

Manazir
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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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Interwoven Collective Memory



Figure 12: Khadija Baker. *My Little Voice Can't Lie*. 2012. Performance and sound, various durations. The 18th Sydney biennale, Cockatoo Island, Australia. © Khadija Baker. Photographer unknown.

This essay examines Khadija Baker's performative work *My Little Voice Can't Lie* and its relationship with certain aspects of collectivity and its physical expression. Khadija Baker was born in Amuda, Syria, and has lived and worked in Montreal, Canada, since she left Kurdistan about twenty years ago. Having experienced displacement herself, she addresses this topic in her artistic work using various media and methods of research. Besides her artistic research, she also has an academic approach as a member of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University.

Baker has performed her work *My Little Voice Can't Lie* in art institutions across Canada and Australia and various public spaces such as libraries, on the street, and on a ferry (Baker 4). Resting in a seated position for about one hour, she has her hair plaited in several long braids with in-ear headphones embedded at the end of each braid. Viewers are invited to approach the artist and listen to a recorded text created from stories of displaced Kurdish women, including the artist's own story. The soundtrack is looped, and viewers need to stand quite close to Baker to hold the braids in their hands and press the ends to their ears in order to hear the recordings. Thus, the performance includes not only an experience of listening but also physical proximity with the artist and the other viewers.

Two aspects of collectivity emerge in the reception of this performance. The first consists of the act of listening to the re-transmission of the displaced women's stories, which ensures their preservation in contemporary memory. The second aspect is that the performance is based on participatory storytelling. Several women with similar experiences of displacement tell different stories about their experiences. This plurality of voices is essential to the process of remembering, where the common denominators of belonging and having similar experiences find their way into a chorus. These two forms of collectivity—the act of listening and the practice of storytelling—result in an expanded communal authorship. The concept of collective remembering thus also includes the recipients and becomes a joint performative act.

By creating this plurality of voices, Baker allows a diversity of experiences to co-exist among a group of displaced Kurdish women. This heterogeneous group is not represented by just one voice; instead, individuals speak for themselves, thereby underlining the power of the spoken word. The spoken word plays a crucial role in Kurdish culture. Although the history of the oppression of the Kurdish people in all its complexity lies beyond the scope of this article, what is important here is that the act of displacing Kurdish people has been a common experience in many settlement regions for decades. In addition, Kurds have been forbidden (in some places even until today) to use their language and perform other fundamental cultural practices in public. This explains the vital role of oral transmission in Kurdish culture to this day as a form of free expression and as a central component of historical memory. When listening to the recorded stories in Khadija Baker's performance, orality is interwoven with the act of remembering.

Remembrance, which this performance initiates, happens against the background of nostalgia. As the women involved in Baker's project have lost their homeland, practices tied to their culture are likely to be associated with a sense of distance and longing. When orally remembering, they reflect on Kurdish culture. Here, the notion of "reflection" refers to the category of "reflective nostalgia" described by Svetlana Boym. Boym defines reflective nostalgia as a way of remembering that does not try to restore the past but rather reflects on it as simply the passage of time (49). This also means that memory is not being imposed on the present, but that the past "might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality" (Bergson 59).

Both the transmission of the collected stories and Khadija Baker's presence at the performances are strongly connected to physicality. To hear the recordings, the audience must get close to the artist's body and touch her hair. This means crossing the boundary of natural physical distance as the artist exposes her body to this act of transgression. Baker herself has said that "there is the crossing of the cultural border of the Middle Eastern female body and conventions about its exposure in public space" (Baker 4).

Baker's actual embodiment of collectivity is particularly evident in her hair braids. Especially with regard to the female body, the fascination with hair has a long, symbolically charged history. Since antiquity, long hair has been a symbol of female attributes of seduction and has been interpreted as a danger that emanates from women (Adomeit 66). In some cultures, the covering of female hair is still widespread today (66). When uncovered, single strands of hair and hair as a collective whole sit at the intersection of strength and fragility. One hair by itself is thin and fragile, but hair as a collective whole is quite resistant. There is also a certain degree of imperishability in that it grows constantly throughout a person's lifetime and does not change its shape even after the person's death. Long hair in particular is a powerful symbol of duration and of what is experienced during the period that the hair grows. In this way it appears as though Khadija Baker's own history is "interwoven" into each of her braids, as memories of the past years have grown into her hair and function as witnesses of time.

Without going back to the numerous appearances of hair motifs in mythology, the idea that in human hair lies the force of life is widespread. Hair is often perceived as representing the whole person as a *pars pro toto* (Vogt 21). For example, when parents stick a lock of their child's hair in the family photo album, it is not necessarily because they find that lock of hair beautiful or valuable on a material level, but rather because it is directly connected to their child as a person and to memories of childhood. The same can be said about Baker's work, in which the hair braids evoke much more than their materiality. Each braid can be seen as an actual embodiment of that person telling their personal story of displacement through that strand of hair. As the stories are interwoven into the braids, the associated memory also manifests on a physical level. Khadija Baker's body functions as a kind of medium for displaced Kurdish women's stories, a physical medium for interwoven collectivity.

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