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“Derailing the status quo”: A Conversation with Marwa Arsanios about Who’s Afraid of Ideology?

« Faire dérailler le statu quo. » Entretien avec Marwa Arsanios sur « Who’s Afraid of Ideology? »

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“Derailing the status quo”: A Conversation with Marwa Arsanios about *Who’s Afraid of Ideology?*

by Judith Naeff and Marwa Arsanios

Keywords: Colombia; ecology; feminism; Lebanon; Kurdistan; Marwa Arsanios; Rojava

Authors: Judith Naeff is Assistant Professor of Cultures of the Middle East at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on contemporary visual culture and literature of the Arab World. This interview is part of her research project *Remembering Dissent and Disillusion in the Arab World*, funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO projectnumber VI.VENI.191C.002).

Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker and researcher whose practice tackles structural and infrastructural questions using different devices, forms and strategies. From architectural spaces, their transformation and adaptability throughout conflict, to artist-run spaces and temporary conventions between feminist communes and cooperatives, the practice tends to make space within and parallel to existing art structures allowing experimentation with different kinds of politics. Film becomes another form and a space for connecting struggles in the way images refer to each other. In the past four years Arsanios has looked at questions of property, law, economy, and ecology from specific plots of land from a new materialist and a historical materialist perspective with different feminist movements that are struggling for their land. Arsanios was a researcher in the Fine Art Department at the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (2010–12). She is currently a PhD candidate at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna. For information on some of her exhibitions and film screenings see <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/marwa-arsanios/>

Marwa Arsanios is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher from Beirut, Lebanon. Her work has explored the entanglements of modernity, the promise of liberation, and gender relations in the twentieth century, and has been shown at the Berlin (2020), Warsaw (2019) and Sharjah Biennales (2019), among many other venues. Her quadrilogy, *Who’s Afraid of Ideology?* consists of four short experimental documentaries on radical feminist ecological resistance as practised by different autonomous women’s movements in conflict zones, focusing alternately on Syrian Kurdistan, Turkish Kurdistan, Colombia, and Lebanon.

Judith Naeff: Can you tell us how you came to this project?

Marwa Arsanios: The project started with an encounter in 2015, when I was still living in Beirut and co-running the 98Weeks research project.¹ At the time, there was a so-called trash crisis in Lebanon. As a result of large-scale corruption, the garbage management system collapsed, and trash was piling up all over the city. I had been part of a coalition of feminist organizations, and with other members here in the city, this crisis brought us back to ecological feminist texts. At the same time, the situation in Syria had turned into a civil war, which had a lot of repercussions here too. But in the north of Syria, there was an experiment of the Kurdish autonomous women’s movement in the self-governed region of Rojava.



Figure 1: Reading group at 98Weeks. Image courtesy of Marwa Arsanios.

It was in this context that I decided to invite, through 98Weeks, two members of this movement to explain to us what was happening there, but also to do a reading group around a text by a guerilla fighter.² Her name is Pelşin Tolhidan, an ideologue of the autonomous women's movement. She was writing on the question of ecology and feminism, but also addressed the contradiction she faced as a guerilla fighter—the contradiction of being in a situation of war while also thinking about ecology. The two members who were invited, Dilara and Meral, translated her writings, and we had a reading group around it. This was the starting point of continuing discussion, with the two guests, but also with other members we met here in Beirut.

Eventually, I was invited to go and meet Pelşin in the mountains. I went with a friend, and we had discussions with them. We really received an education about the work of the movement and what they were doing, their ecological practice of being in relation to the landscape while they were also living in a context of war. There was a mutual desire to communicate all of that by creating a film. *Who's Afraid of Ideology*, Part I would take on and communicate that struggle, the particularity of the landscape and the ecological practices that were put in place.

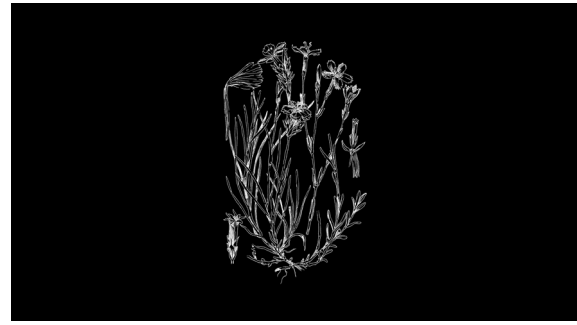


Figure 2: Still from *Who is Afraid of Ideology?* Part I (Marwa Arsanios, 2017)

This was the instigation for the whole process. I find Pelşin's text extremely inspirational. It became a key text in regard to the question of radical ecology, and how one can think ecology beyond environmentalism. Coming out of a question of economy, as the practice of the household, and into the question of ecology, as the practice of living and inhabiting the land. In that sense, the whole series asks this question: how do we inhabit the land and what kind of relationship do we create with this land? It responds to a shallow idea of environmentalism that posits nature as the other and presupposes a divide between nature and the self. The film approaches this question by entering into conversation with people who are already doing this work of changing our relationship to the land and sees these practices as part of a wider political struggle. It is not aimed at a quick fix, but a practice of being that challenges the imposed divide between nature and humans.

Who's Afraid of Ideology? traces different strategies of deprivatizing and communalizing the land. The organizational strategies are often pragmatic, but they are not removed from the philosophical and ideological drive. The title, then, is meant as a provocation of a more liberal feminism and liberal environmentalism that are part of the post-1989 hegemony of a supposedly post-ideological new world. These are moralist and ahistorical approaches: a feminism that fails to address colonial and neocolonial relations, and an environmentalism that fails to tackle the neocolonial extractivist political economy behind ecological disruption.³

JN: The four videos are experimental documentaries. Can you clarify some of the formal choices you made regarding your role as a mediator, filming the landscape?

MA: The question of seeing and mediating the landscape is articulated more explicitly in part IV. It takes the camera as a necessary tool to rethink the landscape. The camera has been an important tool for our extractive relation to land and it was vital to colonialist land grabbing. I believe that we can only rethink our relation to the land and challenge ideas of ownership through the camera again. But in the other parts too, the driving question is: how do we film the land and the people inhabiting the land? It is a very difficult question. In parts I, II and III, I am embedding myself in different struggles which I am not part of in the everyday. So, I really needed to think carefully about my own role as the artist with a camera in relation to the land and the community. I was asked, but also consciously chose to put myself in this uneasy position as an outsider. This role is questioned when you can see the tripod or the microphone in the image. In the opening of part I, you see me speaking, but you hear me reading something else. So, there is confusion about whose voice is speaking. I wanted to emphasize that whatever I say, I am reading other people's words. The opening lines are from Karen Barad, and then I read from a transcript from the interview with Pelşin. So, my role is almost like a container that is mediating the struggles, but it is not myself speaking.

JN: The topic of this publication is the politics and poetics of strike. I would like to invite you to reflect on these practices through the concept of strike.

MA: The different communities I have met, whether in Colombia, Kurdistan, or Rojava, I guess their practice is more a form of derailing than striking. It is a reappropriation of work which resists a specific understanding of what work should be, its relation to the state, and its relation to the land. It is a more affirmative gesture: derailing to create something new. By creating a different kind of agriculture and a different form of living together, you are refusing the existing social relations and resisting state institutions.



Figure 3: Still from *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part IV Reverse shot* (Marwa Arsaniós, 2022)

This is a different mode of critique than syndicalist strikes, because it is not only in the negative but also proposing a different practice. In that sense I think there is something quite anarchist about it, the idea of direct action. If you want to think about it as a strike: it is in fact saying, “No, we will not work the land as state employees on a daily wage,” but because of the political situation in Syria, it is also saying, “We will actually take over the land and reorganize our relation to it and to each other.” A strike, if you will, but not coming from the Western tradition of critiquing the institution. This is not to fetishize it. I am not saying that this is the solution, because then the responsibility would fall on society instead of the responsible people. But in these particular conditions of conflict zones, you really need to take such direct action in order to resist the state's hegemony.

JN: Part of this volume thinks through feminist strikes as a challenge to the gendered division between unpaid domestic labour and wage labour. I was wondering to what extent initiatives you study in your video also derail this gendered division of labour.

MA: In fact, the division between productive and reproductive labour is disrupted in these cases, because the garden, or the orchard, or the land, is an extension of the house. What they are fighting is industrial agriculture and monoculture, which is a capitalist, productive economy. The women themselves are taking care of the land, while also taking care of the household and the children. And they teach and educate, and they are fighting too. So, this division does not exist. When you are saving the seeds, you are nurturing, but you are also threatening seed corporations that seek seed patents to turn it into property which can be sold back to the farmers. This is the resistance.

Endnotes

1. 98weeks ran between 2007 and 2017. A short profile about the project can be found here: <https://www.media-matic.net/en/page/306367/98-weeks>
2. Tolhildan's text "Ecological Catastrophe" can be found here: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/pel-in-tol-hildan-ecological-catastrophe>
3. Marwa Arsanios has elaborated on these issues in the article "Who's Afraid of Ideology? Ecofeminist Practices Between Internationalism and Globalism." *e-flux Journal* 93 (September 2018). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215118/who-s-afraid-of-ideology-ecofeminist-practices-between-internationalism-and-globalism/>