

H(a)unting for Tomorrow

Spectral Temporalities and Sites in Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind's *Tomorrow's Ghosts*

The Palestinian-Danish artist duo Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind's 'Tomorrow's Ghosts' reconceptualises time and identity. This article examines the exhibition's use of haunting and the ghostly in video works and installations, highlighting the ongoing Palestinian plight and the persistent resilience against the erasure of place and memory.

Summary

This contribution examines Palestinian-Danish artist duo Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind's exhibition *Tomorrow's Ghosts* at Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (30 March - 13 August 2023). It considers the two video works making up the exhibition, *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night* (2022) and *In Vitro* (2019), as well as the installation project *Archaeology in Absentia* (2016-17). The exhibition review traces how haunting (Gordon, Ball, Derrida, Auchter, Fisher) operates in all three works and establishes it as an aspect of the past as well as of the future. The distinct spectral qualities that Sansour and Lind employ in their work highlight the ongoing Palestinian predicament and the ever-bleaker prospects of achieving a sovereign Palestinian nation state. At the same time, *Tomorrow's Ghosts* challenges and reformulates conceptions of time, space and identity. By blending real and speculative geographies, mixing archival footage with science fiction, and collapsing past, present and future, the artists defy the continuous toponymicide (erasure of place) and memoricide (erasure of memory) that are the result of the lengthy Israeli occupation of Palestine (Masalha, Abu Lughod, Rachidi, Jayyusi). *Tomorrow's Ghosts* gives ghosts a home and a voice, as well as a time and a place. Tomorrows, then, are not only located in the future, but are equally scripted in the past. Ghosts signify loss in this exhibition but are also the stubborn residue of resilience and hope.

Introduction: Ghosts and Haunting in Palestine

'Ghosts,' Avery Gordon famously noted, channelling Black American writer Zora Neale Hurston, 'hate new things'.¹ This is 'because ghosts are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature they are haunting reminders of lingering trouble'.² Gordon elaborates further that ghosts' aversion to the new is coupled to their haunting power: the more the events, things and places they are connected to disappear, the more difficult it becomes for the ghosts in question to haunt them.³ Ghosts, then, are place-bound; driven by the impulse to return to the site of trouble. But ghosts are also very much time-bound, flitting in from the past and the future to weigh on the present. This begs the question of how ghosts navigate contexts in which time and place are continuously in upheaval. How do ghosts grapple with events (individual and collective trauma), things (material and immaterial culture and heritage, heirlooms, property, personal belongings), places (a territory comprised of its inhabited, built and natural environments), and timelines (histories, individual and collective memories) which are expunged? Palestine remains, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the most egregious example in which time and place are, and continue to be, structurally erased. The Palestinian historian Nur Masalha speaks of memoricide and toponymicide to designate the cumulative loss of, respectively, Palestinian memory and Palestinian place.⁴ If anything, these erasures offer ghosts plenty of reason to haunt and demand a redress of the unresolved historical and political violence that has been waged against Palestinians for over a century.⁵ This ongoing historical injustice, together with unfulfilled political aspiration and a haunted geography of territorial and national loss, resonate with the spectral sensibility of the ghostly. And yet, what will the ghosts of Palestine find once they return to their lands, their homes, their non-existent villages? As in the real world in which Palestinians are barred from returning to their ancestral homes and homeland, so are Palestinian ghosts stifled in their haunting: everything they encounter is new, changed or erased. Without a material reference to haunt, and with so much gone, what remains of the ghost's *raison d'être*?

In their solo exhibition *Tomorrow's Ghosts* (30 March - 13 August 2023) at Kunsten Museum of Modern Art Aalborg, Palestinian-Danish artist duo Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind proffer poetic, but also radical, suggestions on how to manage this conundrum. Sansour, a Palestinian visual artist who studied in Denmark and received Danish citizenship in 2009, and Lind, a Danish writer and philosopher, have collaborated formally since 2016. While the pair has lived in London for over a decade, they remain strongly engaged with the Danish art scene through participation in film festivals and solo and group shows.⁶ In addition, their work continues to enjoy recognition and support from Danish art funders; Sansour's 2019 contribution to the Danish Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale — with Lind credited as artistic collaborator — is a particular highlight. *Tomorrow's Ghosts* was their first exhibition in Denmark with a shared credit line.⁷ In the exhibition, Sansour and Lind's ghosts, contrary to Gordon's, do not enjoy the luxury to eschew new things: their ghosts have to navigate the new so they can perform their haunting and effectuate change. Known for using science fiction in their oeuvre to unsettle conceptions of time, space and identity, the artists' use of the ghostly in this exhibition adds an additional layer of complexity. Sansour and Lind cleverly turn the spectral into the speculative by insisting that ghosts not only encroach on the present and the future from the past, but also encroach from the future on the present, and, crucially, from the future on the past. Ghosts from the future, still troubled by the past, kindle revisionist histories that aim to destabilise accounts of the past. Postcolonial studies scholar Anna Ball, writing about Palestinian visual art, points out that in Palestinian art there is a 'turn toward the spectral as an animating rather than nihilistic force: a means to celebrate the resilience of life-even-in-death, rather than to mourn a condition of death-in-life'.⁸ Sansour and Lind extend this notion and turn the ghost into a life force, a necessity for animating the past, present and future. The title of the exhibition, *Tomorrow's Ghosts*, can thus be read in multiple temporal ways: these are ghosts *for* tomorrow as much as they are *from* tomorrow. The ghost in this exhibition, whether a singular figure or a ghostly motif, is always a collective one too, and one that haunts from the past and continues to do so from the future. Science fiction, like inter-generational trauma, produce haunting grounds

arising in temporalities that are unaligned, collapse into each other, are deeply troubled and therefore keep on producing their own, often contradictory, temporal logic. As such, the works in the exhibition not only expand notions of spectrality and haunting, the ghost and ghostliness, but, importantly, redefine them. In this review article I trace how the individual works making up the exhibition and the exhibition as a whole do this.



Fig 1. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *Tomorrow's Ghosts*. Exhibition view. Kunsten, Museum of Modern Art Aalborg, 2023. Courtesy and photo credit: ©Niels Fabæk/Kunsten, Museum of Modern Art Aalborg.

Spectrality and Loss in *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night* (2022)

While museums in Denmark engage curatorially with political topics and are increasingly diversifying their programming to include artists from non-Euro-Western backgrounds, institutional solo exhibitions by Arab/Palestinian artists are still rare.⁹ *Tomorrow's Ghosts* was presented in Kunsten's bunker-like lower-level gallery space and featured three works: the multi-channel video works *In Vitro* (2019) and *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night* (2022), and the installation project *Archaeology in Absentia* (2016–17). Enveloped by black walls, black carpet and with transparent muslin separating the works from each other, the sparse but effective exhibition design enforced the idea of the viewer entering a series of thresholds that must be crossed [Fig.1]. All three works, in their own specific ways, articulate how the past lingers and sometimes even intrudes on the present and future. However, in all these works the most distinctive conceptual and political gesture comes from the future— where the ghosts from tomorrow seek reparation for the injustices of the past and those of the present. In Sansour and Lind's work the conceptual framing is inherently ghostly because the violence propelling all works remains unresolved. To a degree, this violence is specified: the death of a child in both *In Vitro* and in *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*, respectively by ecological catastrophe and by political unrest. Cutting across all three works is the violence of loss of belonging and loss of home. While these works are firmly anchored in the historical and geo-political context of Palestine, their speculative and ghostly underpinnings not only move the works beyond their geo-political framework but also disrupt the extent of what the viewer

can comprehend empirically. This diminished comprehension falls in line with Jacques Derrida's characterisation of the spectral. Namely, as something that is 'unintelligible, invisible, and uncontrollable'.¹⁰ We cannot fully *know* the ghost because it cannot fully be represented; it therefore does not allow itself to be fully known. This, however, offers opportunities because it 'provides an alternative mechanism of seeing and hearing and feeling and engaging'.¹¹ The irrepresentability of ghosts in the context of Palestine is further complicated by ghostliness veering between the individual and the collective, therefore multiplying how ghosts manifest themselves. For example, the three-channel video installation *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night* is a filmic opera in which the protagonist, haunted by grief, laments the death of her daughter. Performed by Palestinian soprano Nour Darwish, the opera combines lyrics and music from Austrian Jewish composer Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (1901 and 1904) with the Palestinian traditional folk song *Mashaal* in which a Palestinian woman mourns the enlistment of her loved one in the Ottoman army to fight in World War I.¹² When the protagonist grieves for her lost child, she conjures up all children lost to cycles of political violence in Palestine and beyond. The coupling of Mahler's work bewailing the loss of innocent life with the Palestinian song decrying loss of life to military conflict becomes particularly poignant when considering how many children have been killed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The onslaught in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attacks in Israel is only the most recent example.¹³

Sound, or rather sound bleed, becomes another subtle way in which individual and collective experience blur and how spectrality ties the exhibition together. Film and photography are often described as spectral media, but so too is sound, specifically in this exhibition. Nour Darwish's voice, at its highest notes, pierces through the entire exhibition space, while the rumble of *In Vitro*'s soundtrack provides an ominous low base frequency to the show as a whole. Not only does the invisible, but audible, presence of sound remind the audience that there is something else impinging on their current viewing experience; sound also pulls them away from the present and catapults them into the historical crises of the long twentieth century in *As If No Misfortune* and in a dystopian science fictional future in *In Vitro*. In *Tomorrow's Ghosts*, sound and image break through linear timelines, forcing us to contend with the fact that the narratives Sansour and Lind offer never solely present singular depictions of trauma, loss and dispossession, but always collective ones too. Sound and image serve as haunting conduits and indicate, to paraphrase Mark Fisher, places that are stained by time and places that encounter broken time.¹⁴ Palestine, as a historical, geographical and identity-forming locus, is such a haunted place. It is stained by time in the sense that it is weighed down by a past impossible to return to, while simultaneously it seems bereft of a future, robbed of a continuous timeline as much as it is robbed of its territory. This spatio-temporal dislocation is most forcefully exemplified in the post-apocalyptic video installation *In Vitro*.



Fig 2. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. Two-channel black and white HD video installation, 27' 44". Video still. Courtesy the artists.

Political, Ecological, and Temporal Hauntings in *In Vitro* (2019)

Originally produced for the Danish Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019), the black and white two-channel video installation *In Vitro* shows the West Bank city of Bethlehem — where Sansour grew up — after an ecological disaster [Fig.2].¹⁵ An environmental catastrophe has rendered the world uninhabitable and forced the few survivors to live in a bunker underground. I have written elsewhere that this subterranean world is not only haunted by the ghosts of the past but is actually built on it.¹⁶ In this work, ghosts are wilfully summoned. The underground world of the bunker finds itself suspended between a traumatic past and an uncharted future. The present seems evacuated, an example of Fisher's stained and broken haunted time. But space too is made strange and unfamiliar. The bunker is a functional nonplace, geared towards survival and a continuous reminder of what was lost. It stands in stark opposition to the opening sequence of the film, which shows Bethlehem with its many landmarks -such as the Church of the Nativity and Manger Square — before the town is engulfed by a destructive wave of black oil. The bunker, then, is itself a ghostly threshold, a haunted space that cannot manifest itself fully in the present because its existence is meant to be only a temporary solution. It is defined by the destructive event that occurred in the past and simultaneously by a desire to return to Bethlehem in the future. The bunker — and by corollary all life below ground - is ghostly because it is not only haunted by life *before* the disaster but also animated by it. Life in the bunker veers between being bound to the past and how things were before the cataclysm and hoping for a return to Bethlehem above ground at a certain point in the future. This push and pull between past and future, between desperation and hope, is a plight shared by many refugees, whether they have been driven into exile by war or by another tragedy. In the Palestinian context, there is clearly a time before the 1948 *Nakba* (the Palestinian catastrophe and dispossession aligned with the foundation of the State of Israel) and a time after. The *Nakba*, however, did not end in 1948 as dispossession and displacement continue, rendering the *Nakba al mustamirrah* (continuous) and the present haunted. To put it in sociologist Lila Abu Lughod's words: 'the past has not yet passed'.¹⁷ This makes thinking about the future from a position of the present particularly challenging. In *In Vitro*, spatial and temporal disenfranchisement produce an existential disenfranchisement; everything rides on a return above ground that — for now — cannot be obtained. This modality is all too familiar to Palestinians whose *'awda* or return to historic Palestine

drives Palestinian political aspiration. A lost homeland is like a phantom limb, missing but still very present, its pain still deeply felt. *In Vitro* does not shy away from the genuine ache of loss; on the contrary, it speculates that an identity of the present must commune with its ghosts — past and future — to be authentic.



Fig 3. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. Two-channel black and white HD video installation, 27' 44". Video still. Courtesy the artists.

In Vitro's plot centres around a dialogue between two women discussing memory, loss, identity, belonging and transgenerational trauma. Dunia, elderly and ailing on her sickbed, is played by renowned Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass, and Alia, a clone engineered from the DNA of those who perished in the ecological disaster, including Dunia's deceased daughter, is played by Palestinian actress Maisa Abd Elhadi [Fig.3]. Dunia calls for a return to life above ground, her *'awda*. It is of essence for her to keep the memory of the past alive. Moreover, her idea of the future is a future cast in the image of the past and a return to an idealised time before the apocalypse. Only a full return can constitute the means to heal. For her, 'this present barely exists'.¹⁸ Conversely, for the clone Alia matters are less clear. While through the cloning process she inherited the memories and trauma of those who died, all she knows empirically is the reality of the present: the bunker, the lab she was artificially grown in and the underground orchard that provides sustenance for the surviving population. Both Dunia and Alia are haunted by memories of the past, with the difference that Dunia embraces them as an existential *raison d'être* and Alia rejects them. In a testy exchange, Alia retorts: '[T]he past spoon-fed to me ... my own memories replaced by those of others. They appear personal and intimate. They're not real but seductive ... like lavish illustrations in a children's book. Out of touch with life down here like a bacteria planted in me'. Both women demonstrate how they are affected differently by these hauntings. While Dunia is very much a spectre of herself, gaunt and on her deathbed, clinging to an identity of a destroyed world, Alia could be seen as the ghostliest figure of the two. As a clone, she personifies the spectral by being both *revenant* (bringing back to life those who died during the catastrophe) and *arrivant* (a manifestation of a possible future for those in the bunker).¹⁹ Alia strongly affirms, 'I don't believe in ghosts. What we are doing here will not restore the past'. However, she herself mobilises the idea of the ghost into a radically emancipatory proposition. She literally *is* 'tomorrow's ghost': a ghost *for* the future and *from* the future. A figure in search of an authentic identity who straddles all temporal plains of past, present and future and who insists on harnessing the present while refusing to be shackled by the past.

'Perhaps a loss of memories is essential to starting over?', she carefully suggests, while admitting that the memories artificially implanted in her are 'too vivid to dismiss as somebody else's'. If the ghostly is characterised by ambiguity and unresolvedness, then Alia personifies it. At the same time, it is by inhabiting the ghostly with all its contradictions that Alia might manage to identify a horizon of hope and, eventually, undo the haunting.



Fig 4. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *In Vitro*, 2019. Two-channel black and white HD video installation, 27' 44". Video still. Courtesy the artists.

Though at a first glance *In Vitro's* aesthetics seem clear-cut — the split screen, the formalism of black-and-white cinema, the dreamy scenes of life before catastrophe [Fig.4] vis-à-vis the austere functionality of life after catastrophe — they are in fact highly ambiguous and ghostly. Here the oppositional aesthetics become a haunted aesthetics. Past, present and future *do* blend into each. Memory and forgetfulness are not each other's opposites but rather two sides of the same coin that in *In Vitro* seems to be continuously spinning. For someone whose drive is fully centred around remembrance, Dunia concedes: 'We spent too long registering, recording, archiving'. The archival footage of early twentieth-century to 1967 Bethlehem included in the film is a case in point. On the one hand it serves to anchor historicity in the film's suspension of disbelief, transporting the viewer momentarily back to the 'there and then' in Palestine. But on the other, the archival material also very much produces a sensibility of 'here and now'. Is the grainy black and white footage of refugees crossing Allenby Bridge following the 1967 war in which Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Sinai desert any different from the even grainier footage of those who fled in the 1948 *Nakba*, or for that matter the high-definition images we see on our screens of internally displaced Gazans in Israel's most recent war on Gaza (2023-2024)?²⁰ The archival footage does not necessarily mark something that lies in the past. Rather it underscores that 'the past [is] still at work within the present, still actively re-engendering it in its own shape,' as long as the historic and epistemic violence against Palestinians continues.²¹ The role of the archival material, a recurring feature in Sansour and Lind's work, harks back to Dunia's question about the sense of archiving in the wake of obliteration. Do all these materials - in Alia's terms 'a liturgy chronicling our losses' - lay the ghosts to rest, or do they actually spur them on? If the *Nakba* is *al mustamirrah* (continuous), can the work of mourning, essential to working-through trauma and restoring agency, take place at all?²² This fundamental question is provoked in the three-channel opera *As if No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*.



Fig 5. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *As if No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*, 2022. Three-channel HD video installation, 21'. Video still. Courtesy the artists.

Here, too, the artists employ split screens, black and white film, and archival material, and here too these aesthetic and conceptual choices serve to mobilise the ghostly. Set in a derelict and wind-swept church with light faintly peeping through its stained-glass windows, the setting is decidedly haunted. It is sacral but ruinous. Whereas in *In Vitro* the bunker, with all its impediments, still struggles to be a place of life, a place where survival might grow into a new beginning, the church in *As if No Misfortune* is a site of absolute loss and mourning. Like *In Vitro*'s Alia and Dunia, the protagonist (soprano Nour Darwish) casts a haunted figure, a mother grieving for her dead daughter. In this work too, individual loss turns into collective grief. 'I mourn not only the losses I can count but also those ahead and yet unnumbered,' Darwish sings standing on a ghostly plain of misty clouds, a moon peering through the right-hand corner [Fig.5].²³ The child's absence is further accentuated by the image of the protagonist being mirrored across the two outer screens, rendering her an apparitional double and making the void the child left all the more potent. The mother becomes a phantom herself. In a scene towards the end of *In Vitro*, Alia remarks about her memories: 'some scenes are more grainy and faded than others,' as if she were describing their ghostliness. This is put into practice in *As if No Misfortune*. Veering from a full shot across all three screens to a detail shown blurred on a single screen, the image is unclear: parental grief, as well as all the other mournful losses the protagonist has accrued, cannot be fully visualised. The mother's memory of her child persists, albeit devoid of an image. Instead, other images suggesting absence — imperfectly — fill that gap. For example, there is a shot of a rocking chair swaying back and forth with no one on it; a candle's wick flickers in the draft; the sound of a closed door creaking open while in fact it remains shut. These ghostly scenes signify the Palestinian predicament that walks that brittle line between privation and aspiration, between something that is materially present (the territory of historic Palestine) yet absent (a nation state).



Fig 6. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*, 2022. Three-channel HD video installation, 21'. Video still. Courtesy the artists.

In *As if No Misfortune*, like in *In Vitro*, the archival material yanks the viewer from any kind of reverie and demands we look at this work with a historical eye: with the eye of the present but also with a speculative eye *from* and *for* the future. Most of the footage, mined from the collections of the Imperial War Museum in London, is from early twentieth-century Bethlehem and Jerusalem. For example, the iconic views of the Mount of Olives with the golden cupola of the Dome of the Rock are easily recognisable; so too is the imagery from World War I with its trench warfare. Whereas the *Nakba* is often cited as the starting point for Palestinians' collective trauma, or as Lena Jayyusi so eloquently puts it, their 'lesion with memory,' the artists point to a longer historical arc.²⁴ The period of World War I and Palestine transitioning out of Ottoman rule are set as the stage for the creation of the State of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinians. The first two decades of the twentieth century and particularly the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were pivotal for the formation of a Palestinian national consciousness.²⁵ Similar sentiments for independence were brewing across the region following the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement in which France and Britain partitioned the Middle East in French and British spheres of influence and control.²⁶ However, in Palestine, growing Zionist immigration and the 1917 Balfour Declaration, promising a national homeland for Jews in Palestine but no political or national rights for its indigenous population, accelerated Palestinian national identity formation.²⁷ Many Palestinians were drafted into the Ottoman armies to fight the allied forces. *As if No Misfortune* points to significant historic factors prior to, and beyond, the *Nakba* that keep on haunting the present and the future. In an arresting scene, the protagonist stands in a forest of dead suspended tree trunks. She sings: 'The cataclysm of *a century ago* revisited in eternal sequels. Paying off their losses for decades yet to come' (emphasis mine) [Fig.6]. In another scene using archival footage, a tank crushes a bed of cacti. The latter is not meant to be a minor detail. Rather, cacti and their fruit, the prickly pear, signify steadfastness in Palestinian national discourse and art. Following the *Nakba*, cacti were planted around erased Palestinian villages, a ruinous and ghostly marker of what once was.²⁸ *As if No Misfortune* is filled with such markers of absence and loss that seep from the past into the future, and as a form of proleptic mourning, as Darwish sings of

losses 'ahead and yet unnumbered,' from the future into the present.

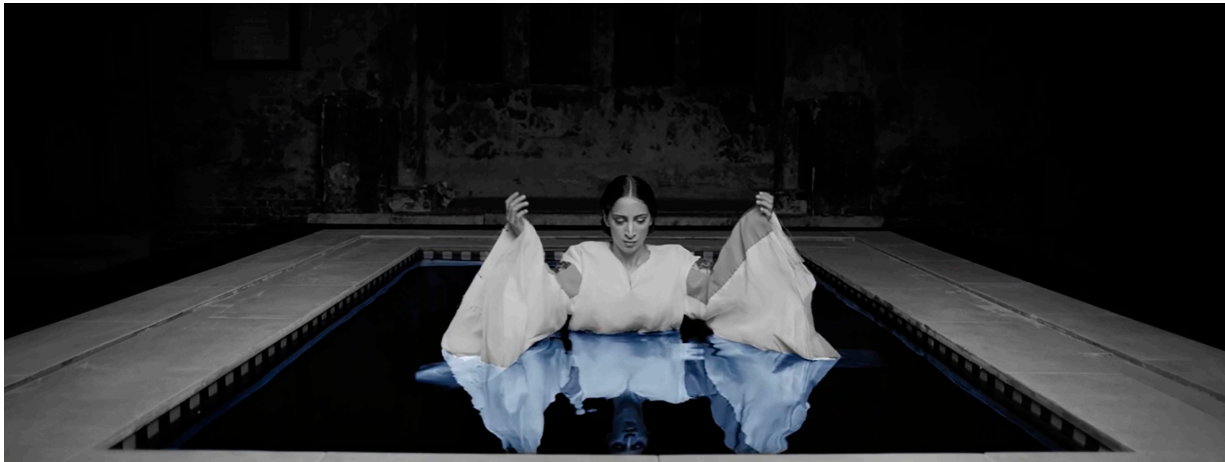


Fig 7. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *As if No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*, 2022. Three-channel HD video installation, 21'. Video still. Courtesy the artists.

Whereas in *In Vitro* the ghostly still seeks a new beginning and formulates a forward-looking stance through clone Alia, in *As if No Misfortune* the prospect of a horizon, and therefore of the future, seems fully lost. Alia desperately tries to harness the present and establish an identity for herself in the future. In the opera, however, all command over time seems relinquished and what remains is a ghostly existence out of time. The protagonist sings: 'Ejected by time and stripped from our chronology. This *haunted* present recites the prelude to our slumbering history' (emphasis mine). In the video's closing sequence, in a dramatic gesture the performer dismounts her headdress, rips her bodice — recognisably decorated with *tatreez* (traditional Palestinian embroidery) — and steps in a pool of indigo-coloured water, the only colour element in the entire work [Fig.7]. The final scenes of the opera are sung in indigo-dyed clothes, the rest still black and white. Dyeing clothes indigo is a traditional mourning ritual in Palestine.²⁹ If *In Vitro* is characterised by a loss of identity and belonging, then *As if No Misfortune* is tormented by a profusion of it. Both works, nonetheless, demonstrate mourning and haunting caused by intergenerational trauma. In both cases, identity, if not ontology, is at stake.

Emancipatory and Reparative Ghosts from the Future

Anthropologist Heonik Kwon characterises ghosts as 'ontological refugees'. They are 'uprooted from home, which is to them a place where their memory can be settled'.³⁰ On the one hand Kwon underlines the inextricable entanglement of identity and memory, on the other he points to an unsettledness of being and of place. All this is galvanised in the Palestinian condition and the denial of a homeland. Palestinian exile concerns as much identity and memory (in Masalha's words the 'memoricide' of Palestine) as it does place (in Masalha's words the 'toponimicide' of Palestine). In the sculptural installation *Archaeology in Absentia* (2016-17), Sansour and Lind reverse engineer this relationship by projecting memory in the future. Placed between the two video installations in the exhibition, this project articulates the boldest step yet: how to mobilise the ghostly in an emancipatory way. Its strategic placement between the uncertainty of *In Vitro* and the utter loss of *As if No Misfortune* proposes a radical owning of the ghost: one where disaster is not necessarily passed on from one generation to the next, but rather becomes agential and transforms the future by, paradoxically enough, transforming the historicity of the past. Both *In Vitro* and *As if No Misfortune* question whether genetic make-up equals destiny. For example, in the latter the protagonist sings: 'I didn't invite the demons in. Yet they rummage through my veins'. *Archaeology in Absentia* affirms that this does not need to be the case. The sculpture series exhibited in *Tomorrow's Ghosts* is part of a larger body of work revolving around the single-channel science fiction video *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016). In the video, a resistance

group makes deposits of elaborate *keffiyeh*-patterned porcelain in the hope the tableware will be found in the future by archaeologists. This would create material and historical evidence of the existence of a people who, indeed, 'ate from the finest porcelain'. The project comments on how archaeology, and specifically biblical archaeology in Israel, is weaponised to construct origin myths and land rights exclusively for Jews.³¹ In *Archaeology in Absentia*, that weaponisation is flipped and made material. The installation consists of fifteen 20 cm bronze munition replicas which resemble Fabergé eggs. Each 'egg' contains an engraved disc with the longitude and latitude coordinates of where their load of porcelain has been deposited and buried in historic Palestine [Fig.8]. The sculptures, then, are testament to the ghostly geography of a Palestinian map that no longer exists, but they also simultaneously attempt to reclaim it.



Fig 8. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *Archeology in Absentia*, 2016. Fifteen 20cm bronze sculptures. Exhibition view. Courtesy and photo credit: ©Niels Fabæk/Kunsten, Museum of Modern Art Aalborg.

At Kunsten, *Archaeology in Absentia* was installed on individual cylindrical concrete pedestals with spotlights trained on the Perspex-encased munition shells. With the metal surfaces subtly catching the light, this particular display evoked both the sensibility of protecting valuable archaeological artefacts and a precious series of embryos growing in a test tube [Fig.9]. Past and future amalgamate and live in a single object. With the porcelain itself absent from the installation and scattered across historic Palestine — from Jerusalem, Acre, Haifa, Jaffa, and Nazareth in present-day Israel to Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jericho in the West Bank — the absent presence of Palestinian exile is reproduced. Lind, courtesy of his Danish passport, was able to enter Israel and plant porcelain there, a privilege not afforded to Sansour, who has been banned from visiting Israel and the city of her birth, Jerusalem. While these empty shells are haunted by loss, they also — in a ghostly fashion — reconstitute it. This recalls the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's (1942-2008) celebrated autobiographical prose poem *Absent Presence (Fi hadrat al-ghiyab, 2006)*. In this hybrid piece of writing, prose and poetry converge, lived experience and the imagination become one, and the recording of his own demons echo the collective haunting of the Palestinian people. The work is, as Anna Ball observes, 'inhabited by images of a spectral Palestinian past that refuses to be laid to rest [...] in which the fraught relationship between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, past and present [are] also at stake'.³² This accurately describes what happens in *Archaeology in Absentia*. Moreover, the refusal of the porcelain to be laid to rest is its

raison d'être. Without being disinterred, becoming visible again, and telling the story of a people threatened with erasure, it has no function; it *has* to resurface. Another aspect also drives *Archaeology in Absentia* to 'commune,' as Ball puts it, 'with Darwish's ghosts'.³³ The complex dynamic between presence and absence signifies and denounces the legal category of 'present absentees,' created in 1950 by the State of Israel.³⁴ This spectral term, part of Israeli Absentee Property Law, refers to Palestinians who were absent from their homes during the *Nakba* and whose properties were confiscated by the state while they themselves still were present in Israel, turning them into internally displaced refugees.³⁵ Present absentees, like many other Palestinians who had to flee to neighbouring countries, are effectively condemned to a haunting existence, residing in close proximity to their homes but unable to return. *Archaeology in Absentia* embodies all these spectral contradictions but offers reparation: in the future, and through the will of the imaginary, ghosts will be laid to rest. In *Archaeology in Absentia*, ghosts reconfigure the future.



Fig 8. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind. *Archeology in Absentia*, 2016. Fifteen 20cm bronze sculptures. Detail. Courtesy and photo credit: ©Niels Fabæk/Kunsten, Museum of Modern Art Aalborg.

However haunted *Tomorrow's Ghosts* might be, it is ultimately a project of repair which invites ghosts to speak up and speak back by lending them a voice, agency and subjectivity. These ghosts continue to linger and haunt Palestine's landscape and Palestinian national consciousness; how could they not with so much still left unresolved? *Tomorrow's Ghosts* offers them, at least, an imaginary place to return to. This makes the exhibition very much an exercise in spectral co-existence: being and living with ghosts. As Alia in *In Vitro* demonstrates, this is not always harmonious. Still, Alia endeavours towards accepting the ghost as kin and as an intrinsic part of herself, and therefore her future. Co-existence also means acknowledging each other's pain as a first step in the process of healing. As if *No Misfortune* shows how individual and collective hurt and haunting are entangled and pulsate violently through past, present and future. Addressing, and dressing, these wounds that continue to tear through Palestinians' lived experience is a prerequisite to start offering ghosts, these 'ontological refugees,' a home. To live with ghosts means to *see* them. In *Tomorrow's Ghosts*, Sansour and Lind open up this field of vision and demand their audiences see

them too.

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Notes

1. Avery F. Gordon: *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008, xix
2. Gordon 2008, xix
3. Gordon 2008, xix
4. In historian Nur Masalha's words, 'memoricide' and 'toponymicide' are described respectively as follows: 'the systematic erasure of the expelled Palestinians and their mini-holocaust from Israeli collective memory and the excision of their history and deeply rooted heritage in the land, and their destroyed villages and towns from Israeli official and popular history. One of the key tools of the de-Arabisation of the land has been toponymicide: the erasure of ancient Palestinian place names and their replacement by newly coined Zionist Hebrew toponymy'. Nur Masalha: *The Palestine Nakba. Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, London and New York: Zed Books 2012, 10
5. Gordon describes haunting as 'an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely'. Gordon 2008, xvi
6. Sansour and Lind premiered their film *Familiar Phantoms* (2024) at the CPH:DOX film festival (2024), where it was nominated for CPH:DOX's Art Film Award. They have received a major production grant in 2023 for their feature film *BETHLEHEM* from The Danish Film Institute and over the years (2004-2023) and also received production grants for their work from the Danish Art Foundation. Sansour's other Danish solo shows include *Heirloom* at Copenhagen Contemporary (2019); *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* at Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen (2016); *Nation Estate*, Fotografisk Center, Copenhagen (2012). Group show participation includes: Arken Museum of Contemporary Art; Nikolaj Kunsthal; Louisiana Museum of Contemporary Art; Brandts Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde; Gl. Holtegaard; Charlottenborg; Vejle Kunstmuseum; Skagen Museum.
7. Whereas Sansour and Lind have shared credit for their film and video work since 2016, they have recently also started sharing credit for exhibitions too. See for example solo presentations at KINDL, Berlin (2023); The Whitworth, Manchester (2023); FACT, Liverpool (2022) and forthcoming exhibitions at Amos Rex, Helsinki (2024) and Wereldmuseum, Amsterdam (2026).
8. Anna Ball: 'Communing with Darwish's Ghosts. Absent Presence in Dialogue with the Palestinian Moving Image', in *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 7, no. 2, 2014, 144
9. At Kunsten in particular, solo presentations of non-Western artists have included: Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi; Israeli artist Omer Fast; Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto; Nigerian artist Toyin Ojih Odutola; Senegalese artist Omar Victor Diop. *Tomorrow's Ghosts* was the first solo exhibition to feature an Arab artist at Kunsten. *Palestine on my Mind* was a 2017 group show at KH4 artspace in Aarhus, an artist-run exhibition space. Palestinian artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abu Rahme have a major solo presentation at Copenhagen Contemporary (14.06.2024 - 24.11.2024) in collaboration with the Glyptotek (14.06.2024 - 20.10.2024). I am indebted to Claire Mary Anne Gould and Tine Vindfeld for providing further insight into the Danish museum context.
10. Jessica Aughter: *The Politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations*, London and New York: Routledge 2014, 18 and 20
11. Aughter 2014, 19

12. Palestine had been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1917; from 1917 to 1948, up to the creation of the state of Israel, Palestine was a British Mandate. See Nur Masalha: *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History*, London: Zed Books 2018, 20 and 39
13. As of 22 May 2024, OCHA notes at least 35,709 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, predominantly women and children and with many thousands still missing under the rubble. OCHA also notes looming starvation threatening the population of Gaza in which 70% of the population will face catastrophic hunger by March–July 2024. In their 7 October 2023 attack, Hamas killed 1200 Israelis and foreign nationals, including 36 children. OCHA: 'Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel | Flash Update #169', 22 May 2024, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-169>. The New Arab: 'Israel's 7 October Death Toll Revised down by Social Security Data', *The New Arab*, 15 December 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/israels-7-oct-toll-revised-down-social-security-data> [last accessed 01.04.2024].
14. Mark Fisher: 'What Is Hauntology?', in *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1, 2012, 19
15. Full disclosure: I was the curator of *Heirloom*, the Danish Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale.
16. Nat Muller: 'Before and After a Disaster: Unsettling Representation in Larissa Sansour's *Heirloom*', in Anthony Downey (ed.): *Larissa Sansour: Heirloom. Research/Practice 03*, Berlin: Sternberg Press 2019, 8
17. Lila Abu-Lughod: 'Return to Half-Ruins: Memory, Postmemory, and Living History in Palestine', in Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod (eds.): *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, New York: Colombia University Press 2007, 78
18. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *In Vitro*, 2019. Two-channel black and white HD video installation, 27' 44". All consecutive quotes follow this citation.
19. For a discussion on the Derridian notions of 'revenant (invoking what was)' and 'arrivant (announcing what will come)', see María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren: 'Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities', in María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (eds.): *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 13.
20. For a concise summary of the loss of Palestinian territory following the 1967 War, see Albert Hourani: *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London: Faber and Faber 1991, 411–15. For a statistics overview on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, see OCHA, 'Day 96: Overview', 11 January 2024, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-96> [last accessed 12.01.2024].
21. Lena Jayyusi: 'Iterability, Cumulativity, and Presence: The Relational Figures of Palestinian Memory', in Ahmad H. Sa'idi and Lila Abu-Lughod (eds.): *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, New York: Colombia University Press 2007, 114
22. For a discussion on historian Dominick LaCapra's take on the differentiation between the acting-out of trauma (melancholia) and the working-through of trauma (mourning), see Lucy Bond and Stef Craps: *Trauma (The New Critical Idiom)*, London: Routledge 2020, 73–83
23. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, *As If No Misfortune Had Occurred in the Night*, 2022. Three-channel HD video installation, 21'. All consecutive quotes follow this citation.
24. Jayyusi 2007, 108

25. For a thorough discussion on the formation of Palestinian identity during this period, see Rashid Khalidi: *Palestinian Identity. The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, 2nd ed., New York: Colombia University Press 2010, 145-176
26. For the Sykes-Picot Agreement, see Hourani 1991, 318
27. For an analysis of the Balfour declaration and its historical and political context, see Rashid Khalidi: *The Hundred Year's War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*, New York: Metropolitan Books 2020, 22-27.
28. For a discussion of cacti in Palestinian art, see Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon: *The Origins of Palestinian Art*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2013, 183. And Tina Sherwell: 'Topographies of Identity, Soliloquies of Place', in *Third Text* 20, no. 3-4, 2006, 432.
29. See Aref Abu-Rabia and Nibal Khalil: 'Mourning Palestine. Death and Grief Rituals', in *Anthropology of the Middle East* 7, no. 2, 2012, 5.
30. Heonik Kwon: *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 16
31. See Nur Masalha: 'Settler-Colonialism, Memoricide and Indigenous Toponymic Memory: The Appropriation of Palestinian Place Names by the Israeli State,' in *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 14, no. 1, 2015, 31.
32. Ball 2014, 136
33. Ball 2014, 136
34. For an overview of the Properties Law and for its full text, see Adalah: 'Absentees' Property Law', n.d. <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/538> [last accessed 12.01.2024].
35. As Masalha notes: "Today almost a quarter of all Palestinian citizens inside Israel are "internal refugees" or "present absentees" (*nifkadim nokhahim* in Hebrew). Inside Israel, after the Nakba, the key stipulation was (as it still is) that it was a state created for Jews; non-Jews, both present and "present absentees", were treated as foreigners in their own homeland, despite being the indigenous inhabitants and formerly resident in the country'. Masalha 2012, 231. See also Ball 2014, 139.

About the author



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Nat Muller, PhD, is an independent curator, writer, and researcher. She is an expert in contemporary art from the Middle East and curated the Danish Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, showing Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour. She has curated exhibitions, film screenings and other projects internationally. Her writing has been published in peer reviewed journals such as *Science Fiction Studies*, *Art Margins* and *SFRA* and in art publications, including *Ocula*, *Hyperallergic*, *Art Basel*, *Springer*, *MetropolisM*, *Bidoun*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Art Papers*, and *Ibraaz*. Her forthcoming monograph *Science Fiction in Contemporary Art from the Middle East* is published with Palgrave Macmillan.

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