

My body cut, My soul wept

The Syrian film collective's name Abounaddara, translates to *the man with the movie camera*, a very significant reference to avant-garde soviet film from 1929 by Dziga Vertov. Firstly, Dziga Vertov is a pseudonym which is derived from the russian verb *vertit'sia*: to spin or turn— alluding to an alteration or transformation of something. This choice that the Dziga Vertov and Abounaddara made to, in a way, separate their individual identities to create something outside of themselves. This rings very true in their intention and meaning behind the work they create, which is intended for the people, not for the art market. There seems to be an invisible string that links most of these works and the ones we examine in class, with Stefania's book along with *Opening the camps and closing the eyes*, and other works like *The Act of Killing* and *Everything was forever, until it was no more*.

There are parallels between the work and intention of the avant-garde and the Abounaddara. The avant-garde was born in the 1920's in an attempt to open the eyes of the people to call for reformation. The Abounaddara create for their people, rooted in Syria, they have witnessed the cruelty of war and they are deeply connected in their communities' collective trauma. The Abounaddara, just as the avant-garde, had to ask the question where to go to find something meaningful, and that's when they found Abou Diab. The collective holds an important intention of creating something that can bring the viewers to life, for there to be transformation and get a sense of the invisible worlds that exist. There were key moments for me WITNESSING THE FILM, then the pleasure of hearing WHAT WAS BEHIND THE MAKING AND INTENTIONS OF THE FILM through Charif Kiwan.

The film itself, focuses on one single thing that is being done by Abou Diab, the three frames tend to trace his movement in different angles, with zoom-in shots, that carries the viewer and brings them into the intricacies of his life. The Imagemaker takes on the role of transporting you into Abou Diab's daily ritual of creating and living. You are immersed into a moment in time you haven't seen before, you follow the artisan in each frame and then you begin to see the world through his eyes. There is a dream-like feel of witnessing the films with three congruent screens fully enrapturing the viewer into the world of the Imagemaker, adopting a "Changed gaze". Abou Diab lives in this reality and the way Abounaddara frames him, embraces his lifestyle and his lens. Charif Kiwan explains how the main character is the cloth since the very beginning, the creation made by layers and layers of stamping impressions with natural dyes to then end with the rinsing, renewal, and final state of the cloths at the river.

When Charif Kiwan came to speak in class, there was such a beautiful aura that filled the room. This person and the shadow of many other souls, were pouring their hearts into creating something so beautiful to do the work of reflection on the ruins we carry, and the collective trauma that is felt globally. They come from a place of knowing the intensity of war striking the heart of their people. I will cherish the experience of having Charif Kiwan come to speak in class of Abounaddara's transformation after witnessing the craft work of Abou Diab in his studio; gathered in the workshop their minds were changed after what they had seen. Most importantly,

Kiwan explains how following Diab they began to see the city in a different way. The restless nature of this artistry seems to keep the world moving; Stefania noted that someone had said that the film makes you feel as if Abou Diab stops his craft, that the world will stop too. This brings in the thoughts on what it means to make something come alive, and how art can do that, and the impression of Abou Diab's living presence remaining despite the ending of the process the film continues to loop— he is kept alive. Stefania talked about how he did eventually pass, and there was footage of his empty workshop, with no clothes, no anything— and they initially had that in the end of the film but decided to take it out, to keep him alive. This decision is hugely impactful to how this film makes me feel about the world and what it is saying about all the people who have lost their lives to war and still remain unseen, unnoticed, and unloved by society. That these souls deserve to be seen as if they were alive, the impressions of the people who have died, remain, and continue to engage with the state of our reality. The art that Abou Diab is engaging with is a dying form, he was the last to learn and produce those fabrics, they made the decision not to showcase the stamps in the exhibition because it would be as if they were presenting it now to be dead.

The ruins we carry, being the exhibition's title, is an attempt to ignite a reflection of the ruins within all of us and those especially that have not been noticed by the larger global society. This correlates to the feeling I get while witnessing the writing and film on the *Opening of the Camps and Closing of the Eyes* by Hubermann. The first class we had we talked about the ghosts and those who are no longer there but still linger in our presence, the topic of WW2 is very significant for the fact that it is widely known as a genocide but still not deeply understood for every life and soul that was lost then. In reference to our reading and the film behind Hubermann's writing, I feel this intentionality in film being a way to face and witness the truth that lies unseen, viewed to be dead, but is very much alive and aching to be transformed and acknowledged. As the souls lost are still forever lingering and present in the world, that there is a responsibility to do the ritual of caring for the dead. There is a divine intention to acknowledge and also there is a simplicity to it being created by the luck of having a camera available to make it happen. This ability to witness through film/storytelling with a divine intention rings true in the work being done by Aboundaddara's use of film as a medium and Stefania's telling of Ilya's story. The reading of professor Stefania's book, *Knot of the soul*, in regard to Ilyas' experience with psychosis and art and trauma and creation, has stuck with me pretty intensely. Stefania's story of Ilya's was a story that could have very well not been told, in a way there's a parallel to how Stefania stumbled upon Ilya's in a similar way Abounaddara stumbled upon Abou Diab.

The piece by Didi Hubermann was written to show what felt like the facing of the truth, as they collected the citizens who lived over the hill to come to the burial service of those who were pulled out of the concentration camps. In the film you see the bodies that seem to be bare bones with just a layer of skin. These people who lived just over the hill had said they never knew there was any such thing happening, but you could not hide the scent of burning flesh that would linger under their noses. What Hubermann writes, showcases the kind of collective neglect that comes from people who see and know of death but choose to collectively ignore this

truth that lives down the street from them. They stated that if their kids were playing on the hill they would have a view into the camp, they had to know. This really stuck with me, but also made me understand the world a little better. I had read in my professor, Alexei Yurchak's book about the Soviet Union's collapse. That the people within the system knew of its restraints but just learned to live within it, to compromise and to keep living, that they would learn the ways that they could live and break the rules without being an enemy to the state. This kind of resilience helps me understand a bit more what reasoning would have gone behind those who lived by the encampments and deny their knowing of the death that was in their backyard. There were some short films we watched from Abounaddara that focused on individuals who were forced to instigate the death of another. This capturing of emotion and pain and sorrow and regret and remorse and fear, on camera, was an intense experience of understanding the implications of what exactly makes the world run. The man that was filmed for "The Unknown Soldier" stated that his body cut their throat and he went out crying, *my body cut, but my soul wept*. He continues to explain "I fear god because I kill"... "Even if it's wrong, it's my right. I don't have a choice".

In a sense understanding the ruins we carry, comes to also understanding why exactly there is so much instigated pain in the first place, what is it like to be the instigator of death and pain? The trauma that comes from this, is it just as valid as those who were victims? I cannot answer these questions but I will go on to ask them. I have watched the ethnographic film *The Act of Killing* and through it I witnessed the life of a post-killer, in Indonesia reflecting on the mass killings of 1965-1966, the film follows this man's way of living after having taken many lives in his hands. The film begins with him laughing and being outwardly unafraid, you wonder what the film was about, then he takes you to a cold concrete place and explains how this wire that was attached to the pillar would be easily wrapped around someone's throat and they would easily die. He would kind of mock this death with his gestures of wiggling and laughing. Later in the film after he has been asked to star in a film where he has to be represented as a hero, in turn meaning he has to sit in the chair of the victim, experiences what it feels like to have that wire wrapped around his neck. He begins to choke and he goes into a panic attack. You can see his eyes and his face panic with this debilitating effect. Perhaps he really didn't know what it was he was doing to these people before? He returns to the concrete death place and walks through it with an intense weight on his shoulders. His face is grim and he internally panics, he touches the wire and then gestures it around his neck... he then urgently goes to throw up. Once he re-watches the film in the end showing his nephews on his lap that he is the star of the film, then when he is being tortured he dismisses them because it's *too dark*, then he looks and leans in closely, he then goes quiet. Then he goes to ask the camera man, "have I sinned?" and he sheds tears that you can feel, he cries, never knowing what it was like to die like that, cause he survived. Is it about survival? Isn't that all we want? To live? And it seems like the cost is something we are only really beginning to understand as a society. War, how long has this been?

