

Ambivalent Domesticities: Exploring the Unfolding and Obscuring of Alternative Social Imaginaries in Laurent Mareschal's *Beiti*

Kasper Tromp

Leiden University

Frieseweg 34 1823 CD Alkmaar

Leiden, The Netherlands

E-mail: kaspertromp@gmail.com

Abstract:

Laurent Mareschal's site-specific installation *Beiti* is situated ambivalently in our imaginations of Israel/Palestine. Its geometric tile carpet, consisting of herbs and spices, effectuate multisensory experiences of the domestic, a place of memory, family and shared tastes and scents, but also of conflict and dispossession. Adopting a Heideggerian framework, this study will examine the formative hold of power (*Macht*) over cultures, histories and politics in the region and explore how *Beiti* simultaneously withdraws and submits to this. Olfactory art theory will help conceptualise how the artwork affects audiences corporeally, through its scents, and how this draws them into various temporal experiences; from the cyclical alternations of nature to personal memories as well as interrupted histories. The article concludes with a strategy to salvage the de-escalatory potential of *Beiti*'s multiple temporal entanglements.

Keywords: Laurent Mareschal, olfactory art theory, Israel/Palestine, corporeal affect, Martin Heidegger, (non)power, temporality, memory, social imaginary

Introduction

Last year, long existing tensions between Israelis and Palestinians escalated in a series of attacks mounted by Hamas and the subsequent military response by the Israel Defense Forces, resulting in an ongoing war in Ghaza. Since Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, its relationship with the Palestinians has been characterised by asymmetrical warfare, land occupation, terrorist attacks, the building of border walls and ill-fated attempts at diplomacy. The international image of Palestine/Israel is one of permanent conflict, while its inhabitants are typically imagined as perpetrators and victims implicated in routine acts of violence. Such persistent representations of the land and its people obstruct alternate social configurations, re-affirm the status quo and legitimise antagonistic politics between the parties involved. Contemporary art, though often perceived as either autonomous from the political realm or, contrarily, outspokenly activist and thus implicit in existing relations of power, may actually carry within it the potential to critically question status quos and explore possibilities for imagining the world alternatively. Indeed, the literary theorist

Krzysztof Ziarek defines artworks as spaces in which relations “become re-oriented and transformed, given a new momentum, as it were, beyond what appears possible within the historical parameters of the existing society.” (Ziarek 2004a, 19)

This article will examine such critical potential of art to work otherwise than reproduce dominant political imaginaries formative of, and reproduced in, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In so doing it will present an extensive case study of Laurent Mareschal’s *Beiti*, a temporary and site-specific installation. Mareschal’s work consists of a selection of herbs and spices that together form a fragrant carpet of decorative tile patterns. The immediacy of experiencing the artwork’s textures, colours, designs and scents challenges us to expand the metaphysical paradigm dominant in art-historical hermeneutics, which typically privileges linguistic constructions of meaning over considerations of embodied presence and affect. During the so-called “affective turn” in the humanities, scholars from multiple disciplinary angles developed strategies for understanding how art “works” besides signifying phenomena exterior to itself. Art became variously theorised as a physical presence which works on our senses, an indexical sign that traces off its referent, or a social agent; a system of action capable of transforming the world, among other perspectives.¹ This study, alternatively, adopts a phenomenological framework that will help examine the critical social implications of interacting with Mareschal’s artwork on a corporeal level. Phenomenology implores us to think beyond constructivist considerations of identity and ideology through which the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is already made known to us, and helps us think about our pre-discursive “being” which, as we shall see, *Beiti* may re-connect us with.

Martin Heidegger’s ideas concerning being and power will form the primary theoretical foundation of this inquiry. In Heidegger’s thought these concepts are mutually interdependent. The former is conceptualised as an event that continually discloses itself rather than defines, whereas the latter operates on the logic of making; fixing beings as objects, commodities or identities. This tendency of power is reflective of the Palestinian-Israeli situation wherein human beings, cultural practices and geographies become produced as properties of national projects that, in turn, are constructed as negatively interdependent opposites embroiled in an endless zero-sum game for survival (Kelman 1999, 588-589). Heidegger’s theory will help analyse how *Beiti* withdraws from such articulations of power and opens up a space in which social relations become transformed beyond their formative hold. At the same time this study accounts for the consequences of power’s (re-)surfacing made possible by this very withdrawal.

This dynamic, between being’s withdrawal and power’s persistence, will be elaborated with reference to the work of Krzysztof Ziarek, who extensively refers to Heidegger’s writings in his own analyses of modern art. This article will elaborate on Ziarek’s framework by putting the multiplicity of possible viewer’s perspectives centre stage. The artwork’s particular configurations of being and power are, after all, dependent upon the window of possible engagements between artwork and viewer. To account for *Beiti*’s multisensory affect, owing to its dimension of smell, this hermeneutic process cannot be conceived solely in terms of linguistic decoding. Rather, it must be broadened in scope to include a sensorial reception of phenomena in the world, through a consciousness that is

intentional and involved, but also pre-reflective, that is to say prior to language (Iared 2016, 194). Ziarek typically applies his understanding of Heidegger in analyses of visual and verbal expressions, a sensory range which this study expands through inquiries into the field of olfactory art theory. This interdisciplinary discourse will help investigate how *Beiti*'s scents affect audiences emotionally, what kind of relations they establish between artwork, viewer and cultural context, how they transform relationality to engender new social imaginaries, and how they immerse viewers into different experiences of time.

The study of scent in art, primarily theorised in Euramerican cultural contexts, will be de-centred and re-traced through discourses in Islamic, Jewish and Arab cultural studies in order to examine how olfactory experiences in the Levant are related to broader aesthetic, religious and political themes. This will help explore three distinct experiential perspectives on Mareschal's artwork; the first one based in Islamic metaphysics, the second on Palestinian diasporic life, and the last on the migrant conception of the "New Jew". These reflect the particular disciplinary expertise of the author and are emphatically no endorsements of any political orientation; a taking of "sides". Rather they are frames of subjective or collective experience through which *Beiti*'s relationship to power *may* be investigated, while accepting the possibility and legitimacy of other discursive avenues.

The following section will introduce Mareschal's artistic practice, with a focus on the works he produced and exhibited in Palestine/Israel. A brief visual analysis will contextualise *Beiti* within this oeuvre. Finally, Heidegger's key concepts of being and power will be elaborated.

Mareschal and Heidegger

Laurent Mareschal (b. Dijon, 1975) received his artistic education in France, having studied fine arts in Paris and contemporary art in Tourcoing (Mareschal 2019). In the early 2000s he lived in Israel for several years. There he created and exhibited artworks in various media pertaining to Palestinian culture, history and (geo-)politics. For example, in 2003 he created photographic works on the *keffiyeh*, the headwear worn traditionally by Palestinian farmers which has turned into a symbol of the Palestinian land, identity and resistance to occupation. On these themes Mareschal created two video works titled *Green Line* (2005-8) and *White Line* (2007-8), reflecting on human-made borders winding through Israeli and Palestinian lands. The former animates images of plants and trees painted on the Palestinian side of the border wall, enabling them to "break through" the concrete and offer spectators a glimpse of life beyond the wall. The latter documents a performance by Mareschal during which he walks through Wallajah, Palestine, and pours chalk from a bag he carries, drawing a white "border" through the landscape.²

Mareschal continued his exploration of the region in the form of performance-installations, whereby he uses food items to evoke domestic settings. *The Curtain* (2010) for example, consists of intricate laceworks made out of wheat, while *The Carpet* (2003) was made from humus paste and spices, around which Mareschal sat with guests/participants, with whom he ate from the carpet and shared experiences of Palestine (Mareschal 2016). These works suggest shifting attitudes towards

imagining Palestinian life, departing from public symbols of identity, oppression and resistance, to examine the privacy of the domestic sphere. A place in which conflict is not centre stage but simply “there” as one of many factors that shape the daily life of Palestinians. The conflict remains discernible in the ephemerality of the works, which have come to characterise Mareschal’s creative practice. In his online portfolio he paraphrases Eugene Ionesco’s statement that “[o]nly the ephemeral is of lasting value” (Kershaw 2008, 263), suggesting that experiences become valuable and meaningful once we realise their impermanence. In this light the ephemeral in Mareschal’s work may be seen as referring to Palestinian culture, which gains a particular meaning and expressive urgency because it is under threat of erasure by Israeli practices of land occupation and house demolition.

It is the dynamic of these shifting perspectives, between Palestinian lives as simply “going on” (or “let be” in Heidegger’s terminology) on the one hand, or constantly interrupted, contested and politicised on the other, which are brought into dialogue by Mareschal’s site-specific installation *Beiti*. This artwork consists of five different types of herbs and spices, ground to powdery substances of various shades and colours. Each of which is carefully sieved through stencils on the museum floor (Fig. 1 and 2). Together the ingredients form an expanse of decorative tiles that follow a regular square grid. The pattern on each individual tile is asymmetrical, though in pairs of four they form radial symmetries. The spice palette, here constituting as well as sensuously enriching the traditional colour palette, that Mareschal uses to “draw” his designs, consists of the following ingredients: ginger powder and za’atar provide the light beige and deeper shade of brown; curcuma and sumac add to this the brighter hues of Mediterranean yellow and dark red; finally, the white of the ground pepper completes Mareschal’s selection of fragrances and colours (Van Abbemuseum 2013). These ingredients are grown across continents, from North-Africa and the Middle-East to South-East Asia. The combination of all five however specifically characterise the Levantine cuisine, with za’atar in particular being a collection of locally grown herbs. Thus, by stimulating different senses *Beiti* evokes the atmosphere of an eastern-Mediterranean domestic space.

The object of this article is to examine how Mareschal’s installation engages experiences of domesticity through sensorial affect, in order to open up a space in which social relations operate based on “nearness” and remain unaffected by the distancing practices of power. Power here will be understood in Martin Heidegger’s conception of *Macht*, a force which operates on the logic of production. In Heidegger’s thought, power comes about in the process of being. Being is conceived as a temporal event, a futural openness to social relations, rather than a thing (*a* being) that is already discursively or technologically produced. As an event, being withdraws from presence, to the point that it collapses into and becomes indistinguishable from beings (things). For Heidegger, this disappearance of the so-called onto-ontological difference, between the thing and the event, and the subsequent forgetting of the event, marks the inception of power. As an event, being unfolds continually on its own terms. However, with the event forgotten, power emerges as a force that subjects beings and relations to processes of production, manipulation, representation and knowledge (Ziarek 2004b, 104-106).



Figure 1. Laurent Mareschal / Adagp, *Beiti*, 2021. Sumac, za'atar, ginger, turmeric, white pepper on linoleum, 6.80 x 5.80 m. Château de Fougères-sur-Bièvre. Photo: Tami Notsani.

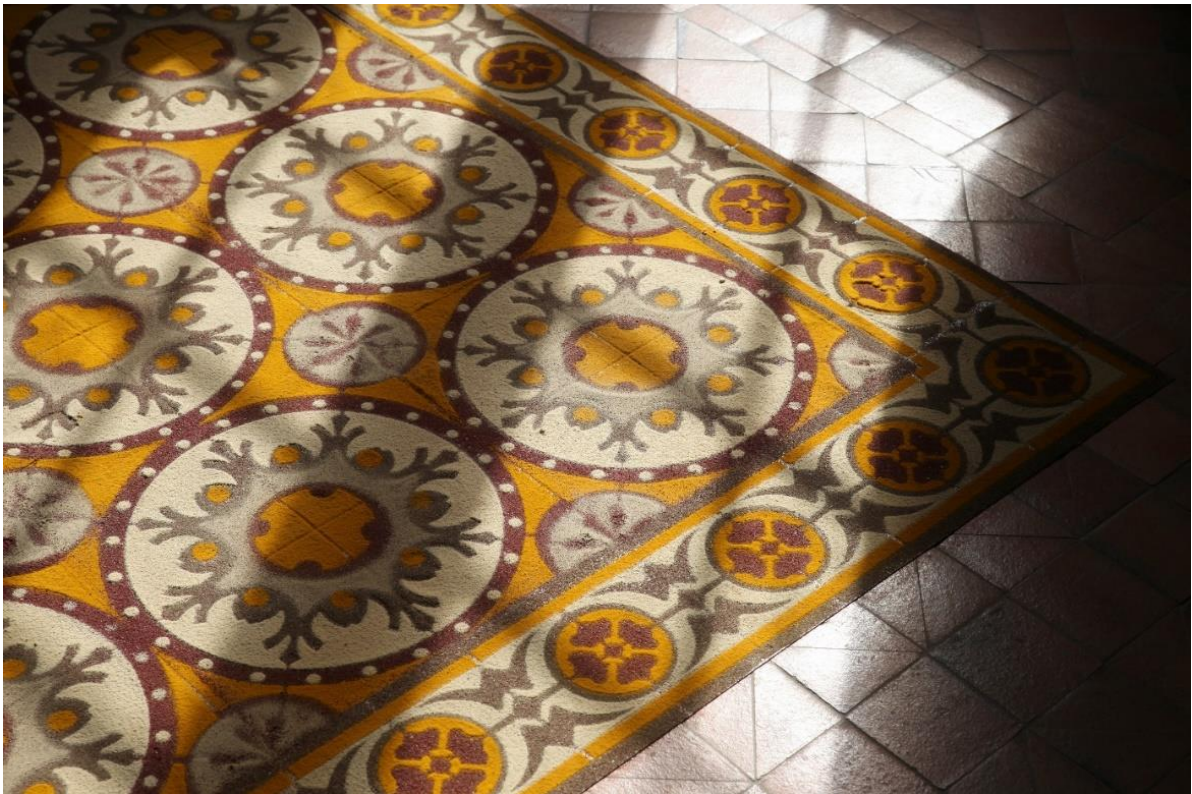


Figure 2. *Beiti* (detail), Photo: Tami Notsani.

Ziarek suggests that, even though the withdrawal of being offers power the space to exert its formative influence over beings, at the same time a dimension is opened up that remains event-like (temporal) and power-free. Thus, by withdrawing, being does not surrender to power. Rather, it simply gives room to its formative practices, while maintaining itself as power-free (Ziarek 2004b, 107). While power's influence on beings is characterised by the process of making (*machen*), non-power constitutes a releasement from power's hold by way of letting be (*lassen*). It is important to note that non-power does not equal powerlessness, since the powerless are ultimately implicated in the same dynamic as the powerful. Rather, non-power constitutes a dimension "beyond power and powerlessness" (Heidegger 1997, 187). It is neither passive, indifferent nor actively power-negating, but rather a transformative undoing of power's hold over social relations.

It is this power-free dimension that Ziarek identifies as "something other" in Heidegger's observation: "[i]n the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made" (Heidegger 2009, 285). In its thing-ness the artwork is the result of production, while the origin of the work of art, its temporal being, remains event-like and other than power. Interestingly, in its temporal unfolding, Mareschal's installation reconstitutes relations of power inherent in the history of its own emergence as an object. After all, in the process of its production, the artwork's primary components, herbs and spices, are subjected to various forms of processing, commodification, physical re-ordering as well as discursive construction. These machinations of power seem to mirror the myth-making practices of the nation which re-inscribe the meaning of culinary and domestic products into hegemonic narratives that force coherence upon its citizenry (Shapiro 2000, 80). Regionally harvested food items and decorative tile production are appropriated by the nation to strengthen cultural identity and geared towards a seemingly inevitable future of othering and distancing that mark an increase of power's hold on relations.

I will argue however that *Beiti's* pre-discursive temporal dimension marks a constant cyclical unfolding of being that disorders the linearity and historicity of such national narratives. The artwork effectuates a "rupturing open" (Ziarek 2004a, 33), as Ziarek calls it, of a space in which relationality remains free from power's hold, through a combination of its strong fragrance, grainy textures, rustic colour pallet and the repetition of its geometric tessellation. These features must not be taken as representations of cultural phenomena, which signify through difference and point to something outside of themselves, rather than revealing their own being. Instead, as an event, *Beiti* constantly discloses and oscillates between its various sensuous modalities and intensities.

Making "Sense" of the Critical Force of Domesticity

In encountering Mareschal's installation, we experience a shift from Cartesian subjects who cognitively come to know and discursively contextualise the art object, into creatures who must sense their way around its "landscape". It is through a simultaneity of haptic, visual and olfactory sensations that Mareschal's artwork re-orientates the exceptionality of our museum experience, and its own role within this as a remarkable piece of food-art, to encapsulate us in the ordinary; the slow

and repetitious unwinding of domesticity. Its textures, colours, patterns and scents draw us out of what the geographer Douglas Porteous calls the “sensuous death” of modern urban life (Porteous 1985, 368), and by extension the white cube of the museum, and into an intensified engagement with nature; that is, rural existence and the circular motions of daily rhythms and seasonal alternations. In *Beiti* the phenomena of the world look, feel and smell “of earth”. These unfold cyclically, as visually reflected in the repetition of its circular patterns, and condition our perception as we gauge the artwork’s dimensions. In this sensuous conditioning we are transformed into rural dwellers whose daily rituals are enacted synchronously with the movements of the constellations across the sky and the agricultural cycles which intimate us with the life-giving elements from which we originate.

It is at this point in the discussion that we move from describing the qualities of Mareschal’s installation and how they might affect audiences, to examining the critical implications of such affects. In so doing, our interactions with the artwork inevitably become defined in academic discourses and conceptual constructs, which necessarily obscures the power-free dimension of the artwork before we even arrive at an understanding of its unfolding. This is illustrative of the paradoxical hermeneutic practice of contextualising a phenomenon that ceases to exist when discursively defined, a problem which Heideggerian perspectives in interpretive studies are bound to run into. For our current discussion, *Beiti*’s tendency to transform exceptionality into mundaneness and linear temporalities into cycles, are understood with reference to Islamic ontologies. These allow for conceptualisations of human natures and states that occur prior to cognition, definition and construction, yet exist themselves within the epistemological horizon of the Islamic revelation. A discursive construction of pre-discursive being if you will. It is from this epistemological vantage point that the space into which Mareschal’s artwork draws us, and consequently opens up within us, can best be conceptualised in terms of *fitra*, denoting our primordial human nature. The *fitra* is described as a panhuman intuition by which we aspire to live in accordance with our creation, which is understood to unfold in “metaphysical correspondence” with the cosmos (Leaman 2006, 210-211).³ It suggests that we are most at peace when we exist in spatial, temporal and ethical harmony with all created beings. The *fitra* must not be conceived as an automaton programmed to act out a predestined life, but as a disposition by which we strive, within the full range of possible life paths, for peaceful and balanced co-existence.

In *Beiti* we find this window of ontological possibility, as situated within a structured natural and social order, reflected in its “tile floor”. From a distance the space appears strictly ordered by geometric forms which extend regularly across the artwork’s plain. Its repetitions seem to reach out to us from beyond its own borders and encompass us in its hypnotic rhythms, which harmonise our being within the warp and weft of the greater socio-cultural as well as rural landscape. When we draw sensorially closer to the artwork, we find the smoothness of the colour fields and the clarity of the borders dissolve into a grainy surface. From this proximity, the regular tessellations begin to appear as irregular shapes; colours that engage in a dialogue with neighbouring forms, shifting into constellations of patterns that are possible but never definite.

Such constantly oscillating plain of formal possibilities may reflect an alternate experience of conviviality. From a constructionist viewpoint, identity is understood relationally and plays out differentially in subject-object dichotomies. However, Heidegger's phenomenological perspective envisions an alternative economy of relations based on "nearness" (*nähe*). According to Ziarek, nearness characterises relations between beings that are at once too close to be defined in terms of difference, yet too distant to produce oneness. It neither increases otherness, nor negates it. Rather, it respects otherness and lets it be (*lassen*). Instead of producing fixed constructions of social relationality, nearness allows for a futurity of relations, projecting itself ahead of what becomes defined. As such, an economy of nearness facilitates "an ethico-political openness to the other" (Ziarek 2000, 139-140). This openness that respects otherness, may be understood with regard to Gayatri Spivak's discussion of relational ethics. Spivak contends that in social interactions something necessarily does not get across, namely a subject's lived experience, which cannot become tangibly felt or "inhabited" by the other. Rather than signalling the impossibility of ethics, this acknowledgement of otherness actually prevents one to interpret, represent or speak for the other, thus promoting ethical engagement (Spivak 1996, 270).

Beiti's aromatic qualities are key in understanding its disclosure of a space in which exchange may occur ethically, on the principle of nearness. Much like its illusion of endless geometries extending outward in all directions, its scents move beyond the physical plain of the artwork and encapsulate the audience. The art historian Jim Drobnick describes how smells "permeate the atmosphere", within which they become environmental, immersive and inescapable (Drobnick 2002, 33). Through their diffusion, the installation's fragrances draw us, as *fitraic* beings, into a corporeal nexus between it, ourselves and others, in relationships that are characterised by sensorial intensity and proximity rather than differential identity. These embodied relations are intensified by the neuro-chemical effects of olfaction. The marketing scholars Annamma Joy and John Sherry state that chemical senses such as smell transform and absorb scents into the body, lodging and dissolving airborne odour particles in the cilia of the nose. They argue that olfaction, as an interment of exotic matter into the body, dissolves the traditional subject-object distinction (Joy 2003, 275).

Encountering *Beiti* thus becomes an intimate experience, to such a degree that fragments of the installation fuse biologically with the bodies of the audience. This literally makes it become "part" of its viewers while their simultaneous olfaction draws each individual experientially closer. The artwork folds difference into a proximity that engenders a corporeal awareness of the affective world of others. The artwork thus provides what the philosopher Jacques Rancière calls a common *aisthesis*, a shared horizon of affects (Rancière 2010, 2). For Rancière, this shared experience potentiated shifts in hierarchies of power between those capable and incapable of sensible speech. However, *Beiti's* unfolding constitutes a releasement of power more radical than merely allowing the marginalised access to the realm of common sense. Rather, by opening up a space of common "sensing", the artwork marks a wholesale withdrawal from articulations of power through which centre and margin become differentiated in the first place.

In fact, the cultural theorists Caro Verbeek and Cretien van Campen posit that the olfactory

process makes for a physical encounter that is experienced emotionally rather than generating linguistic-semantic knowledge cognitively (Verbeek 2013, 139). Such an “out-of-language” experience allows for explorations of nearness that do not operate on the mechanism of infrastructural differing inherent in language (Ziarek 1995, 393), but facilitate a type of being together that may be characterised as “unarticulated”, or even more urgently, “unscripted”. I say urgent, because news reports, social media and state narratives script the Eastern Mediterranean as a contested geography broken up into states and provinces which serve the interests of national projects and sectarian groupings and along the lines of which civil strife and military engagements are frequently enacted. The kind of domesticity that *Beiti* evokes, as well as the location on which it unfolds, is not simply a private matter separate from public discourse, but a highly politicised phenomenon subject to extreme forms of contention (Ross 2015, 247).

In this, we see power’s formative hold on the social world and its impact on our thinking about geopolitics. This inclination demands us to script Palestine/Israel by carefully tracing national borders and mapping ethnic communities, privileging notions of identity, majority/minority, ownership and control. *Beiti* however offers no such narrowly defined description of locality, leaving the audience to ponder whose domesticity they are actually partaking in. It is not an active refusal to produce its residents in terms of national identity or state allegiance; not a negation, but rather a positive interest in what domesticity can be when power loosens its hold on our social imagination. When, in other words, relations are allowed to draw nearer through a radical un-scripting of a pre-scripted social world. Even the title of the artwork un-scripts constructed difference, since the word *beiti* is used by speakers of both Hebrew and Arabic to refer to one’s house.⁴ By spacing experiences of domesticity through our immediate senses, the artwork’s temporal unfolding “remains beyond the threshold of representation, slipping away from the parameters of discursivity” (Ziarek 2004a, 32). Yona Fischer, who curated one of Mareschal’s exhibitions in Israel, speaks of incommunicability in a multilingual region, citing the biblical story of the tower of Babel. She then likens Mareschal to the prophet Moses as a mediator, albeit one who does not “bring together” by means of the written word but with more immediate, sense-able material. While *Beiti*’s economy of nearness potentiates both social exchange as well as the recognition of otherness, it does so phenomenologically, beyond the mechanisms of linguistic constructions. Fischer aptly describes Mareschal’s role in facilitating a sense of openness and nearness between audiences, without defining their positions discursively, describing the artist as a “bringer” rather than a “conductor, arbiter or playmaker” in the dynamic of audience participation (Fischer 2016).

Fischer’s imagination of Mareschal as an implicit force that merely creates the conditions of “being together” instead of an active agent of social ordering and definition, can be likened to *Beiti*’s emphasis of regional characteristics, conjuring a landscape of potential sociality, over the ordering presence of the nation-state. The notion of Levantinism may be particularly illustrative here when defined as a disposition that enables positive social being and imagining. *Beiti*’s Levantinism is not activist, characterised by the literary theorist Rachel Harris as “a *refusal* to conform”, a “*rejection* of

constraints and boundaries” and a *subversion* of “ideological purism” [author’s emphases] (Harris 2012, 108). Rather, the artwork’s critical force implicates audiences into open explorations of the social world, akin to historian Fernand Braudel’s description of Levantine sociality, operating on the acknowledgement of a shared climate, temperament and food, from which flow regionally common agricultural practice, trade, urban culture, education and monotheistic religion (Braudel 2001, 96). The political theorist Bashir Bashir moreover contends that Levantine imaginaries could make visible the exchanges, interconnectedness and intertwinement of various cultures in the region (Bashir 2015, 811), and accommodates their “shared sovereignties” as well as “multiple loyalt[ies]” (Bashir 2015, 803).

As the proverbial *farsh*, that is, the outstretched carpet of the earth (Nasr 1987, 39), *Beiti* provides a literal common ground, an evocation of the Levant, on which difference is allowed to be and unfold relationally, without a pervasive tendency to fold into distance. As a literal *farsh*, a carpet or tile floor, it opens up a domestic space for enacting humanity freely, in all of its valences and intensities, as we may glimpse from the photograph of a Christmas party in Ramallah (Fig. 3). Indeed, *Beiti*’s suggestion of everydayness, the common experience of sitting down with others to feast on a meal prepared with shared tastes and scents that engender familiarity and sociality, foregrounds the subtleties of partaking in Eastern-Mediterranean life. Rather than scripting the region solely as one of conflict and violence and reducing its residents to well-worn abstractions (heroes, villains, martyrs, victims), *Beiti* captures the mundaneness of daily life suggestive of a multifaceted humanity (Harker 2009, 329).

By spacing the Levant through the home, Mareschal’s artwork invites for productive comparisons with Mona Hatoum’s artistic allusions to the domestic sphere. Like *Beiti*, Hatoum’s artwork *Grater Divide* intimates us with experiences of domesticity by engaging our senses. The sculpture is a representation of a cheese grater blown up in size to evoke a metal fence. It relies on our haptic memories of using this particular kitchen utensil to effectuate what the cultural theorist Anna Ball calls “empathetic visual intimacy” (Ball 2012, 177). Ball observes that Hatoum’s artwork connects the emotional “grating” that Palestinians are subjected to near Israeli border walls and checkpoints, with the supposed safety of the home, suggesting that the violence of the border haunts Palestinian families even in the privacy of domestic life (Ball 2012, 183). Hatoum thus takes a culturally non-specific culinary activity and folds it into a particular national experience or condition, which can be temporarily inhabited by museum visitors through sensory interactions. She thereby places another border (or fence) that Ball has missed out on discussing in her article; namely between those who actually live such dehumanising realities every day and those privileged enough to briefly share in the experience by choice, to culturally enrich themselves or to express sympathy for the fate of Palestinians. *Grater Divide* thereby pre-emptively anchors its take on the home in experiences of dispossession, estrangement and humiliation, which viewers can only relate to by assuming a role in the artwork’s nexus of geopolitical power relations.



Figure 3. *A Glimpse of Christmas at al-Nabda Women Association in Ramallah, 1977.* Photograph, 14 x 9 cm. Ramallah. The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.

Mareschal's installation on the other hand seems uninterested in predefining any social hierarchies that charge living spaces with the realities of conflict. This does not mean that it is altogether indifferent towards its audience's cultures and experiences. It merely suggests that its sensory stimuli do not cross the line from letting relations be to producing, ordering and fixing them. *Beiti's* living space is one in which a constantly shifting economy of social forces is allowed to unfold, because the circulation of its audiences and their potentially inexhaustible range of dispositions, experiences and imaginations are not tightened by the noose of discursive pre-scripting. The artwork's leisurely rhythms, visual harmonies and olfactory intensities intimate its viewers in a sense of "peace in belongingness", what may be characterised as *sakina*. This word brings together the experience of thriving spiritually with the notion of belonging, of being at home. From its Semitic root *s-k-n* are derived verbs for "inhabiting", nouns relating to "dwellings" and emotional conditions described by "serenity" and "tranquillity" (Quranic Arabic Corpus 2009-2017). *Beiti* draws us into a feeling of "at ease-ness", as opposed to a state of conflict, as a productive starting point for enacting a myriad of potential modes of sociality. Though this seems to establish Mareschal's installation as apolitical and critically mute, it actually discloses a perfect vantage point from which to offer social critique. After all, true critique of power cannot be implicated in its mechanisms, but must remain radically "otherwise" than power (Ziarek 2004a, 138). *Beiti* does so through subtle atmospheric immersion that celebrates a complex and thriving humanity.

Memories and Ruins

Mareschal wrote a short story titled "What once was home" to elaborate what *Beiti* means to him. It follows a Palestinian boy who enters his family home and walks upstairs to present his school achievements to his mother. The child's sensory experience is described vividly, evoking an atmosphere that is familiar, safe and intimate. However, all of this is undone by the end of the story;

The tiles slowly disappear, almost evaporating into thin air as he opens his eyes. The scents, sights and sounds vanish, as he lay on the ground of a tent in a refugee camp, cold and hungry with only a small rag to shield him from the chill in the air. His mother comes into the room embraces him and rocks him back to sleep singing the familiar lullabies she used to sing to him as an infant. He wills himself to sleep in his mother's arms in hopes of reliving his beautiful dream that had taken him back to the days when he was safely home, happy in school and without a care in the world. If only things could go back to the way they were. Back in Palestine. Back at home. (Mareschal 2014)

With this story, Mareschal situates *Beiti* in the context of exilic Palestinian experience. From this perspective, the artwork evokes memories of a home lost in the aftermath of Israel's declaration of independence and the subsequent 1948 war. The notion of home and the separation with it constitute a cornerstone of Palestinian refugee identity. Expanding on the idea that belongingness is a primary human need, the Middle-East scholar Victoria Mason contends that the home provides a safe space in an emotional sense and is intimately bound to the possibility of having a future existence

(Mason 2007, 274). Mason's descriptions of a primary need and a safe space of futural being, are reflected in the terms of *fitra* and *sakina*: emotive experiences that *Beiti* immerses us in. As a testament to what Palestinians have lost however, Mareschal's installation makes us aware that refugees have no access to such experiences of peace and wholeness.

We can ground emotional responses to exile within the same conceptual sphere of spirituality from which *sakina* derives; in particular the notion of *ghurba*, which describes a feeling of homesickness (Petee 1995, 173), the exact opposite of *sakina*. A person in a state of *ghurba* will constantly mourn the separation from the place of belonging and long to return there. The sociologist Avtar Brah describes the Palestinian exilic idea of home as a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah 1996, 192). In a secular sense, this desire may be seen as an inactive state of being that is unable to materialise any real change in the world. For the classical Sufi thinkers however, this longing was the pre-eminent inspiration for aesthetic expression which helped guide to a feeling of steadfastness in separation, emotional healing and spiritual growth. As the thirteenth century poet Jalal ud-Din Rumi illustrated:

Longing is the core of the mystery.
Longing carries the cure within itself.
The only rule is: suffer the pain.

Your desire must be disciplined,
and what you want to see fulfilled in time,
sacrificed. [Author's translation] (Groot 2010, 25)⁵

Thus, instead of a passive and definite state of defeat, *ghurba* inspires introspective reflections on separation and aesthetic expressions on how to "suffer the pain" of exile. In Palestinian refugee experiences, this idea of sustaining oneself through separation is referred to as *sumud* (steadfastness), which can be described as "cling[ing] to a sense of self and nation, no matter where they [Palestinians] live" (Falah 2013, 300). Various ritual enactments in diasporic communities revolve around the idea of "reconstructing home" in order to maintain identity. One such practice concerns orally passing down detailed experiences of the home(land) to younger generations, making Palestine almost "tangible" to the point that children are able to describe the textures of bricks and scents of trees in and around the family house (Mason 2007, 273). These narrations of home function as what the cultural theorist Carol Bardenstein calls "acts of memory", insofar as they proliferate "around points of perceived and experienced breaks, ruptures, and loss", making present a time or place that no longer is (Bardenstein 1999, 148).

Seen within the context of Palestinian exilic existence, it is this notion of memory and the ritual enactment of it, on which the dynamic between *Beiti*'s ontic being (as a thing) and ontological being (as event) hinges. Memory can be explored through emotive experiences, which anchor the meaning of contemporary existence in the past. In the proximity of its aromatic atmosphere, Mareschal's installation may suddenly trigger very specific memories of domestic life, which the individual viewer

may mentally “re-enact” in its vacuous “living room”, like a projection on an empty screen. The viewer may be understood as “re-inhabiting” an experience of home which was, at some point, interrupted by exile and now made present by the artwork’s sensorial stimuli. Indeed, smells are particularly powerful inducers of what Verbeek and Van Campen call “autobiographical memories” (Verbeek 2013, 134).

Beiti does not however induce a strictly solipsistic experience. According to Joy and Sherry, the meaning of odours is culturally defined and shared odours increase sociality in groups (Joy 2003, 276). The artwork may thus induce episodes of shared memories which shift, one into the other, depending on particular recollections held among different groups of viewers. From this perspective, *Beiti* continually discloses collective pasts which are co-inhabited and re-explored beyond the historical parameters of lived experience cut short by exile. This constitutes a dimension of non-power within which the possibilities of future social imaginaries are projected ahead of the world as it is (historically defined to be). Such temporal continuities of interrelated existences, from remembered pasts to imaginative futures, may strengthen the spirit of *sumud* amongst those who persevere in lives of exile.

Memory can be alternatively traced through national discourse. Palestinian memory practices seem to function as “invented traditions”, a term coined by the historian Eric Hobsbawm. It describes “existing customary traditional practices (...) modified, ritualised and institutionalized for the new national purposes” (Clement 2014, 549). Hobsbawm contends that such newly instituted traditions become established by their relentless repetition, creating an impression of continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983, 1). Invented traditions provide political orders with historical legitimisation, they cement the social cohesion of a national people (Hobsbawm 1983, 12), and create the feeling of historical continuity in “the constant change and innovation of the modern world” (Hobsbawm 1983, 2). In the case of exilic Palestinian experience, the idea of continuity plays an especially important role in bridging the temporal gap left by separation. Through narrative repetitions, Palestinian refugees are accorded a proper place again, as a coherent people among the nations of the modern world. This “production of a people”, occurs in corporeal interactions between subjects (individuals) and objects (of cultural identity), each bestowing a stronger sense of Palestinianness onto the other in incremental stages.

This situates *Beiti* within the logic of production which reveals its ontic being. In its thingness, the artwork is not only made in a physical sense, but also discursively produced as a distinct set of identity markers. Dialogical interactions between the artwork and its viewers, slowly differentiate in-group (Palestinians) from out-group (other museum visitors) and facilitate increasing familiarity with, or estrangement from, *Beiti*’s fragrant contents. As a result, both groups become experientially distanced, mirroring power’s inclination to increase and escalate. This differentiation of sense communities is problematised by the contradictory effects of olfaction. Douglas Porteous suggests that, because of the so-called “habituation effect”, odours to which we are continually exposed become imperceptible. Smells are thus noticed most intensively by newcomers (Porteous 1985, 358). This may disturb experiences of familiarity and intimacy. Through its olfactory affect, *Beiti* mimics ritualised narrations of the homeland, eliciting in diasporic Palestinians personal memories of places

of belonging, but at the same time produces them as outsiders by making a “first (olfactory) impression” on them, estranging them from memories that were believed to be intimate.

Such alienation from the familiar pertains particularly to Palestinian exiles who fell victim to Israeli politics of expansion and occupation. It applies to refugees who grieve their forced separation from home, but in a more literal sense also to inhabitants of houses converted by the Israeli army into military outposts (so-called “straw widows”). In this situation, Israeli soldiers take ownership over a house and use its domestic appliances as if they are the actual inhabitants. Meanwhile Palestinian families are relegated to a single floor, limiting their movement and effectively making them “strangers in their own homes” (Grassiani 2012, 108).

The notion of finitude plays a particularly captivating role in Mareschal’s installation. Vulnerability and decay are inherent in its light powdery substance and the organic nature of its biological materials. The development of the artwork, from careful production to inevitable erasure, though seemingly a processual event playing out along a temporal axis, should not be understood as a transformative dimension of non-power. Ziarek argues that being’s event is not to be confused with “becoming”, but rather a constant temporal unfolding (Ziarek 2004a, 32). The gradual organic process of decay can be more readily understood as a reflection of the fate of Palestinian tradition and culture: its increasing ruination in the present day by the Israeli practice of house demolition (Fig. 4). Preparing the installation is a long and laborious process, during which Mareschal and his team carefully sieve herbs and spices through ten different stencils, filling out one portion of the pattern each time in order to achieve the intricate geometry. Seeing as these templates represent only one colour of a single decorated tile, the procedure must be repeated countless times to complete the entire floor, all the while moving about in utter concentration and wearing facemasks in order to prevent breath from displacing the material (Fig. 5).

This monumental effort seems to be in vain with the realisation that the artwork can be ruined in a flash when entered. However, this is exactly Mareschal’s point, suggesting his work deals with the impermanence of the “Palestinian condition”. In order to demonstrate this ephemerality, he encourages visitors to enter and efface *Beiti*’s spice carpet by picking up, tasting and walking over it (Edible Geography 2014). Letting visitors become part of its domestic sphere indicates the ease with which intimacy and privacy are violated, family life is disrupted and cultural heritage destroyed. Though this may underline the fragility of the installation’s tilework and perhaps the futility of Mareschal’s arduous endeavour of constructing it, it powerfully evokes the sudden demolition of that which has a long history of dedicated development. Later incarnations of the installation are fenced off by a rope and visitors are no longer allowed to physically interact with it. Yet, its organic material is still altered by the slow passing of time and subject to eventual decomposition. In fact, when I went to see *Beiti* in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, it had become covered by a layer of dust, which slightly obscured its bright colours and completely drowned out its scents. Five containers holding samples of the installation’s ingredients were attached to the adjacent wall. These were to reintroduce the dimension of smell, in a sense preserving what was created to fade.



Figure 4. *Ruins of Saleh family home, Deir Abu Mash'al, 2017. Ramallah district. Photo: B'Tselem / Iyad Hadad.*



Figure 5. Laurent Mareschal / Adagp, *Beiti* (installation process), 2021. Sumac, za'atar, ginger, turmeric, white pepper on linoleum, 6.80 x 5.80 m. Haifa: Beit Ha'Gefen Art Centre. Photo: Tami Notsani.

Whether by swift human intervention or slow natural processes, *Beiti*'s suggestion of home eventually fades, leaving a physical ruin in its place, or a mental image, a memory. The artwork speaks to the idea that, what constitutes the core of Palestinian identity, is at once close to people's hearts and unattainable, far removed in time and space. As an act of memory, *Beiti* draws viewers into a remembered place to belong to, be safe in and build a future out of (the spirit of *sumud*), but at the same time attests to the tragedy of separation from such basic human needs (the state of *ghurba*). It becomes a national monument attesting to the tragedies of exile, by which we stand mourning, remembering and empathising with those who were displaced. In this, Mareschal's installation mirrors Banksy's famous graffiti on the border wall between Israel and the West Bank. The painting is a *trompe-l'oeil* depicting a hole in the wall which reveals a paradisiacal landscape behind it. Like *Beiti*, Banksy's work alludes to what was in the Palestinian past, but reduces it to a highly idealised and romanticised image that lacks any of the complexities of lived realities. It monumentalises and aestheticizes the Palestinian condition, not for local residents who express estrangement with Banksy's paintings (Ganivet 2019, 117), but for a progressive audience whose worldviews it confirms and values.

Likewise *Beiti* fashions, for museum audiences around the world, a space of ritualised remembrance of what Palestinians have not. As such, the artwork folds its critical space of alternative social imaginaries, into a memorial space in which cultural Others become further abstracted by the frame of conflict. As a testimony to political injustice *Beiti* becomes implicit in producing Palestinians as dispossessed victims and ensnares them in a power dynamic with the Israeli oppressor. Rather than re-arranging relations into a power-free momentum, *Beiti* re-articulates social paradigms produced over and over by hegemonic narrations of Palestinian lives. In a sense the artwork moves from its own being, as art, into activist modes of solidarity and resistance, which inevitably positions its audiences into hierarchies between insider and outsider, powerful and powerless. As a representation of a historical conflict situation, *Beiti* is seemingly unable to locate within itself a power-free dimension from which to effectively critique dominant articulations of the status quo, which it ends up reaffirming.

De-escalatory Temporalities and the Imaginary of the "New Jew"

I have demonstrated how Mareschal's installation induces us into different perceptions of time, depending on the particular experiential worlds and hermeneutic faculties of its audiences. It may involve us in histories of violence and exile, only to take us out of the linear sequence of historical time and into the circularity of our being in nature. It can make us doze off into personal memories of care-free youths, or condition us into ritual commemorations of the national origins. It allows for thinking temporal continuities and futures yet unexplored, but also dwells extensively on interrupted pasts and continued lives in their aftermath. *Beiti*'s different temporal imaginaries result, as we have seen, in a complex set of dealings with power. In this, the artwork and our relationship with it are marked by ambivalence in the definitional sense that "contradictory emotions or attitudes towards the same object or situation" become possible (Brown 1993, 64).

On the one hand *Beiti* reinforces the dominant social paradigm, which obscures alternate configurations of conviviality and cements the already given identities at play in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. On the other hand it unfolds a power-free space wherein the fixity of these identities is released and new affinities and solidarities can be explored. This approach to Mareschal's work, as a single constellation in which (non-)power constantly (un)fold, may help understand its ambivalent attitudes by recognising that the very same artistic media, cultural practices and embodied experiences that withdraw from power, also offer power the opportunity to envelop them in its operations. Therefore, the installation finds itself at the critical intersection between national separation and social integration, distance and nearness, producing and letting be, ever leaving open the possibility of unfolding and revealing, only to be folded back onto and obscured.

The analytical challenge lies not in conceptualising an eventual "overpowering" of power, for it is not in being's nature to dominate and colonise; only to maintain itself as power-free. Rather, it is power's de-escalation which should be sought when *Beiti*'s whirling patterns, soft textures and inviting fragrances seduce us to explore beyond the horizon of what seems possible. We have seen how every hermeneutic act, each corporeal interaction with the artwork, immerses us into one or multiple entangled trajectories of time, some of which escalate power's hold over beings, some de-escalatory in their temporal unfolding.

One such temporality, firmly rooted in sensory subjectivities similar to those that *Beiti* engages, is the historical imaginary of the "New Jew". Although it is well-known that Palestine saw its greatest influx of Jewish immigrants after the Balfour Declaration of 1917, fewer studies are made of the smaller numbers of refugees who reached Palestine's shores before this official British government sanction. They fled discrimination, persecution and poor living standards in Europe, in pursuit of a safer and healthier society. Interestingly, the historian Gur Alroey found that their leaders preferred rural existence and agricultural work over city life and commercial professions. They even stated that "if there was not a large sector of workers close to nature and the productive materials of nature, such a people would end by degenerating physically and spiritually and would have no right to exist" (Alroey 2014, 177). In this rhetoric, cultivating the land was often associated with health "in body and soul" which was expected to help transform the migrant's ghettoised urban European identities into the idealised figure of the "New Jew" (Ranta 2014, 423).

This is a telling episode which *Beiti* draws us into by engaging our historical consciousness or intergenerational memory. It is telling because this narrative conveys how easily power takes hold of relations when a victimised people have their sights set on a brighter future. Indeed, it has done so historically by increasingly differentiating between migrant Jewish identities and the local Palestinian cultures, escalating into tensions, riots and wars that finally concluded in a complete national rift. This temporal intersection of forces seems predetermined to end the way it did historically. However, *Beiti* may help uncover bits and fragments of sense-experiences and memories, which transform the social *potentiality* (as opposed to historically determined reality) of this past and de-escalate its outcome. For this we have to take a closer look at how migrants made sense of rural life through spiritual narration.



Figure 6. *Harvest in Rehovot*, year and maker unknown. Photograph in album, 16 x 11 cm. Lenkin Family Photography of the Holy Lands Collection at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

The political theorist Ronald Ranta and the Middle-East scholar Yonatan Mendel state that migrants who settled in the countryside of Palestine found communities there which grew, harvested and prepared their own foods in manners they associated with the Jews of Biblical times (Ranta 2014, 423) (Fig. 6). In this Orientalist romanticisation of the land as an unchanging geography, we see an opportunity for power to stereotype and dominate. Spacing the land through religious imaginaries may, moreover, initiate a claim to ownership by the young Jewish nation. However, contrary to this, the early rural settlers, by learning from local agricultural and culinary practices, recognised in the Palestinian fellahin the mythical origins of their own *uomo nuovo* ideals. Various concepts discussed earlier are of particular interest here. Firstly, the idea of spiritual transformation by adjusting to the cycles of nature and the firm conviction that this would make for a healthy and peaceful co-existence. It was the migrants' belief that awareness of such existential condition was not developed historically, but rather originated in the temporal zero-point of revelation.

The idea of Levantine sociality is also instructive for its promotion of conviviality based on the principle of nearness. Shared Abrahamic traditions, natural habitats and cultural practices promote togetherness without un-making otherness. In this dynamic, otherness is “let be” (*gelassen*), rather than nullified or escalated. However, history turned out differently. As we know, the Israeli state-building project would gather speed and forge a distinct nationality, forcing the adopted rural lifestyles of local Palestinians to be re-branded in exclusionary Israeli terms (Ranta 2014, 430). And so it came to pass that the very same experiences of the land, life in rural dwellings and the textures and scents of food that had facilitated the migrants' integration into, and peaceful co-existence with Arab Palestinian communities, eventually folded into markers of exclusivity and contestation.

Sigmund Freud once stated that civilisation required the assumption of an upright position and the raising of the nose from the ground, diminishing the importance of the sense of smell (Freud 1962, 64). Freud suggested that smell is the least civilised of the human senses, an idea that had a lot of currency in his day. It was echoed by contemporary philosophers who deemed olfaction to be emotional and irrational and who idealised a purely cognitive, disembodied reason (Joy 2003, 278). Such ideas originate in Cartesian subject-object structures which are, ironically, undermined by modern-day scientific insights into how scents affect, through immersion and fusion with our bodies, making alternative relationships between the self, the other and the environment possible. By re-tracing Freud's views through this observation in olfactory art theory, corporeal experiences of *Beiti* enable an affective “de-civilisation”, an un-scripting of the national myths of origin that have blocked the way of rapprochement and co-existence. If the distancing practices of nationalisms have lured people into destructive conflicts, one may indeed be tempted to “restart”, quite literally from the ground on up; from the primeval senses by which Palestinians and Israelis share in a common humanity. Laurent Mareschal imagines a home for them, an intimate domain in which being at peace may serve as a point of departure for viable ways of being together. However, the installation is not idealistically naive but, rather, ambivalent in its suggestion that such a pan-human reset may ever be attained. Just as visible in *Beiti* are the spectres of dispossession and violence that haunt the

idea of home in the region, making its transformative potential for thinking relations otherwise ever more urgent.

Endnotes:

1. See also Alfred Gell. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; Hans Gumbrecht. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004; and Joan Gibbons, "Memory and Indexicality," in *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. 29-51.
2. In this latter work, towards the end, Mareschal draws the "white line" through a residential area, which understandably angers the local residents who tell him to go away. This may remind one of an earlier artist who was preoccupied with the aesthetics of the border wall: the British street artist Banksy. In an oft-discussed interaction, an old Palestinian man approached the artist to tell him that he made the wall look beautiful. Banksy thanked him, but the old man responded that he should not, because they hate this wall, and then told him to go home. This is illustrative of the tensions between the sometimes self-centred, highly moralised yet insufficiently informed views on border conflicts by Western progressives and the complex realities of lived experiences around such borders. In this regard, Elisa Ganivet states that "this ideal projection of Banksy for the Palestinians was sometimes out of step with their realities, habits and customs." Elisa Ganivet. "Some Consideration on the Aesthetics of the Geopolitical Wall." *Borders in Globalization Review* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 115-122.
3. The idea of *munasaba* (metaphysical correspondence) has long been discussed by authors in the field of *tasawwuf* (spirituality) and *falsafa* (philosophy), including by the Brethren of Purity and Sadr ad-Din al-Qunawi. They believed that human beings as microcosms united the universe as macrocosm within themselves, thus giving them access to knowledge of all things, through knowledge of the Self. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*. London: Publishing Co. and Thorsons Publishers. Ltd., 1976; and Samir Mahmoud's lecture series on the relationship between human beings and their built environment: *Architecture & the Luminous Ground – Session 2: Human Being as Microcosm*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oGRGlc-d8k&list=RDLVcDvfKYt83Q&index=7>.
4. This un-scripting within language is exemplified by the poem with which Ibtisam Barakat opens her memoir *Tasting the Sky*. The poem goes as follows:
To Alef, the letter
that begins the alphabets
of both Arabic and Hebrew–
two Semitic languages,
sisters for centuries.

May we find the language
that takes us
to the only home there is–
one another's hearts.
Ibtisam Barakat. *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*. New York: Melanie Kroupa Books, 2007.
5. Original text:

Verlangen is de kern van het mysterie.
Verlangen zelf draagt zijn eigen genezing in zich.
De enige regel is: verdraag de pijn.

Je begeren moet worden gedisciplineerd,
en datgene waarvan je wilt dat het in de tijd wordt vervuld,
opgeofferd.

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