



## INTERVIEWS

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# A Letter's Discourse

## Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi in conversation with Natasha Hoare

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Natasha Hoare

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Artist Yazan Khalili and curator Lara Khaldi collaborate to produce performance lectures that draw together image, text, archive, film and sound through the epistolary form. Long standing friends working internationally, the pair maintains their relationship through letters and emails, exchanging ideas and reflecting on their current contexts. This chain of communication, which was initially staged performatively as a public manifestation of shared research: the first lecture performance the pair delivered as part of the 2012 Through The Roadblocks symposium organized by NEME in Limassol, Cyprus, is used to create narratives that blend fiction and non-fiction, staging leaps between temporalities and geographies, bridging the intimate and political. In this conversation, Khalili and Khaldi discuss the letter in their performances, from *Love Letter to a Union* (2012), a performed letter with visual accompaniment conflating decades to chart both a relationship and the failure of Pan Arabism, and *Love Letter to Mars* (2014), a letter written in 2024 to an astronaut friend when the earth is dying.



*Love Letters to a Union*, Limassol, 2012.

Image copyright the artist, courtesy Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi.

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**Natasha Hoare:** The role of the performance lecture plays an important part of your work together. Why have you adopted this format, and does it draw from a specific tradition of performance from the Middle East?

**Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi:** The work grew out of a format that we use all the time to communicate, namely the letter. We have always exchanged e-mails while travelling, about the journey, or things we see, or ideas we're preoccupied with. When NEME, an art space in Limassol, Cyprus, asked us to curate a video programme and speak at the conference we decided to keep the talk in the format that lead the process, which were the letters exchanged between us while researching the connections between love and the union (and consequently the United Arab Republic). We read the letters and showed images that we had found while researching, but we were also conscious of the way the set-up worked for the lecture, and it slowly developed into a lecture performance, adding a different facet every time we were invited to present it. The videos then

were being screened at a different venue separately. The second time, when we presented *Love Letters to a Union* at 98 weeks in Beirut we included the two videos; *The Story of Milk and Honey* (2011) by Basma Alsharif and *The Diver* (2004) by Jumana Emil Abboud, within the lecture performance, and the third time for Homeworks 5 it was more elaborate in terms of presentation and the performative element, so it slowly became a lecture performance, but some colleagues have also referred to it as a reading; it could be a performed reading like when you read a script for a play, or it could also be an exhibition in real time. What we really needed is a mutable format that allows us to include letters, images and video. We could of course think of the installation as a format for this as well, but there is something about the format of the letter that makes you want to read it out loud.

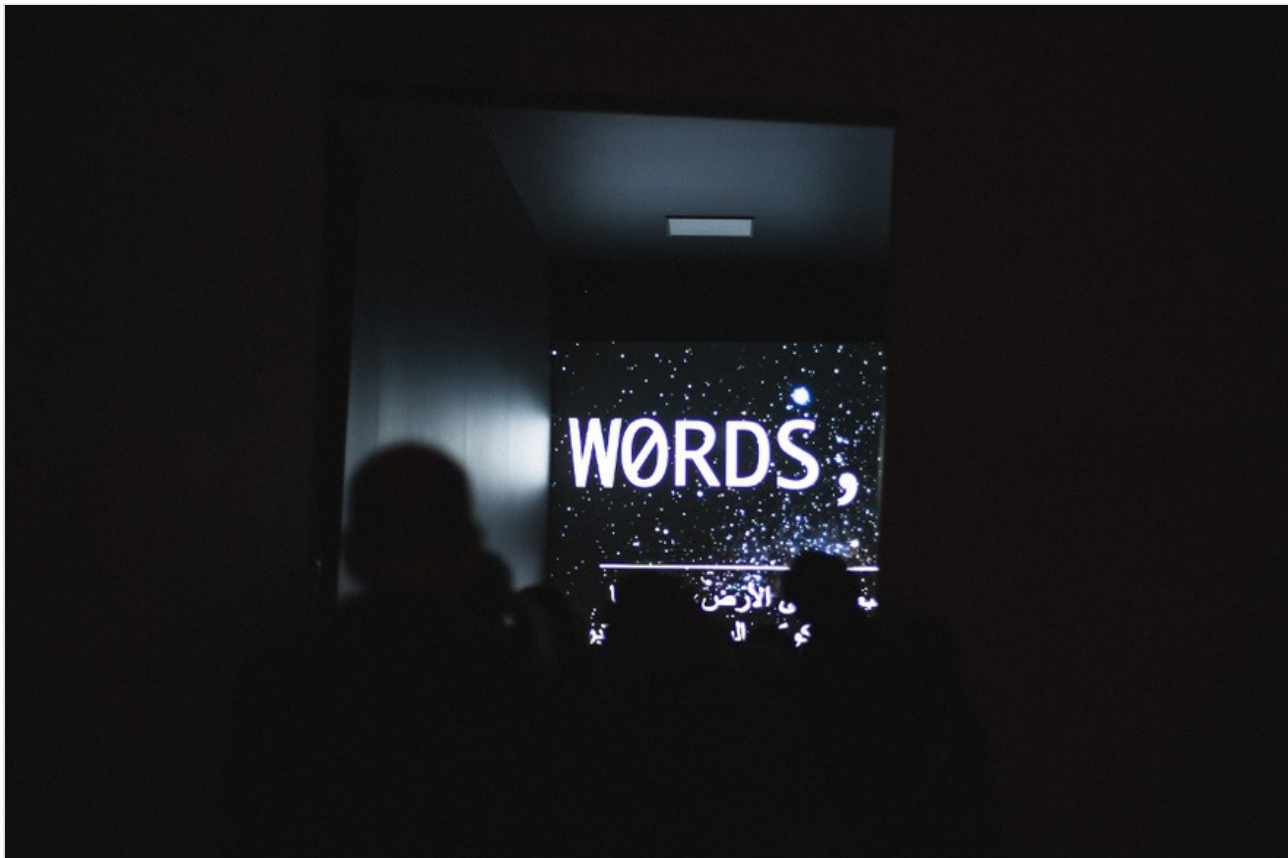
**NH:** Reflecting the basis of email and letter, forms used to communicate across time and space, there is a pervading sense of dislocation or separation in the work. Is this autobiographical? Or perhaps even socio-political, referring to the state of separation between Palestinian territories and communities, as commented on in your referencing of the proclivity towards maps in contemporary art from the region?

**YK & LK:** The letter/e-mail as a form of communication is not specific or exclusive to geopolitical partitions, but perhaps because we use it across those geopolitical borders and across time where those landscapes have changed it appears more pronounced. We use the letter across both time and space, so it becomes a symptom of a certain separation that we discuss throughout the work (the separation between lovers, political unions and affinities...etc.). Political geography is actually the enacting of separation. Our reference to Palestine's map in particular (and that it pervades a lot of artists' works) is because it represents a paradox, because the Palestinian struggle has always been about a politics of emancipation, one that is transnational, but simultaneously the political claim is always an autonomous nation state.

Perhaps also as Palestinians we have this obsession with communicating among ourselves and with the rest of the world. To communicate a certain unity between Palestinians, and to tell the world the Palestinian narrative, but here is another paradox, in that by creating a unity one also enacts a separation from the rest of the world. Like that lonely map of Palestine.

But sending letters doesn't transcend political geography – for a letter to arrive at its destination it has to cross borders, pass surveillance, it is material after all, a body of some sort; we were told how before the nineties, when letters were the main form of communication, for a letter to be sent from a Palestinian living under Israeli occupation (of course using Israeli post services) to any other Arab country and vice versa (where communication between them was criminalized), it had to be sent first to Cyprus to a certain address, there they would open it, put it in a new envelope and send it to its final destination, as if it originated from Cyprus. Palestinian stamp collectors' albums were filled with Cypriot stamps. But this also meant that one knew that s/he is sending a letter that will be opened and read, and therefore it has a wider public than normal letters, and so the letters themselves started speaking to a community rather than individuals.

**NH:** The phrase from *Love Letter for Mars*: 'We read it out loud, in the hope that it will endure, in its vocal dispersal', sounds almost a manifesto for this form of your practice. How do sound, music, and image interact



Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, *Waad*, 2014. Video still. *Love Letters to Mars*, presented in Oslo, 2014.  
Image copyright the artist, courtesy Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi.

with spoken word?

**YK & LK:** Maybe the question is more about how we use the letter format to interweave image, music, sound and spoken word. The letter format is really the process of making the lecture performance for us, which entails a conversation and an exchange of images, a remembrance or listening to music, and the enunciation thereafter of this process to an audience that we hope will somehow embody our story, the way we do. Somehow the audience becomes the medium with which this letter is being sent. In *Love Letters to Mars*, this is almost literal, as Wa'ad – the fictional friend on Mars cannot respond to our letters, we're not even sure she is receiving them, and so the audience in this case becomes not only the recipient of the letter, but the means with which the letter is somehow delivered. We're really interested in the problematic of this process of sending and receiving

**NH:** When you performed *Love Letters to a Union* you also showed two short films: *The Story of Milk and Honey* and *The Diver*; is there a point at which your performances become curatorial?

**YK & LK:** The projects do very much operate between an artistic practice and a curatorial one. One can consider that the inclusion of the videos is embedded within a curatorial narrative, and treats the videos in the same way that the other archival and fictive material in the rest of the lecture performance. We also think of the lecture performances as real-time based exhibitions, where the films, images, and so on, are shown within the

linear progression of the narrative. Since we include other artists' works, the lecture performance becomes a context for screening almost like a curatorial statement within which these videos are displayed. In *Love letter to Mars*, the artworks that were included (by Dirar Kalash, Maha Maamoun, Gerard Ortin and Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries) were commissioned for the lecture performance where the artists were involved in the process of research. We wrote letters to them while addressing Waad (the fictional character who leaves to Mars in 2024) as a way of working together, and their works became part of the lecture performance not only in that they are screened, or exhibited in it but also in the narrative we presented, as it also responded to issues they were tackling in their works.



Maha Maamoun, *Dear Animal*, 2014. Video still. *Love Letters to Mars*, presented in Oslo, 2014.  
Image copyright the artist, courtesy Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi.

**NH:** The performances are very literary in their content and focus. How do your own bodies enter in?

**YK & LK:** Our bodies during the lecture are usually static, it is the voice that is of more importance, we often thought about asking actors to perform in our place, but always decide not to at the end, as not to become directors/curators but to rather embody the narrative, as also a kind of responsibility towards the narrative and the works. At the end of each performance we try to withdraw and retreat into the space of the audience to watch the last video among them, so that we break the sense of the usual end of a lecture, or a performance...to end it like a in a film screening, where the film ends at the cinema, the lights are turned on, and you go home, no clapping, no questions.

We also think a lot about the bodies of the audience, as during the lecture performance, we show different images and videos in different directions, on different walls and in various ways. For example in Oslo during the *Love Letter to Mars* performance we screened videos on different walls, and directed the audience to a separate room at the end to watch a video so that they were in constant movement which would be the case while visiting an exhibition or a tour of an exhibition.

**NH:** There is a beautiful blend of the political and personal in your lectures, especially with lines such as: 'Pan-Arabism is a failed love story...and nothing else.' Love is central to the lectures, seemingly offering some form of resolution to the problems, political or personal, that you reflect upon. How does love figure in your work?

**YK & LK:** We don't see the relationship between the personal and the political as oppositional, what we attempt is actually to provoke or reveal the personal in the public. The formation of the United Arab Republic in *Love Letters to a Union* is presented as a very personal affair where politicized love plays a role, and where we narrate how it did affect very personal lives of a generation.

We are interested in the fact that politics isn't always a rational act, that emotions and feelings are also part of the historical decisions made, and that they directly affect us. In the *Fallen Comrades* version of *Love Letters to a Union* we narrate the story of a couple who fall in love under the comradeship of the communist party in the 70s in Palestine, and whose marriage falls apart with the Oslo agreement, along with a whole support network of friends and comrades...

While 'Love' in the *Love Letters to Mars* project isn't only a result of four people being stuck together forever on a far away planet, but also a means of survival, a factor that is essential for the success of the project, that might have been engineered through a careful selection of the members of the crew. In one of the research results it was concluded if the members don't fall in love they won't make it during the seven month trip to Mars, let alone living there forever, that they might end up killing each other due to cabin-fever. We are interested in this engineered impossibility of love.

We see love as a political event where there is risk; in a biopolitical age where everything is planned and decided for us, love is uncalculated and unpredictable. It's not a coincidence that in a lot of sci-fi literature the love story does save the day because it produces a rethinking of one's perspective, a defiance towards reality (like Winston and Julia's love story in Orwell's *1984*). We are aware of, and of course critical of, the Hollywood version of love where the love story is only a cover or a distraction from political issues, presenting a pseudo-cathartic event, promulgating the individual protagonist who saves the day while a total absence of political engagement. We're interested in love not as an end but an instigator for a political struggle.

**NH:** You mention the problems of the mediation of foreign wars in Western context, the time difference contributing to a sense of dislocation. Does your work attempt to somehow counteract this state of alienation from history and the present? To be embodied rather than mediated?





Gerard Ortin, *Nueva Sonora*, 2014. Video still. *Love Letters to Mars*, presented in Oslo, 2014.  
Image copyright the artist, courtesy Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi.

**YK & LK:** In our lecture performances, we constantly conflate historical events without situating ourselves in time, allowing us to manoeuvre between the past, present and the future without a sense of linearity, or hierarchy. This does indeed allow us to be involved, to internalize, and embody these events in the contemporary moment.

One of the scary parts of contemporary warfare is that it happens from a distance, the drone attacks and live broadcast of missile attacks only puts the audience in an alienated position from the now, the war happens somewhere else and sometime else too, the urgency of the war is mediated via a delayed broadcast, an ability to sit and watch a falling rocket instead of having to run away from it. But of course we are taking this delayed relation as a metaphor for a delayed relation to historical events, as being alienated from history and its remnants. We are interested in the thought that what happens now doesn't only change the future but also the past.

**NH:** The temporal leaps you perform in the pieces, and later in the pure fiction of the *Love Letter to Mars* performance, insert the fictional into the historical. How do you view the relationship between fact and fiction, and what does the fictional allow in terms of reading history or the present?

**YK & LK:** We don't see that there is a difference between fact and fiction, between the past and the present,

we deal with history as a totality. We don't treat time as a linear process in which one event leads to the other, but rather as layers of parallel events and processes that we can look through and connect. We use facts that we find from different resources (sometimes contradicting facts) as possible fictions, lies, mediated events, engineered situations, we are not interested in the 'fact' as absolute truth, but as a possible lie or even rumour that people believe. It really doesn't matter whether our friend, Waad's trip to Mars in *Love Letter to Mars* is fact or fiction, it really did happen for the letter to be written, she is still there on Mars. What's important is what happens after. Fiction (which we understand more as a way of speaking/writing, a genre rather than opposite to reality) helped us make a big leap into the future, so that we could speak about the colonial past, the dystopian present, but also confront the impossibilities inherent in language and communication.

**Read Lara Khaldi's essay 'Letters to Naeem Mohaiemen' [here](#).**

**Lara Khaldi** (b. Jerusalem) is an independent curator based between Ramallah, Palestine, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She recently completed the de Appel curatorial Programme, Amsterdam, and is also pursuing her MA degree at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. Khaldi was director of Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah (2012–13). She has co-curated a number of exhibitions, which include: Art Dubai Projects, Dubai (2015); 'Father, Can't You See I'm Burning?', de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam (2014); Gestures in Time (Jerusalem Show 6, Jerusalem, and the Riwaq Biennial 5, Ramallah, 2013); 'Lonely Crowd' within the /si:n/ festival of video art and performance, Ramallah and Brussels, (2013–14); the 5th Jerusalem Show 'On/Off Language', Al Ma'mal Contemporary Art Foundation, Jerusalem (2012); film and video programmes in 2009 and 2011 as part of the Arab Shorts initiative by Goethe Institute, Cairo. Khaldi held the position of Assistant Director for programmes at the Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates 2009–2011. Khaldi collaborates often with artist Yazan Khalili on a series of lecture performances, the most recent of which titled Love Letters to Mars was presented in autumn of 2014 at Office for Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway.

**Yazan Khalili** (b. Syria) is an artist that lives and works in and out of Palestine. He holds a degree in architecture from Birzeit University (2003), an MA (2010) from the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, and an MFA (2015) from Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam. Solo exhibitions include 'On Love and other Landscapes' at Mumbai Art Room, Mumbai, India (2015), 'The Aliens' at Transit Gallery, Mechelen, Belgium (2015). 'Regarding Distance' at EoA Project Space, London, UK (2014). Selected group shows include 'No Man's Land' at Video Art, Granada, Spain (2008); The Jerusalem Show (2011 and 2010); 'Future of a Promise Pavilion', 54th Venice Biennial, Venice, Italy (2011); 'Forum Expanded', Berlinale 62, Berlin, Germany (2012/2014); 'Re-emerge', Sharjah Biennial 11, Sharjah (2013); and 'Deep Into that darkness Peering', KSCC, Ramallah (2013). Khalili's writings and photographs have been featured in several publications, including among others *Manifesta Journal*, *Frieze Magazine*, *Race & Class*, *C-Print*, *Ibraaz*, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*, and *Subjective atlas of Palestine*.



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Natasha Hoare**

**Natasha Hoare** has been the Associate Curator at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, since 2014. She holds an MA in Curating from Chelsea College of Art, London; and a BA in English Literature from Edinburgh University. Prior to joining Witte de With she worked as Assistant Curator for the Visual Arts Section of the Marrakech Biennale 5 (2014) and for *On Geometry and Speculation*, a parallel project for the Marrakech Biennale 4 (2012). Natasha is completing work on *The New Curator*, a book of interviews with international curators to be published by Laurence King in 2015. Natasha is Editorial Correspondent for *Ibraaz*, and regularly contributes to *Elephant Magazine*, *The Gourmand*, *ExtraExtra*, and Saatchi publications.

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