

critical dance studies



Sandra Noeth

# Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects

Artistic Articulations  
of Borders and Collectivity  
from Lebanon and Palestine

[transcript]

**From:**

*Sandra Noeth*

**Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects**

Artistic Articulations of Borders and Collectivity  
from Lebanon and Palestine

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What does it take to cross a border, and what does it take to belong? Sandra Noeth examines the entangled experiences of borders and of collectivity through the perspective of bodies. By dramaturgical analyses of contemporary artistic work from Lebanon and Palestine, Noeth shows how borders and collectivity are constructed and negotiated through performative, corporeal, movement-based, and sensory strategies and processes. This interdisciplinary study is made urgent by social and political transformations across the Middle East and beyond from 2010 onwards. It puts to the fore the residual, body-bound structural effects of borders and of collectivity and proceeds to develop notions of agency and responsibility that are immanently bound to bodies in relation.

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Who are you, and where are you from? —  
I am not from anywhere,  
but from your fantasy and imagination.  
*Shahram Khosravi, 2017.*

The research process for *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* has put me in contact with many and myriad bodies that have, at times directly and at times obliquely, become interlocutors of this book: disciplined and trained bodies; marginalized and wounded ones; bodies in limbo and others in joyful expectation; real, fictional, and archived bodies. They have pushed me to embark on this study on the role, status, and agency of bodies in light of two critical and intertwined forms of experiences: the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity. Finding expression in bodily postures and gestures, in coordinated and spontaneous movement and somatic tension, and in gazes and facial expression, these bodies have compelled me to explore how borders are not just given but are made, sustained, and challenged by corporeal, choreographic, movement-based, and sensory strategies—strategies that are tangible and observable and describable through artistic practice and the aesthetic experience of artwork.

Hence, it is three artistic works that are at core of the present volume, and I am indebted to Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Farah Saleh, and Tania El Khoury, Abir Saksouk, and Petra Serhal of Dictaphone Group for the commitment, time, and trust that they have so generously given to my inquiry. These artistic works were created between 2010 and 2015, a specific moment in time associated with the Arab Spring uprisings and thus marked by sociopolitical realities to which the artists respond more or less explicitly. However, the forceful yet sensitive, playful yet resistant strategies and concepts that they illustrate open up a more general discussion of borders and collectivity that remains ongoing.

This book and its research hypotheses have emerged from focused interactions and long-term collaborations. Krassimira Kruschkova, Walter Heun, Lejla Mehanović and Arne Forke, as well as Arno Böhler and Susanne Valerie Granzer were colleagues of mine at Tanzquartier Wien, where I prepared this work during my time as Head of Dramaturgy and Research. Their practice of radically investing themselves in the intersections of arts, philosophy and the sociopolitical realm has been an inspiration for me in many ways. I am also grateful towards the entire team at Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, and in particular its director Christine Thomé. In addition to hosting a preparatory research lab on the body's capacity for action and giving me the opportunity to address the problem of the integrity of the body as a Resident Professor in the HWP—Home Workspace Program, they availed their exceptional archives on contemporary Lebanese and Arab art, which proved most valuable in situating this study. I equally acknowledge the support of Sareyyet Ramallah Cultural Centre and its director Khaled Elayyan, as well as the Goethe Institute in the Palestinian Territories and its director Laura Hartz. Their assistance has been crucial in undertaking research on the Palestinian contemporary dance scene, notably in collaboration with choreographer Samar Haddad King.

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ethics, aesthetics, and politics of movement; Bettina Masuch and tanzhaus nrw further encouraged this dialogue and brought it to print with the 2018 publication *Bodies of Evidence*.

The present volume is a lightly annotated version of my doctoral dissertation for the University of Hamburg. As a member of the research group Loose Connections: Collectivity at the Intersection of Digital and Urban Space, I benefited from the group's interdisciplinary take on collectivity, and from a research grant that enabled me to embark on this project in a concentrated manner. Moreover, my colleagues in the research colloquium at the Institute for Human Movement Science and the Section for Culture, Media, and Society have critically encouraged this work over many years and offered valuable suggestions and input. The book has been published with the financial support of Loose Connections and has been implemented thanks to the efficient collaboration with transcript publishers. Adam Kucharski has been a meticulous and engaged copyeditor of the English manuscript of the publication.

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Klein from the Institute for Human Movement Science at the University of Hamburg and PD Dr. Ulrich Bielefeld at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and the Technical University of Darmstadt closely accompanied me in the process leading up to *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* as my doctoral advisors. Their critical input and practical advice encouraged me to develop my claims at the intersection of the fields of sociology, dance and performance studies, and political theory; their insistence on research practices that go beyond the mere defense of personal politics or positions has immeasurably improved this scholarship. Gabriele Klein has placed extraordinary and steadfast trust in my work, throughout its circuitous journey to publication.

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*Berlin, February 2019*

## Chapter 1

### What does it take to cross a border?

### And what does it take to belong?

### Introduction

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Two questions—“What does it take to cross a border? And what does it take to belong?”—set the scene for this book, *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects: Artistic Articulations of Borders and Collectivity from Lebanon and Palestine*. They drove and accompanied the research project, framing my own border experiences and spurring tentative and informal exchanges with the experiences of other border crossers. Rather than demanding quick or general answers, the questions interrogate the meaning and value that we attribute, both individually and collectively, to situating and positioning ourselves—our movements, actions, and thoughts. Combining moments of the past, notions of the present, and promises of the future, they open a door to a complex and ever-specific texture of elements that shape two critical and intertwined forms of experience: the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity.

The questions evoke sensorial and affective moments—senses of complicity and bonding, as well as suspicion and distrust, that mark our interaction with other people at the border. They remind us of the familiarity and mutual recognition of gestures among fellow border crossers, as well as the irritation that comes from unreadable movements and facial expressions. These are moments in which we try to catch—or avoid—the attention of our fellow border crossers, speculating on the probability of a successful passage. They invoke artifacts and objects like passports and permits that equip us with privileges, or conversely deny us the right to access and move across space. They unearth mundane routines, habits, memories, and desires that align us with or exclude us from a given collective. They reveal shared values, norms, discourses, and laws that frame our membership to a given group or community. They summon

experiences in which abstract senses of belonging and of being in or out of place become concrete.

These loosely recollected snippets from various encounters stir the preliminary understanding that bodies are at the core of the experience of the border as well as the experience of collectivity: feelings of tension and joyful anticipation that turn visceral; states of lingering, waiting, and dwelling at the borders that find corporeal expression; direct and digitized practices of being body-searched or placing our fingers on the biometric reader; movements of firmly yet cautiously navigating through space, disciplining the breath, lowering the voice while being alert and ready to improvise at any time.

## 1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

As an internationally active curator and dramaturge in the field of contemporary choreography, dance, and performing arts, I have been traveling in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> for more than a decade now and have faced many of the experiences evoked here with the undeniable privilege of a Western passport. This practice-based background—and the focus on body-based forms of artistic expression that it introduces into the study—encouraged my initial decision to place bodies at the center of *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects*. By treating bodies as points of entry into my theoretical inquiry, I do not presume them to be the authoritarian markers of authenticity or immediacy. Rather, I assume that bodies, as an investigatory perspective and conceptual framework, not only reveal how borders are narrated and represented but help us to perceive processes in which our individual and collective capacity for moving safely and imagining ourselves freely in material and symbolic space are up for negotiation.

In connection to this, I advance the hypothesis that the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity are interlocking and entangled and can only be understood in reference to each other. In other words, I contend that individual bodies, in the experience of the border, are assessed according to their

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1 In the framework of this study, I use the term “Middle East” to refer to Lebanon, Palestine, and their neighboring countries. I do so with awareness that the term has been criticized for reproducing a Eurocentric historical perspective and for being a particularly imprecise geopolitical referent. Yet, in contrast to formulations like “the Arab world,” it provides a geographical, rather than ethnic, description, highlighting that the relevant binding elements strongly rely on but cannot be limited to Arab language and culture.

existing or alleged affiliation with certain collectives. My assumption that bodies and body-based experiences are key to theoretically processing these dynamics is grounded in the understanding that meaning emerges from the interaction between bodies and thus can exceed intentionality, subjectivity, or rational control. Moreover, preliminary indications from my own and other people's border experiences suggest to me that the processes of collective alignment and contestation at stake here cannot be fully comprehended on the basis of homogeneous, preexisting, or exclusive categories. Rather, explanations based solely on transparent administrative logics, binding legal categories, or comprehensive social and identarian frameworks that are supposed to regulate territoriality and sovereignty fall short of the mark, and even more so when situated within the sociopolitical realities of the Middle East. Specifically, in light of recent migratory movements, the repercussions of the Arab uprisings from 2010 onwards, and the resulting forced or chosen coexistences of multiple communities, borders have become increasingly restrictive in the region. At the same time, borders seem to be more porous and portable than ever, reallocated and redistributed among different state and nonstate agents, varying local realities, and the conflicting interests of international politics. Thus, while the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity act as nonnegotiable elements of separation and division in the lives of many, I argue that these experiences are integral to how individual and collective belonging—getting and being together—are performatively brought about, although largely on unequal terms.

Against this backdrop, the study at hand focuses on borders in Lebanon and Palestine/Israel, with particular emphasis on the occupied West Bank. Here, the critical potential of the experience-based approach that I advance in this study gains relevance in a context that is marked by efficacious, highly mediatized, and symbolically loaded representations of the border: images of checkpoints, road blocks, and walls, as well as narratives revolving around war and violent conflict, occupation, and different forms of nationalism.

My goal is not a general discussion of the geopolitical history and current realities of the region.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I am interested in how these contested borders translate into current cultural realms, and, more specifically, into artistic practices that center bodies and movement. How do artists who researched and published their work between 2010 and 2015 approach the dual experiences of borders and collectivity in this context? What happens when they transpose their

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2 For indicative positions on the geographical and geopolitical history of borders in Lebanon and Palestine/Israel, see Hirst 2010; Shoshan 2010; Kaufman 2014b; Hanf 2015; Del Sarto 2017.

own and others' experiences and realities into the aesthetic realm? What is the role and status of the corporeal and the sensorial in that process? And how, finally, do the aesthetic experiences under discussion in this volume make otherwise opaque political realities observable and describable? From the perspective of artistic practice, *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* seeks to understand how the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity are co-constitutive and how bodies inform this process.

## Methodology

With *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects*, I do not aim at a general handling of the history of Lebanon and Palestine/Israel and its border and identity politics. Rather, I take as a starting point the field of contemporary body-based arts and, more specifically, a sample of three artistic case studies that rework to different extents specific experiences of borders and collectivity as a starting point: the live sound installation *Contingency* (2010) by Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, the interactive performance *Free Advice* (2015) by choreographer and dancer Farah Saleh, and the lecture-performance *Nothing to Declare* (2013) by the female live arts collective Dictaphone Group.<sup>3</sup> Each artistic work engages with the cultural and geopolitical contexts of Lebanon or Palestine/Israel. A mixed-media corpus of empirical materials, the works ground my qualitative and comparative analyses and expand notions of what a border is, including architectural and built infrastructure as well as symbolic, embodied, felt, and imagined borders.

This sample and the perspective that it introduces into my analyses raise questions about the methodological potential and limitations of working with aesthetic evidence to investigate social and political phenomena, the selection methodology that was employed, and the comparability of the empirical data—all of which I will detail in Chapter 2. However, all of the artworks place bodies and movement at their core, even though they are from different disciplinary backgrounds and traditions. On this basis and benefiting from a generous, long-term exchange with the artists, my analytical focus is not directed towards biographical research or the reconstruction of the artists' intentions. Nor do I emphasize how audiences perceive the artwork of Abbas and Abou-Rahme, Saleh, and Dictaphone Group. Rather, I explore whether the artists' dramaturgical strategies and concepts can contribute to theoretical rethinking of corpo-

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3 For creation and production details and full credits of the artistic works, see the respective case studies; Chapters 3-5.

reality and embodiment as often-neglected analytical dimensions in the debate on borders and collectivity.

On an operational level, I will combine different content-analytical tools from social sciences such as fieldwork, qualitative interviews, and participatory observation with a practice-based approach to dramaturgy, understood as an analytical function within a creative process. This procedure aims to shift the focus from the representation and narration of the border and of collectivity to their experience and imagination.

## Literature Review and Relevance of the Study

During the research process, the evaluation of the data and the development of theory have been interwoven and mutually formative, particularly with regards to establishing the theoretical focus of the study. In addition to the theory already embedded in the artwork and the artists' accounts, *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* engages different disciplinary and theoretical fields that often live separate lives: dance and performance studies, border studies, and body and movement-theory developed in philosophy and the social sciences. This interdisciplinary approach reflects the discursive histories of the study's key concepts—bodies, borders, and collectivity. It equally suggests that art, politics, and society are closely linked in the experience of the border, the experience of collectivity, and their artistic articulations. In the following section, I will specify existing literature that informs my research and reflect on how this study contributes to and challenges the scholarly debate.

## Dance and Performance Studies

*Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* reflects, through the concepts of the border and of collectivity, on the importance of bodies in maintaining and challenging, rehearsing and staging, and legitimizing and aestheticizing social and political conditions and processes. Here, I draw on a substantial number of theoretical perspectives that have emerged from the field of dance and performance studies in recent years: research on bodies in protest, in assemblies, and war,<sup>4</sup> for instance, as well as studies dedicated to the relationships among art, activism, and socially engaged work.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, underscoring the intertwining of

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4 For examples of this scholarship, see Foster 2003; Butler 2011, 2016; Bharucha 2014; Brandstetter and Hartung 2017.

5 Examples of these studies include Mouffe 2006; Rancière 2013; Crimmin and Stanton 2014; Malzacher and steirischer herbst 2014.

aesthetics, politics, and ethics that I advance in this book, different scholars have explored the concepts of responsibility, care, and vulnerability in their inquiries into social and political action.<sup>6</sup> Alongside these approaches, I rely on scholarship that has elaborated concepts such as community and collectivity in connection with dance and body-based forms of artistic expression, from both historical and contemporary perspectives: explorations for instance, of the embodiment of politics and ideology, and the choreographic formation and orchestration of bodies in social or political mass movements.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, the last decade has seen a rise in scholarly attention to contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East. To some degree, this reflects the fact that artistic strategies have figured prominently in the implementation of processes of social and political transformation in several Arab countries since 2010. Yet, it is important to note that most of the existing corpus of available theoretical literature on contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East predominantly focuses on the fields of visual arts and theater. In addition to a number of anthologies that provide an overview of specific artistic practices, disciplines, or traditions,<sup>8</sup> several publications pursue historical and geopolitical perspectives on specific countries or regions.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, a number of critical online platforms and blogs showcase more recent artistic developments and offer valuable and timely information on the environments in which artistic works are produced.<sup>10</sup> Next to these sources, self-authored texts by artists, catalogue entries, chronological overviews, and newspaper and magazine reviews complete the corpus of literature.

Yet, in the Middle Eastern context, art forms that involve the body and movement lack more systemic academic processing and continue to be under-

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6 This includes Burt 2013; Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Ertem 2013, 2017.

7 For indicative studies, see Baxmann 2000; Sasse and Wenner 2002; Rousier and Centre National de la Danse 2003; Van Eikels 2013; Giersdorf 2013; Cvejić and Vujanović 2015.

8 Examples include Winegar 2006; Amirsadeghi 2009; Keshmirshakan 2015. Also see the catalogues of the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts Ashkal Alwan's biennial *Home Works* and the publications of the Sharjah Biennial.

9 See Downey 2014, 2015, 2016; Halasa, Omareen, and Mahfoud 2014. For a specific focus on dance and movement-centered art forms (and traditional and folklore dance in particular), see Al Zayer 2004; Buckland 2006; Shabout 2007; Boullata 2009; Rowe 2010; Makhoul and Hon 2013.

10 For online publication platforms on culture and contemporary arts in the Middle East, see *Ibraaz*; *Bidoun*; *Makhzin*; *ArteEast*.

studied. Thus, much of this specific knowledge is circulated in direct exchange or other informal ways. Given an implicit history of Western hegemony in dance and performance studies, this leads to an absence of reliable scholarly references about the history of contemporary art and cultural production from the Middle East. This circumstance is intensified by practical difficulties in accessing and circulating the available sources, which, furthermore, are often only available in English.

*Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* seeks to contribute to this deficit in scholarly research by placing specific emphasis on the problem of borders and of collectivity. By focusing on a younger generation of Lebanese and Palestinian artists and corresponding original materials collected in the research process, this project nourishes a local and experiential process of theory formation and contributes to a systematic academic processing of contemporary, body-based artistic practices from the Middle East.

## **Border Studies**

Since the 1990s, the interdisciplinary field of border studies has given increased analytical recognition to bodies and movement. This development is a result of a broader shift from discussions of the geopolitics and materiality of the border to its transformative qualities in society, politics, and the everyday.<sup>11</sup> To summarize, in light of ongoing processes of globalization and digitization, borders have increasingly been approached as dynamic constellations—as processes of re- and debordering in which orders, norms, and values are constantly redistributed. The corresponding development of theoretical vocabulary, such as “border-lands” or “border-scape,” illustrates this conceptual expansion (see van Houtum, 2012). These more process-driven positions indicate a relocation of border research from classical elements such as nationhood or citizenship to more dynamic categories—a shift that gains specific importance in the context of Lebanon and Palestine/Israel, as I will develop in detail in Chapter 6.2.

Against this backdrop, I suggest regrouping existing research on bodies in border studies around three main interconnected investigatory foci. Next to general debates on the body’s capacity to restrict, monitor, or allow mobility, scholars have first highlighted the materiality and the corporeality of bodies. Debates on hunger strikes and suicide bombing exemplify these investigations into the body’s ability to participate in conflict as a weapon or fighter.<sup>12</sup> Second,

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11 For indicative positions, see Khosravi 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Kotef 2015; Nail 2016.

12 See Cornish and Saunders 2014.



the symbolic and metaphorical forces that bodies wield in bordering processes have been central to the debate and reflected in studies on the relationship between the violation of bodies at the border and their corresponding impact on a broader communitarian and collective scale.<sup>13</sup> Studies on human shielding, martyrdom, and self-immolation can serve as examples in the Middle Eastern context as well. Third, I include theoretical voices that place their analyses of bodies and borders in line with human rights discourses and the status of bodies at the border in international law: for instance, critical discussions related to the freedom of physical movement or the integrity of the body at the borders.<sup>14</sup>

*Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* responds to these developments in the academic field by specifically asserting relevance of theoretical and practical knowledge from arts to the theoretical inquiry into border issues. In addition to putting bodies center stage in the examination of borders, I correlate the artistic works at hand to the increased attention that border scholarship has recently given to nonstate actors' impacts on borderwork: e.g., the influence of activists and artists on the experience, maintenance, and representation of borders. However, my starting point is not the eventual external effects that artistic practice and aesthetic experience might have on border dynamics such as how they might provide relief or support in community building, posttraumatic work, education, and so on. Rather, I am interested in how body- and movement-based artistic practices can inform border analyses; i.e., how the corporeal, the sensorial, and the aesthetic can be activated as analytical categories in their own right.<sup>15</sup> This methodological validation of arts-related strategies and concepts has not yet been exhaustively explored in border studies.

### **Social Sciences and Philosophy**

The third pillar of literature that *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* references builds on recent debates in the social sciences and philosophy on collectivity. In summary, I refer to scholarly positions that, from a process-driven perspective, critically reexamine what binds and holds a collective together. One element that traverses different approaches in my inquiry is the understanding that new forms of collectivity such as temporary practices of hospitality and protest cannot be sufficiently explained by the influence of homogeneous and preexisting elements

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13 For examples of this debate, see McSorley 2013; Bargu 2014.

14 For indicative positions, see Agamben 1998; Mbembe 2001, 2017a; Perugini and Gordon 2015; Biedermann 2018.

15 For related scholarship, see Tlalim 2017a; Abu Hamdan 2018 (website); Hamed 2018; Ismail 2018.

or categories alone (e.g., shared interests, objectives, traditions, or other common registers that range from the biological to the metaphysical). Here, concepts like networks or assemblages have been reexamined to analyze how space and agency are redistributed, particularly with regards to the interrelations of animate and inanimate bodies.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, scholars have emphasized the role of affects and emotions in the process of becoming collective<sup>17</sup> and pointed out that the formation and experience of collectivity are located at the intersections of different temporal, spatial, and digital orders.

In line with this, I aim at applying knowledge from dance and performance studies as well as from artistic practice to the discussion on collectivity. I am specifically interested in analyzing how movement can be observed through the meaningful interaction of bodies and, in the process, theorized. Thus, existing research that gives primary recognition of imagination as significant element in the experience of collectivity offers important source codes for my approach.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, accepting that bodies always exist in relation to other bodies, I put forward the argument that the political and the ethical—that is, the negotiation and assessment of binding elements, norms and values—are key factors for understanding the experience of collectivity. Thus, my research question investigates how the mere collocation of bodies at the border might transform a largely homogeneous definition of collectives and communities into polyvalent and dynamic analyses of being together. This approach, more specifically, challenges predominant scholarship on collectivity in the Lebanese and Palestinian/Israeli context that emphasizes strong and often binary and exclusive narratives and representations based on categories such as origin, ethnicity, religion, or nationhood.

## Structure of the Study

*Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* is prefaced by this introduction that outlines the research questions and hypotheses and situates the study within existing scholarly debates. Moreover, it offers contextual remarks on body-based and movement-centered artistic practices from Lebanon, Palestine, and the broader Middle East in an effort to better situate the three selected artistic case studies.

Chapter 2 subsequently presents the corpus of empirical materials and the methodological instruments that have been implemented to collect and evaluate

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16 Examples include Klein 2004; Stäheli 2012; Latour 2013; Böhler and Granzer 2018.

17 For examples of these scholars, see Massumi 2002; Manning 2006; Ahmed 2014.

18 For indicative positions, see Anderson 1993; Bielefeld 2003; 2017.

the data. Alongside a detailed discussion of the research design and both the benefits and shortcomings of grounding qualitative research in artistic case studies, I address ethical and epistemic concerns that stem from doing research in the cultural and geopolitical context of Lebanon and Palestine/Israel: questions of responsibility and power-sensitivity in research, the specific status of theory and expertise conveyed in the empirical corpus of data, the impact of framing qualitative research with external categories such as conflict or care, as well as the status of the sensorial and the corporeal in qualitative empirical inquiries.

This establishes the foundation for Chapters 3-5, which are dedicated to the three artistic case studies: *Contingency* by Abbas and Abou-Rahme (2010), *Free Advice* by Saleh (2015), and *Nothing to Declare* by Dictaphone Group (2013). I analyze the pieces in three separate chapters that are organized with a parallel structure. They are grounded in a description of video documentation of each respective case study that does not attempt to reconstruct the artistic works in detail, but rather serves as a tool to recall their dramaturgical design and allow the reader to orient themselves to the ensuing evaluation and discussion. On this basis, the qualitative analyses are organized into three steps, bringing different empirical documents into conversation with one another: the first two sections focus on the key concepts of the study, i.e., borders and collectivity, and a third section completes each chapter by considering how the notion of agency applies to each case.

In Chapter 6, I put my findings from the case study analyses into dialogue and compare their commonalities and disparities. Analogous to the distinct parts of the case studies, this chapter focuses on the three key terms of the research project: bodies, borders, and collectivity. This structure coordinates the empirical findings and opens them up to selected theoretical positions from the disciplinary fields of dance and performance studies, border studies, the social sciences, and philosophy. It works toward a theorization of the main research question in *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects*: how can the experience of the border and the experience of collectivity be understood from the perspective of bodies?

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the study. Here, I will combine my observations of the residual effects of borders and the resilient qualities of bodies and continue to argue for an experience-based and embodied notion of agency and responsibility. Furthermore, this last part of the study will sketch out possible directions for further research.

## 1.2 BODY-BASED ARTISTIC PRACTICES FROM LEBANON AND PALESTINE. CONTEXTUAL REMARKS

The sample of case studies by artists Abbas and Abou-Rahme, choreographer Saleh, and live arts collective Dictaphone Group situate this study in the context of Lebanon and Palestine/Israel. At this point, I would like to make clear that the scale and composition of this sample follow practical considerations related to the scope of the study; they do not provide an exhaustive overview of border-related artistic practices. Also, while all artwork engages to some extent with realities on the ground, this analytical framing does not aim to geopoliticize the artists and their artistic articulations as representatives of the respective territories that they address, or reduce them to their origins and nationalities. In addition to the collectivizing and essentialist perspective that such an approach would entail, it would fail to acknowledge actual working realities that unfold from much more complex conditions and influences. Moreover, both the Lebanese and Palestinian contemporary art scenes cannot be limited to activities that take place locally. As a result of a long history of migration and displacement that structurally characterizes the region, a large community of artists and intellectuals have been forced or have chosen to live and work outside Lebanon and Palestine, while often upholding strong ties and vivid exchanges with the art scenes they left behind.<sup>19</sup>

Against this backdrop, my subsequent introductory remarks will shed light on significant elements and frameworks that shape the creation, production, and circulation of artistic work from the Middle Eastern context. This includes social, political, and aesthetic elements as well as features related to institutionalism, arts funding, and education. However, rather than attempting a thorough overview, these remarks function as snapshots meant to provide a background for the cultural and geopolitical contexts that I refer to in *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects*. More specific and detailed information on the artistic case studies will be provided in Chapters 3-5.

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19 Correspondingly, artistic traditions and influences have been traveling among different countries and communities in the Middle East; a basic distinction might be made, however, between contexts that draw on long-standing modernist traditions (such as the cultural and artistic scenes in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt) and more market-oriented and globalized developments that have emerged more recently in the Persian Gulf states.

As mentioned earlier, this study emphasizes artistic practices that rely on body- and movement-based approaches, even though they are from different disciplinary backgrounds. This reflects the specificity of my empirical sample. At the same time, while different artistic disciplines and traditions might stand apart in academic reflection, in practice they often appear to be fluid, interlinked, and in communication with one another. The fact that body- and movement-based practices are not reserved to the fields of dance and choreography but have been developed in other domains such as theater, music, sports, and circus, or in popular festivities or societal rituals, illustrates this dynamic.

### **Working with Bodies: Conditions of Creation and Production**<sup>20</sup>

The period from 2010 to 2015 during which the artistic case studies were researched, created, and produced coincides with a wave of interest in contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East by the international arts circuit. As a consequence, prominent Western institutions intensified their engagement, generating a wide range of corresponding programs, festivals, commissions, and residencies. This development is related to the Arab uprisings as well as recent migrations in the region that have entered public debate and gone viral on an international level. Yet, it also mirrors the parallel growth, proliferation, and professionalization that have over the last decade defined different art scenes and, in particular, the field of contemporary dance and choreography in the Middle East. A number of temporary as well as permanent projects dedicated to body- and movement-based artistic practices and related discourses have emerged in reaction to a lack of spaces and opportunities for presenting and creating work.<sup>21</sup>

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20 The following observations on the Palestinian context resonate with field research that I conducted with choreographer Samar Haddad King from March 31 to April 2, 2016, in Nazareth, Haifa, Ramallah, and Jerusalem, and funded by the Goethe Institute in the Palestinian Territories. The Palestinian dance community is spread out over the West Bank, the territories corresponding to the 1948 borders, Gaza, Jerusalem, the refugee camps, and the Palestinian diaspora, with all of these contexts creating different conditions for mobility and exchange.

21 In the Palestinian context, the cultural center Sareyyet Ramallah and El Funoun Dance Group have established permanent structures dedicated to movement-based artistic practices like dance and choreography. Next to artistic and educational activities on the ground, both initiatives contribute to the international visibility of these art forms via touring activities; furthermore, Sareyyet Ramallah has been running an international contemporary dance festival since 2006. In addition to the manifold activities of

In parallel to this, different networks and alliances have been established across the region, juggling shared artistic projects and the practical need to connect in light of precarious and fragmented conditions for producing and creating work. With an almost total lack of public funding or social security for artists, many of these initiatives rely on the support of NGOs or even individual artists, curators, and private patrons.<sup>22</sup> Without downplaying the importance of international Middle East-related development and innovation grants to artistic projects, their long-term impact on the ground, however, is often limited, especially with regards to creating audiences and engaging in educational contexts. Moreover, external funding and its normative evaluation criteria risk introducing and eventually imposing external values and norms on the artistic processes themselves; for instance, expectations that art should contribute to freedom or human rights discourses, or fulfil a community-building social function. Furthermore, in connection to the research interests of this study, different bordering processes that fundamentally affect artistic production and creation processes need to be taken into account. In addition to various limitations on travel and mobility, threats to freedom of expression are structural features that correspond to changing levels of explicit or implicit censorship (and, often, self-censorship). I will detail these dynamics more thoroughly in the following chapters, but for now I reference an informal exchange with curator Christine Thomé. Echoing many other practitioners that I encountered during my research, she describes the main

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individual artists and cultural operators, I will limit myself to acknowledging the Palestinian Circus School, located in Birzeit, that has continuously contributed to the training and artistic development of physical practice. In the Lebanese context, the production, creation, and critical reflection of body-based work is, in most cases, developed in the framework of transdisciplinary platforms, festivals, and institutions such as Ashkal Alwan, or artists-run initiatives like the Zico House, 98-weeks, or the Mansion. With regards to dance and choreography specifically, I will mention the Arab dance platform Bipod and the residency and exchange program moultqa leymoun. This is not an exhaustive list.

- 22 Foreign cultural institutions such as the Goethe Institute, the British Council, or the Institut Français continue to play an important role in the field of contemporary art, providing spaces and funding for presenting work, as well as enabling exchange programs and inviting international researchers, artists, and educators into local contexts. It is significant to note that, to very different degrees, the interdependency between foreign institutes and the local art scenes might represent a continuation of the colonial history of the Middle East and the corresponding unequally distributed power politics.

challenge that contemporary and critical arts from the Middle East currently face today as a “war on mobility” (2015).

With these restrictions in mind, it would, however, be inappropriate to reduce the discussion of contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East to the infrastructural, bureaucratic, symbolic, aesthetic, economic, and material challenges that confront artists in their daily work. Obviously, as I will argue with the example of the selected case studies, body- and movement-based forms of artistic practice can also provide a forceful means of standing together in times where language- and image-based forms of expression are censored by authorities. Furthermore, in addition to romanticizing existing sociopolitical realities, such a perspective would ignore that the artists and cultural operators’ habitual improvisation in maneuvering roles and circumstances also translates into the much-needed skill of reacting to changing social and political developments. In a similar vein and referencing the Palestinian context, architect and researcher Yazid Anani describes, how the departure of contemporary art forms from classical institutional spaces to more independent settings helped “constitute alternative social imaginings and facilitate a discourse on the representations of dystopias” (quoted in Toukan 2014, 210). Correspondingly, many artistic projects that have emerged in recent years demonstrate a high level of political awareness, responsiveness, and distinct engagement in their local contexts with different levels of explicitness, ranging from the implementation of artistic projects in public and urban space to combinations of art, archival work, and research.<sup>23</sup> However, on the levels of infrastructure and human resources, these projects often operate on precarious terms that challenge their own stability and sustainability (see Haddad King and Noeth 2018). In concrete terms, working as an artist in the long term is often only sustainable when pursuing additional professional activities, such as day jobs or parallel studies—a condition that affects the planning of working processes as well as the development of skills and training on a practical level.

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23 Examples of artistic practices that distinctly relate to current developments in public space include the independent and multidisciplinary festival D-Caf (Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival) in Cairo, produced in consecutive annual editions since 2011, and the contemporary dance festival On Marche that inhabits urban space in Marrakech and other sites in Morocco. As an indicative position for the intersection of artistic and archival practices, see the HaRaKa—Dance Development and Research project (Cairo), directed by Adham Hafez.

## Dance and Artistic Movement Education

These predicaments create the problem of how to establish a safe space for exchange and collaboration, both logistically and artistically, and also concern the sector of education. In summary, professional artistic movement and dance education in the Middle East is still very much under development in institutional terms. For example, even today there are no stable, state-run academies or programs that provide formal higher education in contemporary, body-centered artistic practices in Lebanon or Palestine. Consequently, many practitioners draw on a background in traditional dance forms, theater, or music. In addition, formal BA or MA programs in non-Arab countries represent opportunities for learning and training, while diverse and mostly self-organized approaches to autodidacticism, such as workshop or pop-up training formats, are also common. Thus, artistic careers often show very heterogeneous profiles that reflect an entanglement of different roles and responsibilities. In addition to creating and producing artistic work, the artists' activities might include instructing peers, mediating and communicating the outputs of their processes, as well as managing finances, bureaucratic regulations, and more implicit, symbolic, and political negotiations related to the status of art and of bodies in society.

It is against this backdrop that the informal exchange and circulation of knowledge on body-based artistic practices gains specific importance in the Middle Eastern context, both on practical as well as discursive and theoretical levels. Yet, a number of strong and more permanent educational initiatives, particularly in the field of contemporary dance and choreography, have emerged in the last ten years in the region.<sup>24</sup> Beyond the specificities of their projects and cultural and sociopolitical contexts, they share several common concerns. For instance, they strive to integrate materials from local cultures, traditions, and discourses in the educational realm, and thereby artistically acknowledge the richness and poetics of gestural and body languages in Middle Eastern cultures or enhance the possibility of working in vernacular Arabic.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, these

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24 Examples from the educational field include the artist-run, pan-Arab company project *min'tala* or the artist-driven Ramallah Dance Summer School that operates annually in Ramallah and different Palestinian communities since 2016.

25 These elements from local cultures are not necessarily presented in opposition to Western movement vocabularies or techniques, but as additional and alternative positions. With regards to artistic approaches to local movement languages and body cultures, see the choreographic and performative works by artists Nacera Belaza, Bouchra Ouizgen, Danya Hammoud, Taoufiq Izeddiou, Omar Rajeh and Mia Habis,



projects pair their claim to revalidate the specificity of local contexts with a general sensitivity for what it means to artistically work with individual and collective bodies at the intersections of public, domestic, and theatrical space in the local contexts.

Significantly, this need to resituate artistic work must be seen in light of a largely Western-centered history of contemporary body-based artistic practice, particularly dance and choreography, that continues to structurally dominate aesthetic and production standards in international arts markets and education.<sup>26</sup> In line with this, philosopher Rachid Boutayeb speaks of “a double act of violence” (2012) when describing a mechanism that confronts artists from the Middle Eastern context: on the one hand, he refers to the judgment, norms, figurative traditions, and taboos related to the body that characterize their own societies and cultures; on the other hand he evokes the parallel influence of Western concepts and practices that also shape arts education. Bodies, here, appear as sites of contestation and negotiation for the societal and political determinants of authority over aesthetic developments. What is important to note is that these questions of legacy and legitimacy that find articulation here are both epistemic and corporeal at the same time.

### **Framing Bodies: Thematic and Curatorial Concerns**

Arguably, artists’ aesthetic and thematic decisions within body- and movement-based approaches vary widely across the Middle East. Yet, when schematically looking at contemporary practices from Lebanon and Palestine from the 1990s onwards, some recurring interests and topics emerge: for example, a commitment to addressing history, memory, and those forgotten in war or written out of history, and a corresponding insistence on bodily presence and agency in light of political and symbolic regimes. This gives expression to the desire to embrace bodies as sites at which individual and collective identity

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Mithkal Alzghair, or Radhouane El Meddeb as examples from the Middle Eastern context.

26 See dance scholars and critics Jens R. Giersdorf and Gay Morris who contend: “The conscious, if unacknowledged, incorporation of non-Western or indigenous dance techniques and structures as primitive or exotic Other was still considered a product of the choreographer’s genius rather than a skillful borrowing. It was not until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that practitioners and historians began to acknowledge the incorporation of non-Western and indigenous forms and structures into the movement pool and process of choreography.” (2017, 8-9)

politics can be imagined, tested, contested, rehearsed, and dreamed of in complex ways. As writer and curator Nat Muller observes:

“[R]ecurring themes are memory (individual and collective), loss, identity and re-presentation, the production and construction of history, the thin lines between truth and fiction, the countering of stereotypes (disorientalization), the archival, relations to increasing and rapid urbanization and globalization, a critique on institutionalization and the expectations of the art world, etc.” (quoted in Barragán 2014)

In line with this, belonging is a recurring topic that animates the inquiries of artists and institutions alike: works and projects that deal with looking back and recollecting history, but also with providing alternative accounts when faced with a kind of national amnesia, nostalgia, or an absence of official archives. On a microlevel, this translates into questions of place that artists engage when, for example, addressing concrete effects of rapid urbanization and economization on many Arab cities, such as Ramallah and Beirut.

It is significant to consider the normative dynamics launched when artwork from the Middle East is de- and recontextualized in the international arts market. To stay with the perspective of bodies, the obsession with the veiled female body or the focus on wounded, weak, and vulnerable bodies can serve as examples of unintentional or purposeful interpretations that install and stabilize gendered or orientalist stereotypes in the aesthetic as well as in the social realms. Arguably, recent political events such as 9/11 and ‘the war on terror’, the Arab Spring, and the frequently evoked and often vague formula of the ‘refugee crisis’ have intensified these essentialist dynamics and put the body’s capacity for action and transformation at the fore of the public debate. These broader developments that associate bodies with control, containment, subjugation, and biopolitical management, or, on the flipside, with resistance and protest, impact curatorial and institutional politics in the field of art, as well. This dynamic is paralleled on a discursive level by certain Western institutions’ and curators’ vocal insistence that the artists to whom they give visibility are ‘secular’, ‘critical’, and, of course, ‘political’. In a similar dynamic, borders have also become popular in the international art world, as illustrated by the proliferation of artistic projects and conferences dedicated to the topic.<sup>27</sup> Whereas this focus on borders indexes a

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27 For instance, I have been involved in the following projects as a curator and/or participating researcher alongside my work on this study: *Bodies of Evidence: On Bodies, Borders, and Movement*. Conference. January 14–17, 2016. DOCH Stockholm University of the Arts. Stockholm; *Border Effects*. Conference. June 16–

long-standing connection between arts and politics in the region as well as realities on the ground, it risks reducing bodies and artists working on these topics to their representational capacities and thus neglecting the fictive, imaginative, and utopian potential of arts—its poetic surplus that might provide alternative readings to established narratives and representations.

I do not seek to dismiss the myriad, artistically rich, and sensitive collaborations between Middle Eastern and Western artists, institutions, and audiences, or the positive, long-term effects of these exchanges. Nor do I ignore my active involvement in maintaining or challenging these dynamics as a curator and researcher myself. My interest here is simply to raise awareness of the more or less overt dynamics and economies at work when, as Nat Muller puts it, artists find themselves “being sandwiched” or being “pushed to take sides, to serve and include certain subjects and images while excluding others” (Muller 2016). Here, existing inequalities operating in the field of contemporary art and beyond risk being structurally reproduced. At a moment in time when dispersed and often identity-related fears, with the body at their core, color politics in a new and disquieting way, the close analyses of artistic practices in *Resilient Bodies, Residual Effects* can help to reveal these dynamics and contribute to a more profound understanding of the relationships among art, society, and politics at stake.

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19, 2016. As part of Dance Congress. Hanover, Germany; *Wounded Places. On the Integrity of the Body*. Conference. February 27–28. Ashkal Alwan. Beirut; *Art at the Borders: Spatial Politics and Post-Colonial Strategies in the Middle East*. Conference. May 27-28, 2016. Onassis Cultural Centre and Athens Biennial. Athens, Greece.