infusing it with conflicting meanings: as a symbol of state-led development and as a complex force of displacement, dehumanization, and cultural disruption produced by the colossal site and the machines that were needed to deal with it.

El-Gazzar's treatment of the machine diverges from purely celebratory national narratives of progress. Instead, it functions within a critical framework that reveals the psychosocial costs of forced modernization that enabled hydroelectric power and its modern life, at the expense of indigenous agriculture and the natural habitat of Nubia. It appears in his use of scale, contrast, and spatial fragmentation. Moreover, his framing of the High Dam project resonates with wider anxieties about the role of post-independent Egypt in shaping public life, where infrastructure becomes both a monument and a mechanism of control. In this way, El-Gazzar's High Dam works function not only as historical documentation, but also as allegories of modernity's responses, promises, and contradictions in the Arab postindependence period.

Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar
The High Dam, 1964
Oil on board, 100 × 125 cm



Aref El-Rayess (1928–2005) from Lebanon, after studying in France and Italy, spent two years in the United States following a commission by the Lebanese government to produce sculptures for the 1964 New York World's Fair. Immersed in the height of American modernization, he engaged with Abstract Expressionist painters and intellectuals before returning to Beirut in 1967—a moment marked by regional upheaval and political disillusionment. His works featured anthropomorphized versions of destructive warfare machines, a theme that emerged in his 1968 exhibition *Blood and Freedom* and later reappeared in his other pieces. El-Rayess did not look back wistfully; instead, he aspired to a future in which humanity could attain true freedom. Hence, and despite all, the artist embraced a progressive outlook.[26] This turning point catalyzed his deep engagement with political and social critique through art. Between 1967 and 1981, his work reflected the struggles across the Arab World, from the Algerian War (1954–62) and Palestinian resistance to the atrocities of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). Central to his visual language was the element of the machine—depicted not as a symbol of progress, but as a metaphor for alienation, violence, and systemic oppression. In works such as *H.T.M. (Human, Time and Machine)* (1966) and *Technologie et Révolution* (1968), El-Rayess portrayed hybrid mechanical figures, blood-stained metallic beasts, and deconstructed forms that

26 Natasha Gasparian, *Commitment in the Artistic Practice of Aref El-Rayess: The Changing of Horses* (London: Anthem Press, 2020), 30.



Aref El Rayess
Untitled (Technologiyat al-Harb—War Technology Series), 1978
Oil on canvas, 40 × 51 cm

evoke the horrors of mechanized warfare and the dehumanizing forces of modernization.[27] His later works, including *The March of the Peoples of the Third World between Development and Revolution* (1974) and *Technologies of War* (1978), continued this critique, casting machines as emblems of capitalist domination and political exploitation.[28] While sharply critical of technological violence, El-Rayess's works ultimately envisioned the possibility of liberation, articulating a progressive, but ambivalent relationship with modernity.

On the New Media Art front, in 1968, the *Cybernetic Serendipity* exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), a landmark moment in the history of art, showcased New Media Art as the intersection of art and technology. That same year, in Paris, the art scene was a dynamic intersection of experimental practices, political upheaval, and technological advancement. Vera Molnár, a pioneering figure in computer-generated art, cofounded the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV) in 1960 and Art et Informatique in 1967, both of which played a crucial role in integrating technology into artistic practice. One of the first women to use computers in art, she began to create algorithmic drawings in 1968, contributing to the evolution of digital art within the Parisian avant-garde. GRAV, in turn, explored participatory and perceptual experiences using technology, thereby fostering a movement that blurred the boundaries between art and science.

New Media Art began to include Kinetic art experiments in the 1950s and '60s, when artists started incorporating technology, motors, light, and viewer interaction into their work. Pioneering examples of Kinetic art date back to the early twentieth century; however, in aligning it with the emerging characteristics of new media, it took a new form. Around this time, GRAV utilized motion, optical effects, and interactivity to explore perception and participation, embodying principles central to new media. This connection was further reinforced by the exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity*, which showcased kinetic and robotic art alongside computer-based works.

That same year, Ihab Shaker also moved to Paris to study and work with the French animator Paul Grimault (1905–1994), creating five short animated films between Paris and Cairo. Among them were *1,2,3* (1974), which received Le prix de qualité du Centre national français and represented

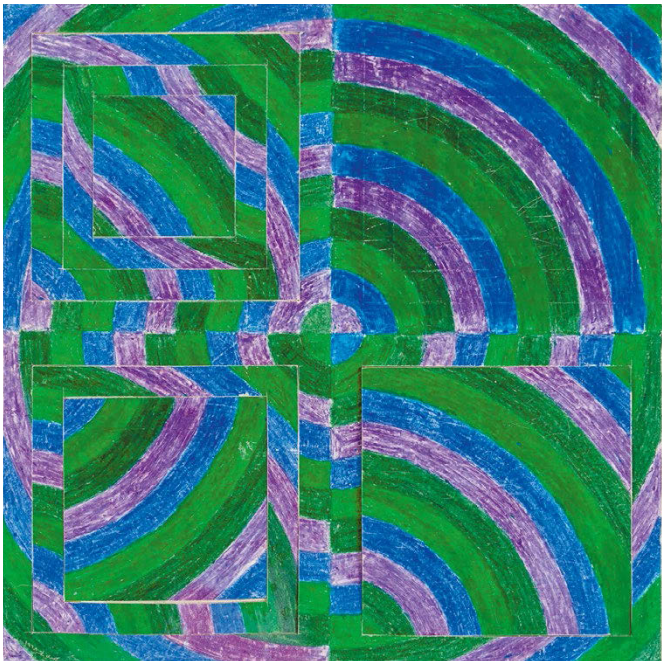
27 "Aref El-Rayess: Biography," Sfeir-Semler Gallery, https://www.sfeir-semler.com/galleryartists/aref-el-rayess/biography [all URLs here accessed in December 2025].
28 "Aref El Rayess: Political Works," Sfeir-Semler Gallery, https://www.sfeir-semler.com/galleryartists/aref-el-rayess/work; "Aref El Rayess: Artworks 1958–1978," IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, https://ivam.es/wp-content/uploads/exposiciones/aref-el-rayess-obras-1958-1978/Dosier-prensa-Aref_EN_DEF_mod.pdf.

France internationally. Upon returning to Egypt, the artist custom-made a machine to produce his later animations. Artists linking technologies, techniques, and ideas from the cities where they studied to where they came from was a significant element in the transfer of New Media Art practices to the Arab World. It also transformed the way Arab artists conceptualized and thought about their work from within their own narratives and contexts, thus leading to the creation of innovative works about the art and tradition-based legacies of the Arab nation.

Nagy Shaker (1932–2018) incorporated kinetic light art into his stage and puppetry works, namely the performance titled *Madinat al-Ahlam* (*City of Dreams*) (1964). In a black theater, he utilized shadow puppets as main characters by means of avant-garde light techniques. The artist revisited the work in *Light Talk* (2015), involving fourteen experiments with light and kinetic movement using light techniques with music to express his own dreams.[29] The eponymous *Light Talk* exhibition, held at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo in 2015, was an extension of these dreams and a continuation of his explorations into the realm of dreams.

Mehdi Moutashar (b. 1943) moved to Paris in 1967 after studying at Baghdad's Academy of Fine Arts. He received a grant to continue his studies at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, where he was exposed to theories of color and form, particularly the work of Josef Albers (1888–1976) and Jean Arp. Moutashar began his exploration of kinetic art in 1968. During this period, he was profoundly influenced by the *Lumière et Mouvement* exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, which showcased geometric and kinetic abstraction. This exposure led him to experiment with geometric abstraction and Op Art, integrating elements of movement and viewer interaction into his work. In 1969, Moutashar created *Zone 1, Paris*, a work that exemplifies his engagement with kinetic concepts through the use of systematic, mathematical compositions and black-and-white color schemes. Moutashar spliced the colored strips of his works and started arraying, shifting, and rotating them before affixing them as the final work. The process that embeds movement is reminiscent of the Kinetic art practice prevalent during that period. His works seem connected to the legacy of Islamic art, particularly in the use of geometric and abstract traditions. This is an interesting example of how

29 Haytham Nawar, *Nagy Shaker: An Experimental Graphic Artist of the Egyptian Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Khatt Books, 2023).

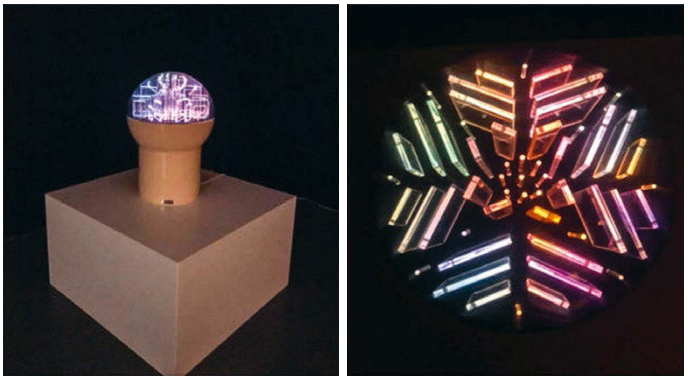


Medhi Moutashar
Untitled, Paris, 1968
Cutout, pastel, 41.3 × 41.5 cm

works conscious of symmetry, repetition, and space exploration provide a foundation to create contemporary abstract works that relate to Islamic art legacies. This is evident in how the artist draws upon Islamic art's intellectual and spiritual dimensions, particularly in the use of geometric patterns and calligraphy, which have long been integral to Islamic visual culture.

1970s x 1980s
Transmissions and Ripples

In the 1970s, Lebanese artist Nadia Saikali introduced light-based kinetic art emerging from a deep engagement with



Nadia Saikali
Paysage Géodésique, 1972
Light and acrylic sculpture,
55 × 40 cm

the expressive possibilities of painting. Initially working with diluted and transparent oil paints, she sought to infuse her compositions with movement, layering gestural bursts, swirling circles, and graphically expressive markings that evoked a rhythmic, almost musical quality. Her early abstractions resonated with a desire to break the silence and embrace life's dynamism, reflecting an evolving relationship between color, motion, and emotion.

Her transition to kinetic and light art was a personal and artistic breakthrough. In *Paysage Géodésique* (1972), she constructed a luminous sculptural form: a transparent dome atop a yellow base, encasing acrylic rectangles arranged in geometric harmony. Illuminated in pale hues from within, the structure transformed depending on the viewer's perspective, resembling the inner structure of a star and the vibrancy of an electrical cityscape. The work extended Saikali's interest in the interaction of light, color, and rhythm—elements she had long explored in painting—into a new, dynamic medium. In her book, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, one of her peers, art critic and artist Helen Khal, observed that Saikali's artistic development was a gradual progression toward an aesthetic that, while uncommon among her peers, was already emerging in the West.[30] Her engagement with kinetic art marked a significant turning point in her career, setting her apart as the first artist—regardless of gender—in Lebanon (and possibly the Arab World) to work extensively and successfully with this technological medium. These light and kinetic work experiments are not traceable in the literature of art histories.

Saikali taught at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) between 1962 and 1974, where Syrian artist Rosevart Sisserian enrolled as a student and made her painting *Pixels* (1974). This work reflects an early exploration of an idea that would later become central to digital art: the pixel. The term "pixel" originated from the words "picture" and "element," and was first published in two articles in 1965, one describing the pictorial elements of scanned images from space probes to the Moon and Mars.[31] Its use became more standardized in the mid-1970s as digital imaging technology advanced. While breaking images into discrete elements dates back to early mosaic and halftone printing techniques, the word "pixel" gained prominence with the rise of computer graphics, digital imaging, and television research.

30 Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987).

31 Razmig Bedirian, "New Nadia Saikali exhibition demonstrates Beirut's role as a hub for abstract art in the 1970s and 1980s," *The National*, February 5, 2025, https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art-design/2025/02/05/nadia-saikali-exhibition-maraya-art-centre-sharjah/.

Samia Halaby
Branching, 1990–96 / 2019
Kinetic painting produced using the Kinetic Painting Program, coded on a PC with a Windows operating system, sound, 7 min.



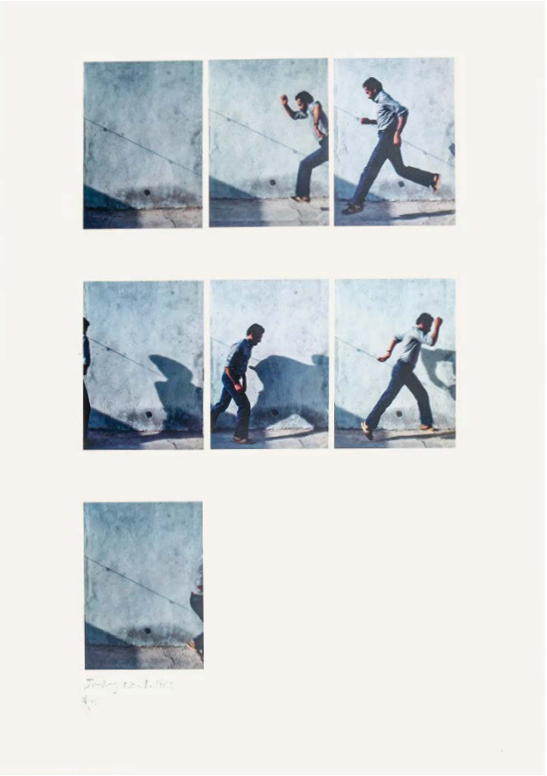
However, Sisserian's *Pixels* shows a prescient engagement with the abstraction of visual information. She used small, discrete blocks of color to create a larger composition, similar to how pixels would later function on digital screens. Her experiment coincided with that of Nadia Saikali's light and kinetic forms of abstraction. It is evident that the scene was engaging with new concepts and technological innovations, while also working with geometric shapes, color theory, and Minimalism. All of this is better understood with the logic of the new media as well as the later development of computational art, the emergence of which was foreshadowed by these early experiments.

This was also the case with Samia Halaby (b. 1936), who had decided early on to tune into the medium of her time, challenging the fundamental physicalities of painting practices and producing a series of *Kinetic Paintings* (1986–89). While teaching at the Yale School of Art in the 1960s, Halaby first encountered computer stations that filled the lab rooms, and she heard about fellow graduate students, such as MIT's Ivan Sutherland, who designed the Sketchpad drawing program in 1963.

In 1986, seeking a computer that would serve as a medium for kinetic painting, Halaby purchased an Amiga 1000 after extensive research into available models. Unlike many artists who used computers to replicate traditional painting or photography, she saw programming as an opportunity to expand pictorial language, embracing

the computer's potential for movement, time, and spatial relativity. She began to program in Basic, later transitioning to C, and developed moving abstractions that responded to the dynamic demands of digital media. For Halaby, motion was not an added feature, but an intrinsic element requiring a new approach to composition. Her explorations extended to sound, using the "sound" command in Basic to integrate auditory elements into her kinetic works. Inspired by the experience of opening windows after winter and the interplay of shifting visual and sonic perceptions, she explored how movement and sound shape memory and perception. By programming sound as an integral part of her visual compositions, she created immersive abstractions in which color, form, and sound operate in unison. These works—in which shape, growth, and sound intertwine—rank among her most profound contributions to painting. In embracing digital programming, Halaby continued to push the boundaries of abstraction and traditional media into new dimensions, positioning herself as a pioneering figure at the intersection of painting and new media.

In *Don't Smile, You're on Camera!* (1980), Mona Hatoum (b. 1952) filmed audience members with a handheld camera, transmitting real-time footage to a monitor where their images were superimposed with X-rays and body visuals. This illusion of their bodies disrupted notions of privacy. It transformed expectations between what the camera could capture on-site and a video recording from a previous event. In *So Much I Want to Say* (1983), she used Slow Scan video technology to transmit footage of herself from Vancouver to Vienna. Her face, gagged by male hands, appears in a series of delayed images, accompanied by a repeated, strained voice stating, "So much I want to say." This disruption of smooth information flow, combined with its reference to censorship, underscores Hatoum's concerns with the machines utilized in surveillance and oppression, echoing her own experiences of displacement due to Nakba, and later, the Lebanese Civil War. The utilization of new types of cameras and image-making, combined with themes of invasion and bodily trespass, culminate in *Corps Étranger* (1994), where an endoscopic camera films the internal landscape of the artist's body, creating an unsettling mix of intimacy and alienation. The camera allowed Hatoum to see the world she carried inside her body, but she acknowledged that it



Hassan Sharif
Jumping No. 1, 1983
Photographs mounted on cardboard, 98 × 73.2 cm

was an invasive camera, and the body thus became a site for exploration.

Similar studies of the body were explored by Emirati artist Hassan Sharif (1951–2016), who studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London,[32] where he encountered the philosophies of Dada and Fluxus. These movements significantly influenced his approach, leading him to create performance-based works that emphasized repetition, the human body, and the surrounding landscape. Sharif began his experimental art practices by documenting short performances that explored rhythm, movement, and the simplicity of human actions, such as *Jumping* (1983), where he documented himself jumping in the Hatta desert, and *Swing* (1983), in which he swung while chanting. In *Body and Square* (1983), the artist performed various physical positions within a grid of twenty-five squares, examining the interaction between the body and space. His *Recording Stones* (1983) involved Sharif collecting and arranging stones, inviting viewers to find meaning in the seemingly mundane. These performances, often conducted in the desert or his studio, were meticulously documented through sketches and photographs, with

32 The Byam Shaw School of Art in London is now called the Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design.



Walid Raad
Let's be honest, the weather helped Egypt, 1998–2006
Pigmented inkjet print,
46.8 × 72.4

Sharif emphasizing the significance of everyday actions and challenging traditional art forms by encouraging viewers to find profundity in the commonplace.

In 1983, Walid Raad (b. 1967) left Lebanon during the height of the civil war and sought refuge in New York City. As a young artist, the conflict profoundly influenced his early work, and he opted to study at Rochester Institute of Technology in 1989. His departure was not just a personal decision, but also part of a broader wave of Lebanese artists and intellectuals fleeing the violence and instability of the war-torn country. Raad began to shape his artistic identity in New York, which allowed him to critically engage with the political and artistic contexts surrounding Lebanon, ultimately shaping his work that would later employ digital tools to blend elements of his homeland's historical narrative and his experience in the diaspora.

Raad's *Atlas Group* project (1989–2004) focuses on a fictional collective that investigates and documents Lebanon's contemporary history. Through it, the artist produced and presented various multimedia works that blend fact and fiction, challenging traditional notions of historical narrative and archival authenticity. The works under *The Atlas Group* umbrella incorporate photography, video, and text, critically examining memory and historiography. His multimedia installation, *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*, records the locations of bullet holes with colored dots on a series of black-and-white photographs. The colors of the dots correspond to the colors of the bullet tips devised by manufacturing

countries to mark cartridges sent to those fighting in the Lebanese Civil War. Conscious of the import/export of technology, the work utilized a visual reference related to the sizes of the dots to stir the viewer's imagination of the effect of the bullets. Working on these subconscious and preconceived notions, Raad often utilized people's trust in archival records to challenge the processes of history-making and the role of media in shaping collective memory. His works can be read in relation to Aref El-Rayess's exploration of the tensions with warfare machines, but they also offer a juxtaposition between the artist's digital drawings and photographs of the sites to which he was referring.

In 1992, Raad joined Jayce Salloum (b. 1958) in his return to Lebanon following the end of the war. Salloum secured some funding and took five Hi8 video cameras, an editing suite, and tripods to develop projects with people who wanted to make tapes. From these tapes, he put together a program that could be brought back, shown, and distributed. The two collaborated on the video *Up to the South* (1993), an oblique yet consequential documentary examining the conditions, politics, and economics of southern Lebanon. The work focuses on social, intellectual, and popular resistance to the Israeli occupation, as well as conceptions of land, culture, and the identities of the Lebanese people.

Notably, the work engages in a self-conscious critique of the documentary genre and its traditions. In the film, the artists incorporate interviews with members of formal resistance movements discussing the relationship between economic and social issues. This approach offers a close reading of the dynamics between occupier and occupied and of varying conceptions of "the land." The filmmakers exhibit self-awareness, acknowledging that their film, however critical, is shaped by their own ideas and representations. Their collaboration reflects a shared engagement with new media to interrogate history, memory, and representation in the postwar Lebanese context. *Up to the South* layered still and moving images, text, and manipulated footage that destabilized dominant accounts of the conflict, challenging the authority of photographic and video documentation. This practice paralleled postwar transformations in Lebanon and the region, as artists increasingly turned to technology and new media to negotiate history, identity, and collective memory.