

AFTER THE IMAGE IS THE PRESENT

Program of experimental short films

curated by **Pebbles Underground** and **Les Boîtes Explosives**

Presented by **Visualcontainer[.BOX]**

September 26, opening at 18h00, program duration: 1hr

Via G.B. Passerini 18, 20162, Milano, Italy

The stories reflected [here] do not belong safely to the past. The division of Cyprus in 1974, the crimes against humanity committed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Artsakh, and the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza are all unfinished political histories. Their consequences, like ripple effects, change how, by whom they are remembered, denied, documented, or erased.

These histories do not belong to a concluded sequence of regional catastrophes either. They belong to a political geography in which earlier wars, occupations, and acts of destruction continue to shape what can be seen, said, and believed now. The current war of the US against Iran, although not represented in any of the films directly, is an “elephant in the room”, the tragic continuation of the program in real life.

Who records the evidence? Whose story is believed? Who gets to disappear twice: first physically, and then through the erasure of their history and culture? What happens when the present produces huge numbers of images, but they don't necessarily lead to accountability?

The multiplication of evidence does not resolve the struggle over reality. Side-by-side the struggle for preserving political memory, the films almost embody the need to rebuild, to resist through ritual anchored in one's own body. A fight against the Present that became an incessant producer of its own archive in real time, pouring out military statements, satellite images, phone footage, testimonies, casualty figures, intercepted communications, destroyed targets...

The open-ended finalé of the program is not a conclusion, but a refusal to conclude it. For the curators, for the artists, for the viewer.

– Text by Pebbles Underground and Les Boîtes Explosives –

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A political point of view

by Alessandra Arnò

In a present crossed by conflicts that multiply and overlap — in Gaza, in Artsakh, in Iraqi Kurdistan, in a Cyprus still divided — video art asserts itself as a political instrument before it is an aesthetic one: the capacity to fix, process, and return what daily information compresses into figures and headlines. The six works in the programme do not yield to the narrative of war, but move through it in gestures, bodies, and voices: the ritual cleaning of an abandoned airport, the deliberate destruction of fifty paintings as an act of refusal against the spectacle-image of violence, the oral transmission of trauma across generations, hands kneading bread while a siege unfolds outside, scripts that gather survivors' testimonies, up to a work that refuses closed narrative altogether, leaving the viewer responsible for its meaning.

No gaze remains neutral in this programme. If the closing work of the selection — signed jointly by Nima Nikakhlagh, Iman Tash, and Amir Sharif — entrusts its meaning entirely to the subjective interpretation of whoever is watching, it is because this principle runs, more or less overtly, through the whole selection: the representation of conflict is not exhausted in the image; it is completed in the gaze that receives it, and therefore in the responsibility of whoever chooses to look, to look away, or to deny that there is anything to see. The relationship between work and viewer is where the politics of the image plays out. To look, in this sense, is already a form of positioning. Whoever bears witness ceases to be a mere audience and becomes party to what they have seen: it is precisely in this shift — between spectator and witness — that experimental moving image reclaims a function that the distracted consumption of the contemporary image has steadily eroded.

Each work constructs a different degree of proximity and responsibility: some ask the viewer to dwell in the dead time of an abandoned place, some confront them with the absence of a deliberately destroyed image, some

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compel them to listen to a voice without the comfort of an explanatory image, some hand over the construction of meaning entirely. In no case does the viewer receive a ready-made impression: they are asked to work through it, to remain within the discomfort of the question rather than the comfort of an answer. This operation comes at a cost — it demands time, attention, and a willingness not to be immediately reassured — but it is here that the agency of a work engaging the viewer visually, emotionally, and intellectually can be measured.

This link between representation, spectator, and politics becomes explicit when someone attempts to erase it by force. This was evident only days ago at the Venice Film Festival, where NAZA, the documentary by Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, received twenty-five minutes of applause and the Special Jury Prize, only to be branded "obscene" by Israel's culture minister, who threatened to strip the filmmakers of their citizenship, accusing them of treason. The short circuit is telling, and worth underscoring: censorship, when it declares itself openly, almost never succeeds in making an image disappear — on the contrary, it confirms its power, turning a film into a case, a gaze into a threat to be neutralised. It is the same logic, inverted, that Parham Ghalamdar stages by burning more than fifty of his own paintings — works already exhibited in international institutions — in response to the unbroken flow of images of violence from Gaza: if authority attempts to make an uncomfortable image disappear by accusing whoever produced it, the artist chooses to make it disappear himself, withdrawing it from the regime of the image-as-spectacle before anyone else can neutralise it by reducing it to evidence. In both cases, destruction—suffered or chosen—does not close the matter; it makes it more visible, shifting the conflict from the image's content to the right to show it.

More often, though, concealment needs no dramatic gesture, no threatening minister, no fire. It works through accumulation, absence, neglect—and in this slower, less spectacular form, the concealment of the image and the concealment of guilt blur into one another until they become the same thing. The Nicosia airport that Andreas Savva cleans, seat by seat,

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has stood still since the Turkish invasion of 1974: history made it invisible simply by ceasing to pass through it, and with it made invisible the responsibility for a division that Europe now treats as a closed matter, even though that border remains the only one still under military occupation on the continent. There is no declared guilt in an empty building—only its absence from the news, and it is precisely that absence that the work puts back into circulation. In the same way, the voice that Nour entrusts to a family in *The Nakba Across Generations* does not narrate a concluded event. Still, what is passed down, generation after generation, is as much trauma as institutional refusal to acknowledge continuity between 1948 and the present — a continuity that, to be denied, must first be made invisible. The hands kneading bread in *Fibers*, by Anna Grigorian, hold a gesture that no war bulletin records, under a siege — that of Shushi, in Artsakh — largely ignored by Western public opinion, not for lack of available images, but for lack of sustained attention; the scripts that Huner Emin gathers from survivors of crimes committed by ISIS against the Kurdish and Yazidi population give shape and voice to a violence exposed to oblivion the moment it leaves the headlines, when media urgency moves elsewhere and historical responsibility remains suspended, never fully assumed. Concealing the image and concealing the guilt proceed together, in the same movement: it begins with no longer looking, and ends with no longer having to answer for anything.

This is also why the very circulation of these works is integral to their political meaning, and why independent networks take on the task of continuing to show them, against the logic of accumulation and removal. The shared presence of bodies in front of the screen restores to viewing a collective character that the fragmented, individual consumption of images online tends to dissolve: one watches together, one can watch oneself watching, and the responsibility already discussed ceases to be merely individual, becoming, for at least an hour, shared.

It is no surprise that, faced with this double movement of removal, the selection does not answer with a single language. Ritual, iconoclasm, orality, the domestic gesture, the document, the refusal of closed narrative: these are

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different strategies for the same task — restoring complexity where public discourse imposes synthesis and simplification. No work in the programme gives in to the temptation of the image-as-spectacle; instead, all of them proceed by subtraction, by mediation, by slowness — which is why they become, here, an act of resistance before they are a stylistic choice.

We live in a time that has refined the instruments of concealment: not only declared censorship, but the slow erosion of relevance — the reduction of a massacre to an incident, of an occupation to a controversy, of repression to a matter of public order. In this scenario, the complexity that each work holds is not a stylistic detail, but a form of resistance to what tends to simplify, minimise, render acceptable. The mere presence of these images, shown and discussed, takes ground away from normalisation: not because they resolve a conflict, but because they keep intact the part that no synthesis, and no authority, can erase. It is in this obstinacy — showing what one would rather make disappear, answering for what one would rather leave without guilt — that the civic responsibility of our gaze is measured today.

September 2026

© *Alessandra Arnò*

Director

Visualcontainer Italian videoart Platform

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A dialogue between the film program *After the Image is the Present* and Abounaddara's reflections

by Ivonne Sheen

In their essay *Waiting for Resurrection*¹, the Syrian anonymous collective Abounaddara rethinks image-making from the perspective of the land they come from, its geopolitical changes and their ancestral mythologies. These aspects, such as memory as a ruin that the new generations carry or the tension around images as receptacles of the Sacred or as merely prototypes of the Sacred, resonate very much with the films that shape the *After the image is the present* program. I take some of the reflections by the film collective to trace a river crossing the films in order to dive deeper into their intentions and resonances.

The selection focuses on works that have been made or that address themes related to various histories of occupation and war, situated in what is now known as the SWANA² region. The program offers a starting point through performative actions that build statements and portray a state of things, mediated by the presence of a body immersed in a bigger-than-them reality which has turned into ruins and that are part of a constant cycle of destruction and dehumanization. It is in this constant repetition of disappearance and reconstruction that the concept of resurrection presented by the Abounaddara collective comes back to me, through which the film collective proposes cinema as a potential medium for focusing on a resurrection that moves beyond a nationalistic imagination of it, but focuses on the personal life experience as a core, to bring the invisible to the surface. The backwards movement in *Get ready again* by Andreas Savva, the first film of the program, somehow recalls this going back to the ruins to transform them, maybe with a dose of hope.

¹ This essay is included in the booklet that accompanies Abounaddara's first US solo exhibition at BAMPFA in October 2024, entitled *The ruins we carry*.

² South West Asia North Africa

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As for the concept of ruin, the collective proposes that “each generation finds itself at the same starting point: it inherits ruins to which it must add its own share, reluctantly.” What’s our share in a context of hyper-visibility and techno-fascism? In *The sight is a wound*, the artist Parham Ghalamdar decides to sacrifice the most personal relationship to images he has: his own paintings. The action of self-destruction relates to the intention of transfiguration that Abounaddara proposes when they decided to film the ruins that they carry. The fire is an essential element for transformation and even though the act of destroying a personal invaluable object feels like a limit, and the voice-over of the film brings a pessimistic relationship to the hyper-visibility of the genocide of the Palestinian peoples, I still consider that the action of burning something is also a way of offering it, of giving something personal *in memoriam* of those who have unfairly been disappeared and as a way of believing in the sacredness of images beyond the visible.

The silent presence and the inner thought of these political performative actions are complemented by the following films in the program which portray testimonies of the older generations, from whom the authors have inherited their ruins. In *memories of the Nakba* by Nour, different generations in intimate spaces and conversations reflect and remember together how a family has been affected by displacement, how their identities have been cracked, and how they had to emigrate to the countries that are also responsible for and accomplices in the occupation. The film only shows a few faces, protecting the identities of the interviewed, and bringing a common tension into the room that is quite present in every corner of the world. Who has the right to speak about the genocide and to be applauded?³ At the same time, when just a few understand and listen to the testimonies of the past generations who are still alive carrying their own ruins.

³ This question is a reference to the reflections addressed recently by Carolina Bracco about the 25 min obsession that the directors of the film NAZA received during the premier of their film in the recent Venice Film Festival.

<https://carolinabracco.substack.com/p/la-burbuja-de-naza>

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This exercise of listening and going back through the “human history” in Kapka Kassabova’s words⁴, who also explains that history is mostly written by the ones who were not present “there”, is a form of resistance and commemoration of the survival of memory that fights for humanity in reaction to the imaginaries that oppose it. The act of listening and its evocations are woven in the film *Fibers* by Anna Grigorian, in which we see the making of the Armenian zhengyalov bread, we learn how to make it and we witness how these hands remember very well how it is made or it should be made. Following the instructions, a memory comes back and the persistence of joy and love overcome any fear. Love is stronger than fear and love gives meaning in times marked by a lack of sense and extreme violence. There are unspoken experiences embedded in this knowledge of bread-making, living on as ruins and brought back into the present every time someone makes this bread. Ancestral knowledge carries the souls of those who have witnessed its existence and have digested it.

Coming back to the silent process of remembering and reacting, the lack of reproduced images connects to the impossibility for images to embrace the reality that they pretend to portray. The series of written testimonies in the format of the script in *Testimonies from Mount Sinjar* by Hunter Emin establishes a necessary agency from the spectator, since our own imagination is the one building mental images of the violence and displacement. It becomes an impossible film of an un-human reality. Would something change after witnessing once again the end of the world with images? The attention and agency are demanded in this film, so we are indirectly involved in what is happening or has happened. The image of Mount Sinjar as the origin of these testimonies recalls the struggle that the Yazidis people are constantly facing, who had to escape ISIS persecution and run away to Mount Sinjar to protect themselves.

The closing film of the program, *An elegy in a dream* by Nima Nikakhlagh, opens a dreamlike portal, where words are not enough and experimentation makes it possible to open up pathways that form a labyrinth.

⁴ These reflections are taken from the foreword written by the author for her book *Border: a journey to the edge of Europe* published in 2017.

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Throughout the film, many images of a territory appear as a dreamlike journey which can hold different meanings for the people who have been there – coming back to Kassabova's reflections – but also trigger the personal memory of those who cannot recognize the landscape. There's a tone of nostalgia across the film, but I would like to describe it better as the final moment of the "resurrection" proposed by Abounaddara, in which the image results from a transfiguration that is moved by an intense desire for utopia.

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Independent essayist and film critic

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PROGRAM



GET READY AGAIN by Andreas Savva | Cyprus | 2011 (02'20'') Silent, color

The video performance is shot at the abandoned Nicosia Airport, which terminated its function soon after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974. After that it was mainly used as

the headquarters of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus. We view the artist in the symbolic act of cleaning the chairs of the abandoned airport as if it gets prepared to restore its function.

<https://savvaandreas.net>



THE SIGHT IS A WOUND / دیدن، زخم است by Parham Ghalamdar | Iran, UK | 2025 (06'48'') Sound, color

A six-minute experimental video-poem confronting the ethical crisis of image-making in the digital age, particularly in response to the unfolding genocide in Gaza. In an act

of aesthetic refusal, artist Parham Ghalamdar burns over 50 of his own paintings—works previously exhibited in renowned institutions worldwide—as a personal and political gesture against the overwhelming flood of atrocities visualized through screens.

<https://www.ghalamdar.com>

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THE NAKBA ACROSS GENERATIONS / النكبة عبر الأجيال
Nour
Palestine, Germany | 2024

THE NAKBA ACROSS

GENERATIONS / النكبة عبر الأجيال by Nour
| Palestine, Germany | 2024 (11')

Sound, color

Experimental documentary
recounting the multifaceted stories
of the Nakba through the lens of a
family. By weaving personal

narratives with historical events, it attempts to reflect the broader, collective
trauma experienced by Palestinians and also draws an important parallel to
the "second" (if it ever really stopped since 1948...) Nakba happening to the
people of Gaza as we speak.

[@nourjeehan](https://www.instagram.com/nourjeehan)



FIBERS / ԹԵԽԱԿՈՐ ԼԱՐԵՐ
Anna Grigorian
Armenia, Canada | 2025

FIBERS / ԹԵԽԱԿՈՐ ԼԱՐԵՐ by Anna
Grigorian | Armenia, Canada | 2025
(15'30'') Sound, color

Experimental essay documentary
blending voiceover testimony,
performative studio imagery, and
tactile close-ups of the narrator's
hands making zhengyalov bread to

reflect on memory, resilience under siege, and daily life during the war in
Shushi (Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh).

<https://annagrigorian.art/>

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TESTIMONIES FROM MOUNT

SINJAR / دیدہ‌فان ز چیاين شنگارو by Huner Emin | South Kurdistan (North Iraq), USA (07'50") Silent, monochrome

“Testimonies from Mount Sinjar” is a multidisciplinary project focused on crimes against humanity committed by ISIS members in Iraq. Featuring a

series of written film scripts of crucial, desperate, and traumatizing moments that survivors suffered under ISIS's captivity.

<https://www.huneremin.com/>



AN ELEGY IN A DREAM by Nima Nikakhlagh, Iman Tash, Amir Sharif | Iran, USA | 2022 (18'36") Sound, monochrome

As a non-narrative audio-visual experience, the film itself is not fully realized until it is individually and subjectively interpreted by each

viewer.

The main idea of the film is not to tell a story nor to simply entertain. We feel it is important that the audience not have been given any specific directions before viewing. When each audience member adds their own stories to the film, based on their own experiences, it is the moment when the making process of this film is realized. It is not until the viewer takes the film into their own consciousness that it becomes – in this way, cinema is a collaboration between the filmmakers and the audience.

<https://www.nimanikakhlagh.com/>