



# KW

**Oraib Toukan**  
*What Then*

**19 February – 1 May 22**

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**Krist Gruijthuijsen & Léon Kruijswijk: The exhibition *What Then* stems from your long-standing research on the afterlife of ‘cruel images’, or mediated images of encounters with violence. Your research explores the line between looking at and looking away from such images. Your practice proposes to move beyond the dichotomy of outcry and indifference and return to *seeing*. What is your motivation to do so?**

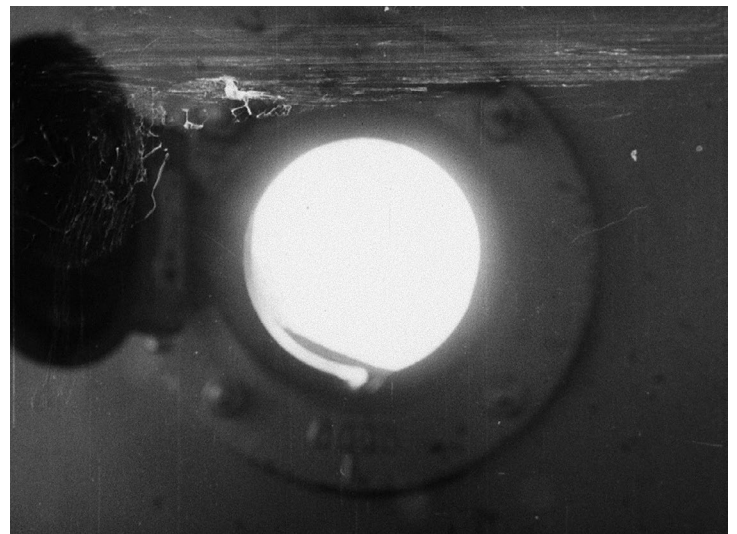
Oraib Toukan: Sometimes one is frequented by an image that feels like spotting a lone particle of glitter on one’s skin. You do not know where it came from and why it is sitting on the fleshy web space between your thumb and index finger, but it is there now and has your attention. For me, this particle was a frame by the late photographer and cinematographer, Hani Jawharieh, captured in the aftermath of the 1967 war with Israel. It was possibly one of the earliest depictions of the dead Palestinian body on 16mm film, recorded by a fellow Palestinian. Not unlike Audre Lorde’s line in the poem *Afterimages* (1982)—‘however the image enters its force remains within my eyes’—, this figure became what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay would call a ‘companion’ for me to explore the afterlife of degrading, and degraded, images.

**KG & LK: In your practice, you use post-production as a medium with which you study the complexity of representations of violence in photography, film, text, and speech. By pitting images of the tender and the mundane against imaginations of the horrific in one work, or re-editing discovered and restored archival images of bodies in struggle in another, you ask: What lies outside the frame of suffering? Abstraction and close-up studies of the image are essential to your work, sometimes almost to the level of the pixel grain, sometimes made opaque. What do you seek and find at this level, being so close to the material?**

OT: Besides being seen, images truly need to be handled. It is during the intimate tactile phase of post-production that we might fathom something about them, simply based on where we are standing, inside the blur, the grain, or the pixel. I insist on filming and editing myself, in impromptu productions, because that is where I discover the most. It is after the blur, after the indefinite, where we tend to meet what feels definite. But it is also from deep inside of images, in thinking of them as containers, that we realize just how much we may have been devoured by the rigidity of the frame—made captives inside a hermetic square, with many more frames still inside it. Abstraction is key to decoloniality—key to understanding beyond a single ‘point of view’. In a way it is not unlike the claim behind a child’s painting: ‘It’s a tree, because I say it’s a tree.’

**KG & LK: In *Via Dolorosa*, you worked with the early cinematography of the late Hani Jawharieh, which he captured between 1967–69. You found it hidden in piles of friendship and solidarity films from former Soviet cultural centers in Amman, Jordan, which had been thrown away. You slowed down, zoomed into, and re-assembled all this material. The video is accompanied by commentary from the literary and film scholar Nadia Yaqub. Exploring the tactile, relational space of the frame of suffering, *Via Dolorosa* (Latin translation of the Arabic ‘Way of Suffering’) is itself a processional route that Jawharieh filmed in the city of his birth, Jerusalem. What did you see in these close studies of archival footage?**

OT: Jawharieh and his colleagues dedicated themselves to showing the crimes committed against their communities. But before the unsteady, precarious, and pursuing shots of his militant years, to me, he was somewhat a formalist with enormous care and attention to detail. Jawharieh belonged to Jerusalem’s pluralist, secular communities, which had various rituals and ceremonies of public grieving. What arrangements, icons and signs drew him in? Elsewhere, from a tilt and a pan, I found that he must have also emancipated himself—from seeing the refugee as a victim of humiliating conditions to seeing the refugee as a radical political being. After all, he too was a refugee—but not a camp-dweller. I also saw many who looked straight back at him, some appearing uneasy with being filmed. In his processing of the effects of the war for the Jordanian Ministry of Information and Culture, I saw that he, too, might have been negotiating with unshowable images. However, like a planet changing orbits, Jawharieh’s gaze was transformed after the war. By leaping into these frames, and slowly treading across them, I was able to reframe the relations and situations I found in them. But it is only from the writings of one of his childhood friends, the artist Vladimir Tamari, who was exiled in Tokyo, that I understood just how funny and playful he



Oraib Toukan, *Via Dolorosa*, 2021. Image study in a single-channel video (color, sound). Courtesy the artist

also was and how revolutionary narratives can obscure that. My own free, naïve, and somewhat voyeuristic associations of color, sounds, and textures, that I found in the pile of Soviet propaganda was perhaps in this vein.

**KG & LK: In the film *Offing*, you re-center relationality as a way into the ‘unrenderable essence’ of sound and subjectivity. Taking the spoken voice of artist Salman Nawati inside Gaza and setting it against footage shot by you outside Gaza, the film departs from the 2021 war on Gaza. Nawati and you convene online on a weekly basis with other Gaza-based artists and writers to read key Arabic literary works and Arabic-translations of texts like Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). How would you describe relationality here?**

OT: Right before the war, we were actually reading Virginia Woolf’s *Death of a Moth* (1942). By minutely observing the will of a moth to live, Woolf speaks about death without necessarily showing it. She relates to struggle, first and foremost, as a desire to live. The problem is that cruel images shut down the faculty of language altogether—you cannot formulate words about the cruelty being seen. That is the point: to incapacitate voices and bodies from speaking and mobilizing. Cruel images eclipse the life that sites of struggle seek, and their strategies for survival, which are often based on love of life. Cruel images instead dehumanize these sites as uninhabitable and unbearable—their communities as accustomed to violence. What narratives escape that frame—and that do so all the more buoyantly? And how exactly do these subjectivities ‘sound out’? Solidarity, like sound frequencies, travels in fragile waves. We seem to increasingly tune in and tune out of calamity. Judith Butler’s ideas around relationality are central here to understanding the ‘I’ with which the film begins—and binding it to the ‘us’ and ‘they’ the film ends with. Just like Nawati’s horizon, the line at which the sky and the earth appear to touch each other, subjectivities meet, collude, and collide toward lives we can project with others.

**KG & LK: The two videos have different distances in time and space to the moments that they depict. In *Via Dolorosa* you work with archival footage against 1980s Soviet and Maoist friendship or solidarity films, while *Offing* is an account set in the immediate aftermath of the 2021 war in Gaza. What did you learn from working with these different positions in time and space to the materials and occurrences? And how would you relate these different videos to each other?**

OT: With a question perhaps: Can treating the historic image of suffering help us understand the contemporary condition of scrolling through others’ encounters with violence? The title of the exhibition borrows from Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s verse *What then, What do we do with our love* (1974), and honors the state of being

distant to disaster, in time and in space. I am curious about ways of speech that ignite the faculty of imagination. I admire those who articulate from real incessant experience—like Salman Nawati’s localized way of truly knowing versus Nadia Yaqub’s transnational way of truly reading. Both films wander through these voices in an essayistic sense. Both films comment on the need to wander. Both films question what political commitment does to the type of works you end up making. Both reclaim indigenous signs and iconographies, and playfully explore the institutionalization of those signs. Both delay, deter, and deflect that which is unshowable in the context of which it is being seen.

### **Public Program**

Collective Poetry Reading  
with Sana Tannoury-Karam, Sara Mourad and Oraib Toukan  
16 March 22, 7 pm  
In English  
Please register via [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de)

Curator’s tour with Léon Kruijswijk  
3 April 22, 2 pm  
In German  
Admission: free during Museum Sunday Berlin

Artist talk with Oraib Toukan  
*What Then, What do we do with our love?*  
6 April 22, 6 pm  
In English  
In cooperation with Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe (EUME), a research program at the Forum Transregionale Studien, Berlin  
Please register via [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de)

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### Opening Hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm  
Thursday 11 am–9 pm  
Closed on Tuesday  
Modified opening hours during Gallery Weekend on  
Friday, 29 April 22, 11 am–9 pm

### Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €  
berlinpass holders 4 €  
Free admission to visitors up to and including 18,  
Friends of KW and Berlin Biennale, and KW Lover\*.  
Free admission to all visitors on Thursday evenings  
6–9 pm, during Museum Sunday Berlin and during  
Gallery Weekend, 29 April 22, 6–9 pm.

### Tours with KW Guides

During regular opening hours, visitors of KW can participate in short introductions to the exhibitions by the KW Guides. Please reach out to our staff at the ticket counter. Participation is free of charge.

### Public guided tours

Saturday, in English: 5 + 26 March, 16 April, at 4 pm  
Sunday, in German: 6 March (Museum Sunday Berlin),  
27 March, 17 April, at 4 pm  
Sunday, in English: 1 May (Museum Sunday Berlin),  
at 4 pm  
Admission: included in exhibition ticket. Participation  
only after prior registration with Museumsdienst Berlin.  
Limited capacity.

Museumsdienst Berlin  
Tel.: +49 (0)30 247 49 888 (Mon–Fri: 9 am–4 pm,  
Sat–Sun: 9 am–1 pm)  
museumsdienst@kulturprojekte.berlin

### Hygiene measures

In accordance with the applicable standards of the State of Berlin, comprehensive hygiene measures have been taken to protect visitors and staff. Updated information will be available on our website. Wearing a FFP2 mask is obligatory during your stay at KW.

Please only visit KW if you feel healthy. We look forward to your stay!

### Colophon

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Installation Team: KW Installation Team  
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Oraib Toukan  
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