4 Transcorporeal Alliances

Women, Video Art, and Ecologies of Crisis in the Middle East

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Introduction

This chapter considers the notion of territorial bodies along the contours of Middle Eastern women's video-based art practice. As such, it delves into a selection of artworks from the oeuvres of Iranian artist Shirin Neshat and Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige – contemporary visual artists whose works engage with the wars and exiles permeating not only the lived reality of Middle Eastern women but also their geographical territories at large. Featuring a cultural landscape tormented by numerous destructions, these women's video art stages female corporeality in a state of constant change, always without a definitive telos or a settled territory. Building upon Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of becoming (1987) and Stacy Alaimo's notion of transcorporeality (2008), I gesture towards a relational quality surrounding these women's artistic practices, which allows them to register an interconnected bond between their bodies and social environments. This relational quality seeps to the surface when these Middle Eastern artists map out how their bodies and social environments endure analogous alterations under social crises, revealing the overlaps between their shared experiences. At once arresting and unsettling, Neshat and Joreige's works underscore the extent to which women's bodies and social environments are interrelated, rendering discernible the devastating outcomes brought by war and exile.

Hence, Neshat and Joreige's videos that contain bodies with unassigned or incessantly altering territories form what I call *transcorporeal alliances*. As a cross-contaminating coalition between entities, transcorporeal alliances explicate the ways in which female bodies deterritorialise and are deterritorialised by their social environment. Uncovering how exile and war can enable, shape, or foreclose women's relationships with their social environments, I contend that these social crises occurring in their ecologies led Neshat and Joreige to fabricate transcorporeal alliances in which both female bodies and social environments forge a reciprocally affecting

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relationship. In this transversal exchange, women and social environment alike affect one another to transcend the fixed boundaries ascribed to them. Interweaving the ontology of becoming with Alaimo's "transcorporeality" (2008), this chapter thus expands on the notion of territorial bodies by parsing out how Middle Eastern women's video-based art practice delineates female corporeality as a relational and ever-shifting conception, one that renders legible the affiliations between bodies and territories during a time of social crisis.

Transcorporeal Alliances

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) designate the processes of becomings as ceaseless mutations and transformations attendant to the transversal alliances occurring between entities. As ontology, becoming "is not an evolution by descent or filiation" (1987: 239); it does not gesture towards a fixed, finalised, or sedentary state with a forgone conclusion. Rather, becoming "is the pure movement evident in changes between particular events" (Stagoll in Parr, 2010: 26). Thwarting the conventional dualisms of Western reason which historically privileged the stasis and centrality of *being* above all else, the ontology of becoming and its interrelated vocabularies, such as assemblage and rhizome, are thus fluid concepts that put forth a processual, decentred, and cross-contaminating mode of existence (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Buchanan and Colebrook, 2000). Often referring to how the structural opposites between human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate are seemingly conceived as incontestable in the traditional Western philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari predicate the ontology of becoming on relational and durational planes, staging it as an ontology that decentres the human from being the measure of all things. No longer touting the human as the centre of existence and master of nature, for that conceptualisation has by now indisputably led to socio-ecological crises such as warfare, mass displacements, and environmental decay, the ontology of becoming calls for a heterogeneous and non-anthropocentric mode of existence in the world.

As a Deleuzian-inflected philosopher,[1] Stacy Alaimo's theories also forge connections between nature and humans, with a particular interest in nature's affirmative potentials and interconnected alliances with feminist social change (2000, 2008). According to Alaimo, feminism's "flight from the natur[al]" (2000: 4) has caused theoretical impasses in which many social constructionists that approached nature as "static" and culture as "dynamic" phenomena found themselves amidst a dualistic rational that merely attends to the prevailing Western traditions (2000: 5). Neither implying to leave dichotomies behind nor proposing an overwhelming affiliation with nature, Alaimo argues that nature can be a feminist ally,

an undomesticated ground in which one can imagine a space both "apart from the domestic" and that is "untamed" (2000: 16), allocating the necessary base for female emancipation. In lieu of conceiving nature as a "pliable resource for industrial production or social construction" (Alaimo and Hekman, 2008: 4), this new materialist understanding reorients it as an agentic force, emphasising how it builds relational affiliations with humans that might postulate convenient grounds for feminist thought. Accordingly, Alaimo (2018: 435) introduces the term transcorporeality:

> Trans-corporeality means that all creatures, as embodied beings, are intermeshed with the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, and is transformed by them. While transcorporeality as an ontology does not exclude any living creature, it does begin with the human, in order – paradoxically perhaps – to disrupt Western human exceptionalism.

Here, perhaps in an unorthodox method, I slightly pivot from the notion of nature in its literal sense. Unlike Alaimo, who takes nature – for the most part – as in the events and elements that compose the natural world, I rethink transcorporeality in a wider frame of ecology: one that is more attuned to the social environment. In doing so, I foreground how the constituents of the social environment such as landscapes, architecture, and other material objects are a part of the creation of knowledge and modes of existence regarding female bodies. Merging together the notions of body and territory, Verónica Gago also notes that "Body-territory", compacted as a single word, "de-liberalizes the notion of the body as individual property and specifies a political, productive, and epistemological continuity, of the body *as* territory" (2020: 86). In other words, bodies do not exist in isolation as individuals, but always in relation to other bodies and "nonhuman forces" (Gago, 2020: 86), thereby unveiling how they are intricately tied to the notion of territory. Building on such theorisation, this chapter thus argues that Neshat and Joreige envision female bodies and social environments as intertwined forces whereby "each body is a territory of battle, an always-changing assemblage, open to becoming" (Gago, 2020: 87). Hence, in what follows, I offer a closer look into Neshat and Joreige's artistic opuses, respectively.

Shirin Neshat and the Liminality of Exile

Located in between two worlds, Iranian-American artist Shirin Neshat's body of work touches upon Muslim women's identities, putting the artist as the mediator between two cultures. As Iftikhar Dadi notes, Neshat has often been recognised among the international art circuits as "the singular privileged translator who is able to mediate the image of Muslim

womanhood in the West by means of her powerful aesthetic representations" (2008: 128). Through experimentations in films, photographs, and video installations, her works draw their influence from the oppressive heteropatriarchal predicament of women in post-revolutionary Iran and the artist's own exile from her homeland. The experimental quality of her work, as Jenny Chamarette argues, "is concerned with the conjoining of structural opposites: male and female, the real and the magical, formal stillness and choreography, political concreteness and poetic abstraction" (2015: 129). Even though Neshat's experimentations oscillate between these different binary opposites, perhaps the most ostensible duality she mediates is the one between East and West,[2] in which she remains "ambivalent about being fixed in place by either" (Navab, 2007: 44).

For this reason, Neshat mediates a liminal space in which the artist herself, along with other Iranian women in her works, negotiate the dynamic interplay between the dichotomies of nature/culture, male/female, and East/West. As Farzaneh Milani aptly puts, Neshat's works incubate "a liminal space where us and them, here and there, local and global are juxtaposed seamlessly, and from their stark contrast and confluence a new landscape is produced" (2019: 173). Harnessing these multi-layered implications of her artistic prowess, I argue that Neshat and the women she films execute an entanglement with their social environments. Far from being stuck as isolated entities, the female bodies in Neshat's works are enmeshed with the social ecology, co-constituting "a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions" (Alaimo, 2010a: 2). To decipher these claims further, I now closely look at Neshat's video art series *Rapture* and *Soliloquy* through which the artist plays with the dualisms intrinsic to Western thought, to foreground how and on what terms female bodies and social environments interpolate.

Neshat's two-channel video installation *Rapture* is built upon contrasts as she instantaneously displays a neatly ordered, city-like town on one side and a barren wilderness on the other. While men in sleek white shirts pervade the first frame, women in black chadors gather around in the second frame of the desolate badlands. Here, what Neshat constructs is a playful mediation on the foundational dualism that associates men with culture and women with nature (Plumwood, 1993: 4). For in *Rapture*, men are delineated as working in an embroiled environment, whereas women are seen as standing still, harmonised with the serene nature of the panoramic landscape. Even though men are initially portrayed as active agents who constantly work and circulate in their sleek, urbanite environment (Figure 4.1), their routine is abruptly disturbed as women collectively start chanting and tongue-lashing, thereby disrupting the masculine economy which dominates the social order. Towards the end, while men stay put and gaze across the town, a group of women on the coastline step on a small vessel, sailing through the waves of the ocean (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.1 Men working in an urban environment.

Source: © Shirin Neshat. (1999a). *Rapture*. Film still. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Noirmontartproduction, Paris



Figure 4.2 Women at the beach, roaming towards a boat.

Source: © Shirin Neshat. (1999a). *Rapture*. Film still. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York and Noirmontartproduction, Paris

Avant-garde media theorist Scott MacDonald notes that the split structure in *Rapture* is an artistic enterprise that focuses "on the separation of the sexes in Islamic culture and on the various ways in which this traditional separation is articulated" (MacDonald and Neshat, 2004: 622). Given that many Iranian women have found themselves amidst a strict demarcation of public and private spheres after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, such an aesthetic choice has resonances for Neshat's feminist endeavours. As such, at play here is a juxtaposition of men with architectural landscape and women with the land and sea that characterises this traditional sexual division with an omnipresent tension. Parallelly, the video unravels as though men and women persistently wage war against each other to preserve a space of their own. Instead of leaning towards one side of these binary opposites, however, *Rapture* operates within a transitory and liminal state, opening up "a third arena of action and experience" for both the artist and the subjects filmed (Navab, 2007: 44).

This attempt to operate from a non-dualistic ground stems from a feminist compulsion in which the artist observes the prejudicial and damaging outcomes of dichotomous thinking, especially for women. As many feminist theorists point out, the association of men with culture and women with nature unequivocally marked women and nature as inferior and passive facades: as a "terra nullius, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect" (Plumwood, 1993: 4). Nevertheless, unlike these shared contentions that undergird Western thought, as Grosz notes, "the natural is not the inert, passive, unchanging element against which culture elaborates itself but the matter of the cultural, that which enables and actively facilitates cultural variation and change" (2005: 47). Subsequently, Neshat's video strives for an affirmative account of nature in which women, far from being reduced to stagnant bodies without agency, start looming as subjects with vitality that actively foster and even disturb the men's alleged order.

Interweaved with nature, women in *Rapture* display a transcorporeal alliance formulated with the social environment. After the shift transpires in the narrative and women cease standing still, the artist exhibits them undertaking numerous activities, with some praying on the land, some launching a boat, and others using that boat to flow into the sea. Regarding how the concept of transcorporeality proposes relational forms of existence in the world, Alaimo stresses that "by emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human" (2008: 238). In that matter, these women engender a cross-contaminating allegiance with their environment by which both parties inaugurate a process of change and enmeshment. Comparable to Deleuze and Guattari's famous writings on the wasp and the orchid in which a reciprocal exchange takes place between these two entities and enables "a becoming-wasp of the orchid

and a becoming-orchid of the wasp" (1987: 10), women in Neshat's video collectively forge a "shared deterritorialization" with their social ecologies whereby a symbiotic relationship comes to the surface (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 238). Women, taking the role of the active wasps, deterritorialise the sedentary and uncontaminated plane of their environment for their own quests of emancipation, meanwhile, the environment – embodying the passive role of the orchid – is reterritorialised into a new ecology through which it is then activated to facilitate women in transgressing boundaries. Hence, altering its own purview, the environment distances itself from being the locus of inertia, towards an energetic sphere of movement.

Unlike *Rapture* in which the split structure of the installation executes a traditional sexual division between men and women, in Neshat's next video installation *Soliloquy*, it takes on the duty of illustrating the artist's exile. Divided, once again, as a two-channel video installation, *Soliloquy* displays the artist in a black chador, roaming aimlessly in the two seemingly different cityscapes. While one screen shows a modern architectural panorama that resembles the American urban atmosphere where Neshat resides in exile (Figure 4.3), the other chooses a more traditional and noticeably



Figure 4.3 Covered in a black chador from head to toe, the artist stands in front of a modern building in a Western metropolis.

Source: © Shirin Neshat. (1999b). *Soliloquy*. Photograph. Courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York

Islamic background with mosques and madrasas as its setting, indicative of the artist's home in Iran. From running around in the city subways to dwelling in the gardens of mosques or coming across a group of Christian people at the church, we are shown a female figure wavering amid two cultures and yet never feeling welcomed by either side. Primarily envisaged around an East/West dualism, this is thus a work in which the artist feels belonging neither to East nor to West but rather chooses to "continue traveling in between" (Navab, 2007: 44). As an alienated body in exile, without an assigned territory, Neshat operates at the intermezzo – a state which "constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 293).

As Laura Marks stresses, many Middle Eastern artists working in the Global North are often wrapped up in a "thick intercultural fabric spanning home and diaspora" (2003: 54). Since these displaced artists are convoluted in a multitude of economic, political, and cultural forces that operate in their newly found environments, their subjectivities are carried into an ever-shifting ground that goes back and forth between the land that they yearn for back home and the land that they try to embrace in exile. Neshat, as an Iranian artist in exile, is no exception to this pattern. In *Soliloquy*, as well as in her other video installations, "national and political borders are found to be porous and pliable" (Schad, 2019: 13), waving towards a state of in-betweenness. Therefore, through the iconographies of unresolved conflicts, estrangements, and perplexities, *Soliloquy* becomes the centrepiece project that marks the artist's inner and external journeys of exile.

Even though exile is often accompanied by undesirable outcomes or as I have argued thus far, an in-between state of existence; in *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said presents a rather affirmative account of exile in which the exilic subject "is aware of at least two cultures" via which he or she attains a "plurality of vision" (2000: 222). Remaining careful not to discard the pain of displacement, Said contends that "a life of exile moves according to a different calendar" by which the displaced subject lives his/her life "outside habitual order" in a "nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal" fashion (2000: 222). When elaborated through this vantage point, Neshat practices this plurality of vision through the dual screens of *Soliloquy* as she explores the components of the home in a divergent set of social environments. Modernised North American cityscape on the one hand, and the folkloric panorama of the Middle East on the other, she compromises the fragmented, plural, and heterogeneous nature of her existence in exile. Instead of conceiving a "home that is static – that is the home as property, as a solid line of defense", Neshat delineates the idea of home "as a place of becoming" (Alaimo, 2016: 34) whereby her exilic subjectivity attunes

with the flowing space of the in-between, trying to map the frontiers of both sides.

Speaking of mapping, *Soliloquy* presents the artist's body as entangled with the picturesque landscape of the modern and traditional architectural sites, constituting a "body-territory" by which human corporeality and nonhuman territories are morphed into a singular image (Gago, 2020: 83). In *Atlas of Emotion*, Giuliana Bruno attests that "if the landscape becomes a body, the body conversely becomes a site of mapping" (2002: 233). Underscoring how such mapping can be conducive to feminist ventures, Bruno additionally notes that "when the site of exploration is a body map, one can travel physiologically through the depths of bodily passages" and discover the potentials of "epidermic cartographic knowledge" (2002: 233). Emphasising the entwinement of the human body and the nonhuman nature, Alaimo argues in a similar vein that "the maps of transit between human corporeality and nonhuman nature are infinite" through which diverse forms of social, political, and cultural realities which are often perceived to be detached are in fact "inextricably linked by the substantial transit across bodies and natures" (2008: 259). Indeed, the body maps that Neshat conveys through the twofold duration of *Soliloquy* confirm the relational linkage between the exiled self and the social environment, particularly for women. Whether the artist in a black chador standing inertly in the maddening crowd of the New York City subway or blending in with a cluster of other veiled Muslim women in a mosque in Mardin, Turkey, Neshat's video installation displays landscapes imbued with the corporeal self of the artist, alluding to the fact that the exile befalling in the social sphere immediately affects the territorial bodies.

Therefore, selected video installations from Neshat's oeuvre showcase a constant encounter with the dualisms intrinsic in Western thought. Whether it is male/female, nature/culture, or East/West, the artist negotiates an in-between territory by a frequent oscillation between these categories. While her double frames – perhaps paradoxically – constitute a binary vision, the acumen of her artistic praxis concentrates on an alternative space beyond dualisms. As Milani notes, "hers is the epitome of an artistic trajectory with an on-the-road mentality, one that refuses to stagnate in a familiar space" (2019: 173). Stimulated by her own exile, along with Iranian women's struggles, Neshat's videos amalgamate the female body and environment into a single plane, demonstrating how the exile and patriarchal hegemony endured by Iranian women affect both their bodies and territories.

Lamia Joreige's Videoscapes of War

In her works on the aftermath of the Lebanese Wars, Lamia Joreige employs an artistic method that tries to render truth in her own terms.

Either collecting testimonies from other Lebanese citizens or projecting herself in the middle of her works, Joreige confronts the seemingly singular account of war by foregrounding the peculiar histories of each person, including her own. Mark Westmoreland asserts that many Lebanese video artists who engage with the remnants of war in such subversive modes do not attempt "to replace one 'false' history with another 'true' one, but to go against the grain of sanctioned forgetfulness, commonly referred to as 'official amnesia'" (2010: 176). In the aftermath of the civil war which gripped the nation from 1975 to 1990 and left a carcass in the country's economic and political spheres, Lebanese officials avoided addressing the violence that ruined the country and thus "enacted an unmistakable policy of containment" through passing "a law granting amnesty for war crimes" (Rogers, 2007: 9). The result was the advent of an official discourse that, instead of historicising the war, imagined "an idealized, prewar Lebanon" (Rogers, 2007: 9). Congruently, the video-based works of Joreige weave together an assemblage of memory whereby the material objects, human subjects, and urban landscapes of Lebanon are accumulated into a domain of conjunction to counteract that collective amnesia. Aiming to map these entangled videoscapes of war and the territorial bodies that they compose, I now closely inspect two works from Joreige's oeuvre – *Objects of War* and *Nights and Days*.

As Joreige's ongoing project that resists the finality of artistic productions, *Objects of War* is a series of video interviews conducted over the different decades of recent Lebanese history. In this project, participants from various generations are called in to reminisce about their memories of the civil war, especially with regard to an object of their choice. A Miss Piggy bag, family photographs, a guitar, a curtain, or an ID card without a picture constitute some of the objects that participants associate with war. Since these objects are only taken as a starting point for each person's story, *Objects of War* operates as fragments of a dispersed cultural memory. One by one, Joreige traces the plural, multifarious, and ever-changing implications of war in each person's individual and subjective history, thereby refuting the idea of a unified, singular memory that sustains the national narrative.

While the interviewees recount their personal memories attached to these objects, we are shown how their items function either as harmless nostalgic symbols for the past or as potentially disruptive entities that can radically render the present tense a "volatile" state (Marks, 2007: 22). Since these material objects carry a certain history of atrocity within them, as Marks attests, "they show us that the present is the fingertip of the past and the past is reaching to pull us into the earth" (2007: 22). Underscoring the "dangerous" potentials embedded in them, Marks further notes that these objects can be regarded as "fetishes that establish a material contact

whereby the past can leak into the present" (2007: 22). Although agreeing with Marks on the idea that the past might easily lurk through the materiality of these objects, I further argue that through this cluster of material entities, Joreige formulates an assemblage in which subjects-in-becomings emerge and unfold, creating ceaselessly fluctuating Lebanese subjects that are caught between the complex interplay of past, present, and future.

Designating the concept of assemblage along the axis of "a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms", Deleuze proclaims that assemblage "establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures" (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007: 69). Since its heterogenic attributes entail the coming together of different forms of entities, bodies, or substances, an assemblage often refers to a "constellation that disturbs and unsettles the rigid categorisations of groups" (Baykan, 2021: 201). As a dynamic network of relations through which becomings unfold, assemblage gathers "man and nature, the organic and inorganic, the mechanical and non-mechanical, in a single sphere of interaction" (Bogue, 1989: 129).

What Joreige undertakes in *Objects of War* resonates with the concept of assemblage, in that, she brings together a group of distinct and yet connected objects and delineates Lebanese subjects in a continual state of change through their temporal linkages with these material objects. For instance, during the testimony of Nesrine in which she chooses playing cards as her object of war, we realise that the cards that once reminded her of the war are no longer affiliated with that memory. After a certain period of time spent in a state of crisis, Nesrine tells us, one simply refuses "to coexist with the war", thereby radically reordering the importance of objects (Joreige, 1999 – ongoing). As more and more stories of interviewees unravel, we begin to see that their perceptions of their own pasts, presents, and futures are altered in the rapidly changing ether of post-war Lebanon. In that respect, since the subjects enter a metamorphosing episode, the assemblage composed of their interconnected objects too undergoes a "constant variation" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 82), changing the meanings attached to these inanimate entities. The material objects and the memories that they include, thus, not only reflect the memory-making objective of the artist but also engender an assemblage containing the subjectivities of Lebanese people, one that always remains in a state of transformation.

In *The Migrant Image*, T. J. Demos stresses that Joreige's *Objects of War*, through its diverse set of archival testimonies, "reveals the violence of the war's sectarian divisions without privileging any single viewpoint" and hence registers an ever-shifting and collective account of the civil war (2013: 184). This fluid and plural chronicle of witnessing orchestrated by Joreige parallels the transitory, relational, and heterogeneous state of

female subjectivity in post-war Lebanon. In one of the testimonies, a Lebanese woman named Chaza remembers losing her identity card during an attack by the Israeli forces, an event which sparked a strong hatred towards the intruding forces (Figure 4.4). However, after coming across a young Israeli soldier with fear in his eyes and seeing the human person behind this armed conflict, Chaza explains, the feeling of hatred is enmeshed with the feeling of understanding, "all at once, both born at the same instant, during this assault" (Joreige, 1999 – ongoing). Corresponding to the material act of losing an ID card, then, Chaza's turbulent encounter with the soldier rendered her fixed identity ever so fluid, ungraspable, and easy to elude.

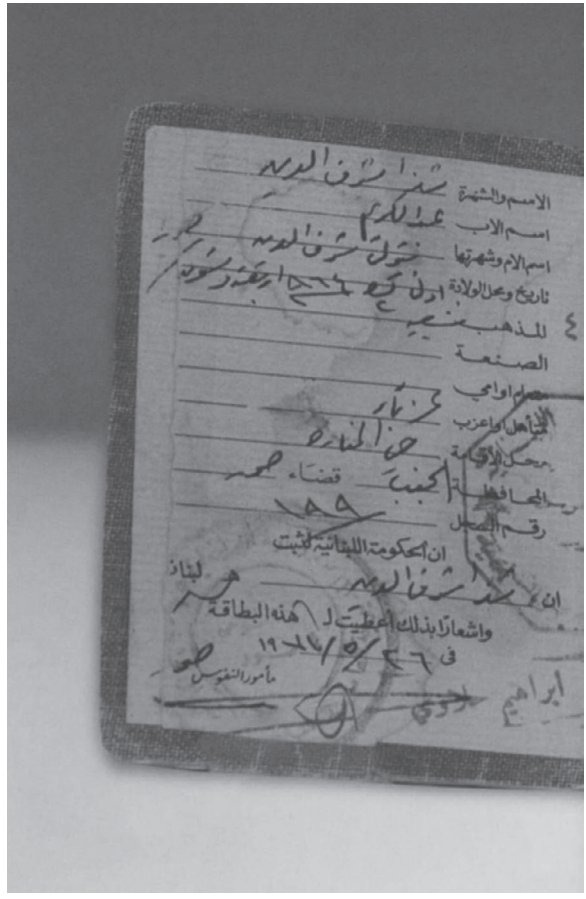


Figure 4.4 ID with a lost photograph.

Source: © Lamia Joreige. (1999 – ongoing). *Objects of War*. Film still. Courtesy of the artist

Convoluted into a spiral of socio-political crisis, namely the remnants of the civil war that lasted for more than a decade, Joreige carefully resumes sketching out Lebanese bodies entangled with their environment in *Objects of War*. While thinking through transcorporeality, Alaimo often uses the equally symbolic and real notion of "toxic bodies" to "reimagine human corporeality, and materiality itself, not as a utopian or romantic substance existing prior to social inscription", but as an embroiled phenomenon that carries "the trace of history, social position, region, and the uneven distribution of risk" (2008: 260). On a similar note, Gago also describes how the exploitation of common territories shared by groups of people discloses "the violation of the body of each person, as well as the collective body, through dispossession" (2020: 83). When the material effects of war on human corporeality are rethought within this frame of reference, I contend that Joreige illustrates the interviewees in *Objects of War* as toxic bodies – bodies that are impinged and inscribed by the reciprocal contact with the warfare state of their ecologies. Like the testimony of Rudy Khalil, who shares a family photograph of his parents in their old house – a house that was destroyed during the war – the many subjects of Joreige's project are laid out as infected by the catastrophic forces of the civil war unfolding in their environment. Hence, as "volatile, emergent, and continually evolving" corporeal entities (Alaimo, 2008: 262), the bodies of Lebanese people are contaminated by the unforeseen and unpredictable dynamism of the war. Affecting human and nonhuman entities adjacent to it, this civil war rendered their ecology as a pliable and defenceless organism, prone to vicissitudes and always without a conclusion.

Since the civil war in Lebanon spanned over 15 years, the social, cultural and architectural fabric of Beirut was permanently altered as a consequence. In the aftermath of the civil war, as Sarah Rogers designates, "the country splintered long political and sectarian lines, and in its wake, a myth of origin has been invoked that naturalizes the violence within a cycle of destruction and rebirth" (2007b: 19). While such "violent ruptures" often result in turning points in other national narratives, as Rogers continues, "the ontological status of Beirut, according to this national myth, is constituted through a series of ruins and resurgences" (2007b: 19). This cultural myth of rebirth through destruction is thus carried out in Joreige's next project *Nights and Days*, which takes place in the aftermath of the Lebanon War in 2006, a violent battle between Israeli and Hezbollah forces that once again left the city in ruins.

Nights and Days is a twofold story. In the first part of the video, while the artist reads excerpts from her journals on the war, she intercuts the images of her town – embellished with the smoke of bombings, military tanks, sounds of drones, and other such vocabularies she relates to war (Figure 4.5). During the second act, she travels to South Lebanon where the



Figure 4.5 A shot from the first part showing the growing smoke of a bombing.
Source: © Lamia Joreige (2007a). *Nights and Days*. Film still. Courtesy of the artist

central conflict of the war took place. Remarking that "the landscape of war became a genre with its own specificities and significant details" (Joreige, 2007b: 61), the artist discloses panoramic imagery of the Southern region in which roads, bridges, apartments, and schools are all demolished by the bombings. Instead of a calmly read monologue voiced by the artist, the second part is accompanied by an evocative composition of Israeli drone sounds, as the artist underlines that words could not register the devastation she endured in the warzone (Joreige, 2018). While an atmosphere of despair envelopes *Nights and Days*, alluding to the aforementioned national parable of the relentless rebirth that pervades the Lebanese ethos, Joreige nevertheless reflects "on the passage of time, the awaiting, the fears as well as the transformations forced by this war" (2007b: 59).

Aligning with the dynamic contact between female corporeality and the more-than-human world, *Nights and Days* encapsulates a gendered account of social division emerging in the contemporary conjuncture of Lebanon. In her writings in the years following the civil war, the Lebanese poet and painter Etel Adnan elucidates that "there's no more Nature,

I tell myself, in the near metaphysical, ecstatic sense of the word. And if there's no "Nature", there is no "Woman" (1993: 16). Commenting on how the urban atmosphere of Beirut has distorted over the war, Adnan further articulates that "a woman alone in the streets has nowhere to stop" since the cityscape of Beirut, which was once specifically welcoming for women dwellers and flaneuses, "has become the exclusive domain of men" (1993: 80). Likewise, a generation later, in the aftermath of the Lebanon War in 2006, one sees that Joreige's body is deterritorialised by the critical transformations taking place in her environment. Reminiscent of Neshat's shifting subjectivity in exile, which is echoed in *Soliloquy*, Joreige's identity as a woman is rendered in an unceasing flux initiated by the wars in Lebanon. From displaying how she grew afraid of staying at her house by herself to stating that how "[she] cannot remember what [she] was doing before it all began" (Joreige, 2007a), the artist is shown as a female figure wound up in the waves of change, virtually delineating in a transcorporeal mode, "a sense of fleshy vulnerability" (Alaimo, 2010b: 24). Therefore, these cultural registers of Lebanese wars gesture towards the *body-territory* of Joreige, underscoring how the social and material demolition inflicted by wars instantaneously affects the territorial bodies of Lebanese subjects.

Apart from the entanglement of bodies and environments that saturate a vast majority of Joreige's works, the scattered video passages of ravaged and derelict landscapes in *Nights and Days* insinuate an assemblage of videoscapes, captured en masse in times of war. Deleuze and Guattari state that assemblage "has neither base nor superstructure" but a "single plane of consistency upon which reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out" (1987: 90). This relational interplay between the heterogeneous entities that constitute the assemblage, as Paulo de Assis notes, renders it "a fluid entity, moving from one state to another, from one phase to another" (2018: 100). Following this line of thought and considering the video excerpts of the destroyed landscapes of Beirut as forming an assemblage, Joreige's project draws the city as a constantly evolving set of couplings. Resembling the non-fixed and non-finalised nature of assemblage that avoids "an identitarian conclusion or an end product" (Baykan, 2021: 201), the constituents of videoscapes demonstrate Beirut as an ever-shifting and open-ended entity that, far from remaining settled, embraces the change itself.

Hence, the works of Lamia Joreige draw their core influence from the plural, heterogeneous, and interconnected stories of Lebanese people who grapple with the devastating relics of wars. Probing the relational affiliations foreseen between human and nonhuman, or animate and inanimate spheres, Joreige undermines the boundaries between these ontological categories. Parallel to Neshat's oeuvre in which she was rifling for an in-between ecology to inhabit, Joreige dwells around the material objects and

landscapes that collectively constitute videoscapes of war. Affirming the potential alliances that can be forged with the social environment, meanwhile aligning with the other contemporary Lebanese visual artists such as Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige that infiltrate the social landscape of post-war Beirut, she maintains "a tyranny of uncertainty about the future" (Westmoreland, 2010: 177).

Conclusion

Staging an encounter with the selected artistic praxes of Shirin Neshat and Lamia Joreige, this chapter foregrounds transcorporeal alliances as a conducive and entangled phenomenon to fathom how Middle Eastern women artists carve out female bodies as intricately embroiled with their social environments. Alaimo notes that transcorporeality affords a vantage point to reconsider ethical and political standpoints that can contend with copious modern-day predicaments "in which 'human' and 'environment' can by no means be considered as separate" (Alaimo, 2010a: 2). As such, what is at stake in Neshat and Joreige's works is an artistic endeavour that interlaces those otherwise distant ontological orders into a single fabric. Whether it is the war that alters one's relationship to the land or the exile in which a person is extracted from an environment, these artists sketch out transcorporeal alliances to disclose how the magnitudes of such social crises render bodies inseparable from territories. At once dismal and cathartic, these territorial bodies therefore thrive not to sustain the status quo but to dismantle the attendant power asymmetries beyond their reach, in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Notes

1 Alaimo refers to Deleuze and Guattari's work (1987) as eluding the "centuries of dualistic, anthropocentric Western thought by forwarding concepts such as rhizomes, strata, and assemblages" (2000: 12–13).
2 While Neshat herself does not directly state this, in her interview with Scott MacDonald on *Feminist Studies*, she discusses her exile from Iran and how that made her navigate through the differences encountered in Western and Eastern cultures. For more information, please refer to Scott MacDonald's interview, "Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat" (2004), *Feminist Studies*, 30(3).

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