



YURA— Palestinian Visual Art Resources

Restoring Narratives through Art Archives



By Rawan Sharaf

In 2019, upon my return to Palestine after a few years of studying abroad, I was asked by the Palestinian Art Court—Al Hoash, a Jerusalem-based cultural institution that specializes in the visual arts, to assist in reviewing its strategic vision and help build a two-year plan for the institution. Thus, I became involved in the establishment of YURA—Palestinian Visual Art Resources, an open-access source in Arabic that archives material on Palestinian art and a platform for the production and dissemination of research-driven critical knowledge. As a former director of Al Hoash (2006–2013) and a contributor to its founding, I had the privilege of knowing what cultural assets this institution owns and what potential its archive holds—specifically in the Al-Wasiti Art Archive. Al Hoash specializes in the collection, presentation, and interpretation of Palestinian visual art and has accumulated over 15 years of work experience and cultural capital; it fosters research and knowledge production in the visual arts, as manifested notably in its remarkable series of publications that includes anthologies, artists' monographs, and catalogs. Yet, like most cultural institutions in Jerusalem, Al Hoash faces challenges to its ability to sustain itself

under extremely difficult funding conditions and scarce resources. These challenges have frequently hindered the organization's ability to maintain its mission of accumulating knowledge, making it accessible to the Palestinian public, and preserving it as part of our collective experiences and knowledge.

In addition, this opportunity to embark on such a project came just after I finished my studies on the politics of the Palestinian art field, and corresponded to an area of both personal interest and what I believed to be a collective necessity. Researchers in the Palestinian cultural field face a dearth of reliable resources or are unable to access the existing ones, whether primary material or research and critical literature, which hampers their research and knowledge-production endeavors. Despite the rich legacy of Palestinian visual art experiences and practices, there has been little systematic collection, preservation, documentation, and archiving of cultural production and practices. Most individual or

institutional efforts to engage in such ventures are scattered and remain inaccessible or obliterated. The risk of losing this material and what it embodies in terms of memory, knowledge, and narratives lingers—while the Israeli occupation remains. Over the past 74 years, Palestinian cultural productions and heritage, whether tangible or intangible and in official archives or private collections, have been exposed to very harsh acts of systematic looting, dispossession, and destruction by the Zionist machine of aggression, ranging from the 1948 mass expulsion of the Palestinian people and the destruction of hundreds of villages during the *Nakba*



Photographs and other materials from the Al-Wasiti Archive.





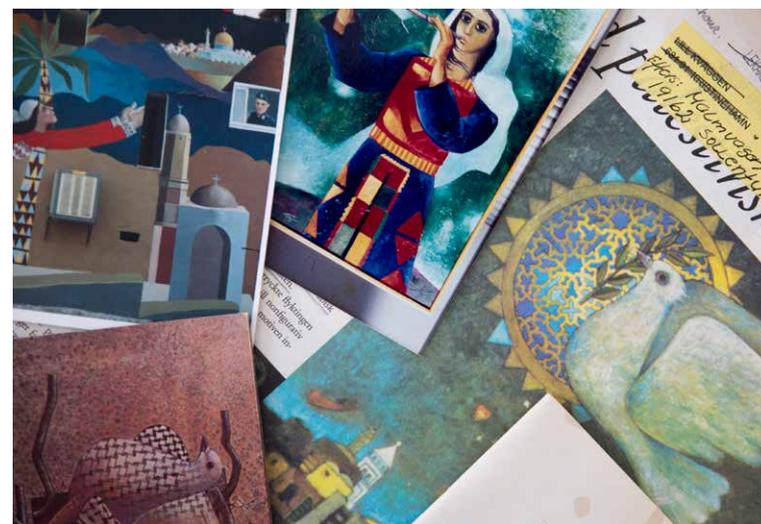
Artist folders from the Al-Wasiti Archive.

to the raiding and plundering of the PLO headquarters and archives in Beirut during the 1982 invasion, the repeated military aggression against Gaza, and the raiding and seizing of libraries, archives, and documents of Palestinian organizations in Palestine in general and Jerusalem in particular. However, the last few years have witnessed among Palestinian institutions an upsurge in projects that collect, archive, and digitize resources. They have resulted in collections such as The Palestinian Museum's Digital Archive,ⁱ an extensive endeavor to archive the social history of Palestine, and Khazaaen,ⁱⁱ a community-based, voluntarily led societal archive that documents the daily life of Palestine and the Arab world, to name only two. Yet none of these projects specializes in the visual arts.

But how does all the above connect to the present project detailed here? Personal passion, organizational capacity, and collective concern were the motivation behind the Palestinian Visual Art Resources program – a

multifaceted, long-term program that seeks to generate, provide, and facilitate knowledge and resources on Palestinian art to a range of audiences, including artists, curators, and researchers. It is not an archive project per se but a project of collecting and making accessible visual art resources, including archival material, to Arab and Palestinian audiences, and fostering the generation of historical and critical knowledge around these materials through various methods. And when we say visual art archival material and resources, we do not necessarily refer only to visual material but rather to all forms of productions through which art and cultural practices become part of the social public arena, including textual and visual material, publications, posters, catalogues, photos, etc.

Over a period of three years, Al-Hoash invested collective efforts through its team, friends, volunteers, and partners to bring to light this project in its foundational phase. It was a long, exciting, challenging, and frequently



Postcards and other materials from the Al-Wasiti Archive.

tedious labor of love and dedication by a small team, working with limited resources and under the restrictions and closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ The foundational phase included the digitization of archival material through a partnership with Khazaaen, observing, classifying, and preparing the metadata for this material, recruiting researchers to produce research papers from the archive, and developing the digital platform and launching it.

Al-Wasiti Art Archive, gifted to Al Hoash in 2006, constituted the main archival material in this first phase. It was initiated in 1997, when artist and researcher Tina Sherwell joined the team of the Al-Wasiti Art Centre in Jerusalem (1996–2002) to set up an organized Palestinian art archive, and was halted in the year 2001, when the art center lost its venue, had to close its doors, and was eventually dissolved. This stands as yet another ambitious Palestinian project of documentation and institutionalization that sadly was terminated. The archive,

along with the center's institutional documents, remained in the custody of Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour until 2006, when it was granted to Al Hoash upon its establishment. Since then, Al Hoash has maintained the archive, storing it in metal cabinets in a corner of its premises. I remember the times when the Al Hoash team and its board members explored ways to preserve this archive, make it accessible, and make good use of it. As a Palestinian, I believe that we as a collective share an existential concern when it comes to our cultural productions and heritage. It's more of a syndrome, where we feel obliged as individuals and as groups to collate and preserve our productions as a way of negating the Zionist-constructed narratives. However, the tedious cycle of working in Palestinian civil society, continuously struggling to maneuver ways through the politics of international funding, its instability, conditionality, and contribution to de-development in many cases, kept such an important project for years on the margin.



Screenshot from Yura: Palestinian Visual Art Resources showing an Invitation card for the 2nd edition exhibition for artists Vladimir Tamarin in 1986. To access the material <https://alhoashgallery.org/archives/1-05-0095/>.



Clipping from Al-Fajr newspaper, 1978, article by Karim Khalaf. The headline reads, "Ra'yan: Fi-l-harakah al-tashkiliya al-falastiniya" (two opinions about the Palestinian art movement). Courtesy of Al-Wasiti Archive and the Palestinian Art Court—al-Hoash.

generation of new knowledge that is digitally available to Palestinians now and in the future, here and abroad. Al Hoash perceives this as part of its role to proactively contribute to the preserving and constructing of the fragile Palestinian social, cultural, and political narratives by using visual arts.

book Contemporary Palestinian Art: Origins, Nationalism, Identity, authored by Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon and published by the Institute for Palestine Studies in 2020. She curated and supervised the establishment of the electronic platform YURA: Palestinian Visual Art Resources, and has curated exhibitions locally and internationally. She has published several articles and essays in books and on various digital platforms.

Article photos courtesy of the Palestinian Art Court – al-Hoash. Photos by Ahed Izhiman.

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ⁱ For more information, please visit www.palarchive.org.
ⁱⁱ For more information, please visit www.khazaaen.org.
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