



# Exiled at Home

Curated by Amin Alsaden

# Participating Artists

**Mona Hatoum** was born to a Palestinian family in Beirut, Lebanon, and has lived in London since 1975. She works in a great variety of media including photography, video, sculpture, and installations, producing surreal and poetic commentaries on the politics of the body, culture, and displacement.

**Akram Zaatari** was born in Saida, Lebanon, and currently lives in Beirut. His work, in video and photographic installations, reflects on the shifting nature of borders and the production and circulation of images in the context of political divisions in the contemporary Middle East.

**Nahed Mansour** is a Toronto-based video and installation artist and curator whose works explore themes of entertainment, race, and power. She currently serves as Curator of Programs and Education at the Gardiner Museum.

**Atefeh Khademolreza** was born in Iran, and currently lives in Toronto. She worked as a freelance director and writer in television and various independent filmmaking organizations. Inspired by experimental and poetic cinematic traditions, her work explores disorientation and alienation.

**Parastoo Anoushahpour and Faraz Anoushahpour** are Iranian siblings based in Toronto with backgrounds in Theatre and Architecture working predominantly in video and installation. Since 2013 they have been working in collaboration with Ryan Ferko. Their shared practice explores the tension of multiple subjectivities as a strategy to address the power inherent in narrative structures.

**Rehab Nazzal** is a Palestinian-born multidisciplinary artist and educator based in Toronto, Canada. Her work deals with the effects of settler colonial violence on peoples, on land, and on other non-human life in colonized territories.

**Walid Raad** grew up in Lebanon, and currently lives in New York, where he teaches at the Cooper Union School of Art. He works across text, photography, video, performance, and installations, focusing on the Lebanese civil war, and exploring how historical events affect bodies, cultures, and narratives.

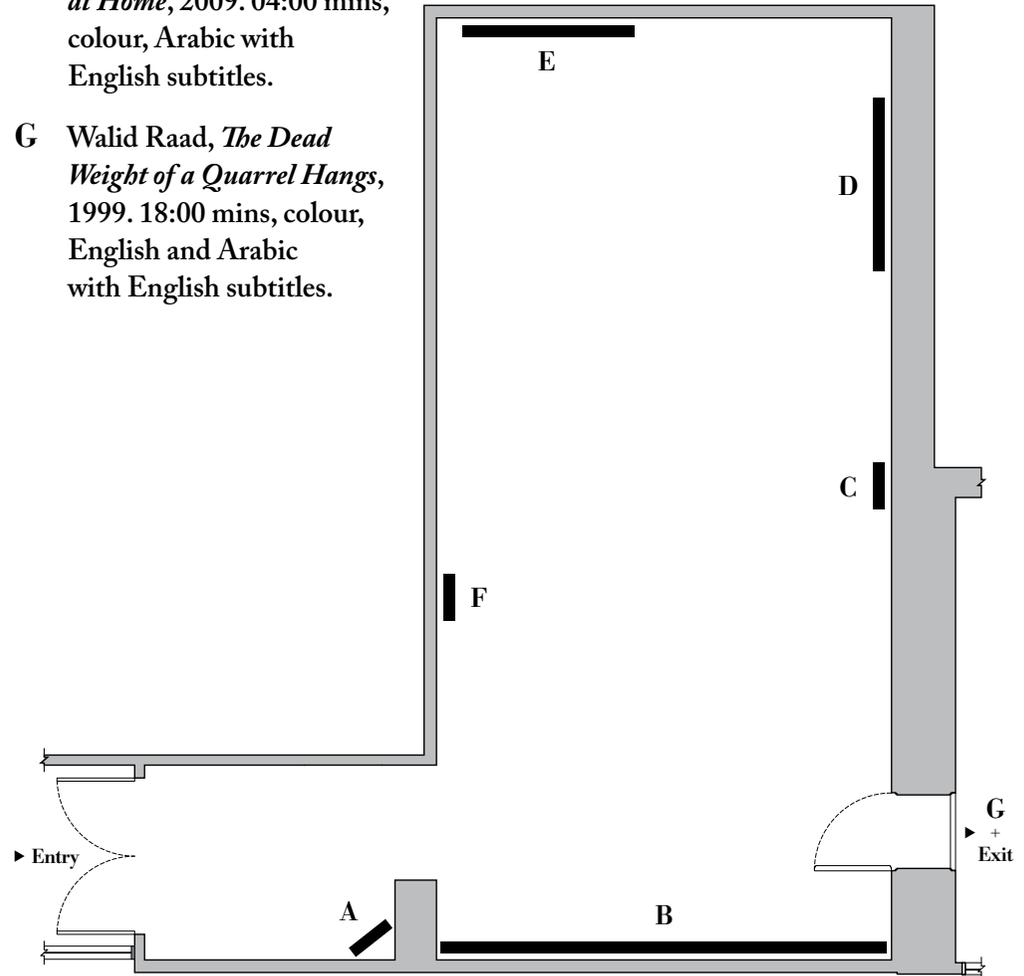
- A Mona Hatoum, *so much I want to say*, 1983. 06:00 mins, black and white, English.
- B Akram Zaatari, *Beirut [Exploded Views]*, 2014. 28:00 mins, colour, Arabic.
- C Nahed Mansour, *Archiving Voice*, 2009. 04:15 mins, colour, Arabic.
- D Atefeh Khademolreza, *Déjà-vu*, 2018. 12:00 mins, black and white, English and Kurdish with English subtitles.
- E Parastoo Anoushahpour and Faraz Anoushahpour, *Pictures of Departure*, 2018. 12:10 mins, colour, Farsi with English subtitles.
- F Rehab Nazzal, *A Night at Home*, 2009. 04:00 mins, colour, Arabic with English subtitles.
- G Walid Raad, *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, 1999. 18:00 mins, colour, English and Arabic with English subtitles.



A B C D



E F G



“*Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.*”

—Edward Said

This exhibition brings together artists whose works navigate the purgatory of exile. They explore the complexities and contradictions inherent in the experience of displaced communities, caught in between an incessant longing for homes left behind, and an inability to belong to new, presumably safer, environments. **Mona Hatoum, Akram Zaatari, Nahed Mansour, Atefeh Khademolreza, Parastoo Anoushahpour and Faraz Anoushahpour, Rehab Nazzal, and Walid Raad** capture the disturbing sense of alienation, and the deep melancholia that emerges in the wake of losing one’s home, along with the certainty, familiarity, stability, security, and warmth that home represents.

Theorist Jalal Toufic describes a “surpassing disaster” as a major catastrophic event, such as a devastating war, genocide—or, one might extrapolate, a pandemic unprecedented in living memory, which killed countless people and caused immeasurable anxiety and grief. Following such a disaster, Toufic argues, art becomes inaccessible not only physically, but it also undergoes an immaterial withdrawal, even though artworks may continue to exist. This nuanced concept, developed in dialogue with the work of Walid Raad, contends that those who endure a disaster become incapable of comprehending or engaging with art due to a historical rupture, which necessitates an acknowledgement of art’s withdrawal, and then a deliberate “resurrection” of art as society works through its trauma.

This exhibition offers a reflection on the very nature of art following the most recent global disaster, the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on and pushing Toufic’s ideas further. The exhibition “resurrects” works from the Vtape catalogue that reveal what might have withdrawn from collective consciousness, especially the compounded sorrows endured by members of diasporic communities. Most people struggled with being trapped at home during the pandemic, yearning to head back into public space, to return to some sense of normalcy. Others were also trapped, but for them, home was not home. For the displaced, the pandemic only exacerbated an existing situation, which will likely last well into the future. For the displaced—especially immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—home is exile.

The exhibition raises a number of questions: Can the experiences of these communities, for whom the pandemic is yet another tragedy, be accounted for, and perhaps centred? Can the eagerly anticipated post-pandemic moment be taken as an opportunity to ponder how loneliness is itself an epidemic that has taken over the world, and to remember those who were already isolated, and who continue to silently bear the agonies of displacement, privately grappling with feelings of not belonging? How is the construct of “home” imagined, especially by those whose relationship to ancestral homelands has been violently severed? Why does home remain such an elusive place for the exiled?

Exploring how artists employ video, a time-based medium, to convey the durational longing to belong, the exhibition contemplates the very basic notion of home, of being home—taken for granted by some, desired by most, yet unattainable by many.

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An early work by **Mona Hatoum** sets the tone for the exhibition, and has inspired the selection of other works, brought into dialogue with this short yet powerful piece. In *so much I want to say*<sup>\*</sup> the artist points to the inexpressible—and often suppressed—agonies of displacement, at a moment when her longing for family and home was exacerbated by a raging conflict destroying the landscape of her childhood memories. In a live performance by Hatoum, a series of still images were broadcast between Vancouver and Vienna. Changing every few seconds, the images show a face (the artist’s) being gagged by hands, while she apparently struggles to break free. The voiceover incessantly repeats the phrase “so much I want to say,” speaking to the multiple dimensions of the entangled reality the artist wished to denounce. Produced after Hatoum became stranded, unable to return to her family following the 1975 outbreak of war in Lebanon, and not knowing their fate, the extreme closeups imply the sense of anxiety, confinement, and paralysis she felt in her involuntary exile.

Lebanon, which Hatoum had to leave behind, is a country that has been transformed by a series of tumultuous events over the past few decades. *Beirut [Exploded Views]*<sup>†</sup> is a portrait of a nondescript location in Lebanon’s capital, following the recent arrival of an influx of refugees escaping war in neighboring Syria. **Akram Zaatari** evokes a post-apocalyptic setting, where people attempt to make a home in an unfamiliar, and apparently hostile, environment. Marked by silence, the film unfolds within a landscape of architectural fragments, staging a series of quotidian activities, such as working, eating, and bathing. The lack of communication is counterbalanced by an intimate relationship with smart devices, which points not only to a global attachment to technologies of mediation, but also to the fact that phones remain the only way of staying in touch with family and friends back home, or with fellow exiles, those displaced in other parts of the world. Woven into the melancholic undertones of the work are glimpses of hope, joy, inertia, anxiety, and violence.

The silence in Zaatari’s work is complemented by attempts to speak—or the struggle to enunciate certain ideas—in other works. *Archiving Voice*<sup>‡</sup> is an autoethnography of sorts, archiving the strenuous efforts made by **Nahed Mansour** at a moment in time when she was grappling with questions of identity as a racialized person living in Canada. Striving to counter processes of cultural erasure, she also documents her community’s alienation from their immediate surroundings, partly exacerbated by an inability to use their first language. In this recording of a performance, Mansour pronounces the sounds of Arabic letters, repeating and stumbling through the recital, to highlight the challenges presented by preserving one’s mother tongue. Exerting palpable energy in pronouncing sounds that have no equivalent in English, made evident in the exaggerated movement of her tongue, the endurance exercise points to the central role played by a displaced person’s language—which can stand for one’s kin, culture, and homeland—while marking one’s fraught relationship with exile.

Mansour makes a remarkable effort to keep alive her connection to the homeland, through repetition, but other artists are wary of the fatigue that results from recurring acts meant to conjure home. *Déjà-vu*<sup>§</sup> is fictional depiction of an immigrant family about to head back to their homeland, but who instead get lost in repetitive rituals of return. **Atefeh Khademolreza** presents a Kurdish family, whose identity connotes the realities of the places people tend to flee: the Kurdish community exemplifies a people pining for an independent nation, and who have historically endured persecution as a minority in South West Asia (or the region known as the “Middle East”); many Kurds have had to leave and take refuge elsewhere, including Canada. The artist observes that immigrants change once they leave their homelands. They experience the overwhelming loneliness of alienation from their new

environments, and they encounter difficulties in forming meaningful relationships in exile. The characters in her film, which evokes a disturbing dream or a memory sequence, perform mundane actions, in preparation for an imminent trip: speaking with family back home, packing belongings, waiting, anticipating. But the performance soon becomes eerie when it is repeated ad infinitum, which speaks to the reality of those displaced: neither here nor there, spending an inordinate amount of time reminiscing and fantasizing about going back to a home that may no longer exist.

The unrequited desire to return to a lost homeland is typically ameliorated by the act of remembering, as the displaced become mobile vessels of endless memories. *Pictures of Departure*<sup>¶</sup> explores the body as archive, and family as the repository of traces of a home left behind. **Parastoo Anoushahpour** and **Faraz Anoushahpour** focus on scratches across surfaces, which point to larger subjects that, though at times unexamined, leave an intergenerational mark on the lives of diasporic communities. Instigated by the diaries of their mother, chronicling life during the Iraq-Iran war, they interview and record her reflecting on certain memories, to underline the fragile, fragmentary, and absurd nature of history, and any attempts at reconstructing the past. Borrowing from methodologies employed by archaeologists and treasure hunters, they suggest how excavating the past and searching for “home” can be a thrilling pursuit, but often a futile one. Their work evokes the circularity of diasporic life, where one is constantly departing from the present, searching for a home, but without a return, arrival, or resolution—becoming stuck in endless reveries.

But this pain is usually caused by specific conditions, to which Hatoum and other participating artists allude, namely the instability and chronic conflict that plagues different parts of South West Asia, presenting a stark choice between dying in one’s ancestral homeland or living elsewhere. *A Night at Home*<sup>\*\*</sup> speaks to the bitter reality of what could become of “home” back home: a hostile place of anxiety and danger where death lurks around the corner, forcing their inhabitants into exile. In this minimal work, **Rehab Nazzal** captures a dialogue between family members of three generations, against a dark sky, at a time of grave danger. On the night the family arrives, during their first trip back home since settling in Canada, they get awakened by a sound bomb. An incessant barrage of gun fire rages outside during an invasion of the artist’s hometown, near Jenin, Palestine. The sound terrorizes the family, with the child asking whether they will survive the night. The raw footage of the blank sky is contrasted sharply with the palpable fear the family experienced, and the helplessness of a mother unable to comfort her son.

The fraught memories of home, especially when home has been ravaged by a prolonged conflict, have also been tackled by these artists. One of the characters in *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*<sup>††</sup> eloquently describes the unimaginable and lasting consequences of war: “The impact of a bullet is never proportionate to its physical dimensions.” There is an ambivalence throughout this early work by **Walid Raad**, as it is unclear whether the events presented are true, even autobiographical, or fictional; the artist’s voice is mixed with others, and what may appear as a testimony simultaneously comes across as a fabrication. The disparate parts may seem nonsensical, describing, for example, historians betting on horses, people dragging their belongings across borders, a scholar with a personal collection of bullets, and mysterious disappearances in the Mediterranean; but they collectively make sense in that they form a sort of quarrel over how history may be written, the veracity of narratives or archives, and who has the right to remember, or imagine, memories of a complex time past—a time one might associate with home.

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Produced at different times, each of the participating works evokes a distinct place or community, but the common denominator is not only the fact that these are titles found in the Vtape catalogue, but also that most of these artists happen to hail from a geography, South West Asia, closely associated with displacement (Edward Said, quoted in the epigraph above, also grew up in the same region, and ended up articulating some profound reflections on the condition of exile).

Although countries in South West Asia gained independence decades ago, the devastating legacy of colonialism continues to haunt the region, resulting in turmoil that has pushed many of its populations abroad, reluctantly fleeing their homelands in search of safer conditions elsewhere. Sharing these experiences, the artists eloquently tackle what “home” might mean for diasporic communities. Their works convey what it entails to go through multiple degrees of separation, and speak to what art could say about the primordial human desire for meaningful contact, and for homemaking and homecoming, however these may be defined.

The artists invite viewers to draw links, some of which might be fairly evident, others more subtle, about alienation and belonging—which resonate with those who experience myriad guises of displacement, even within their own homelands. Repetition is used by several of these artists as an underlying theme or tool, conjuring not only the never-ending process of making sense of home, or its loss, but also, the compulsion to repeat certain acts, reiterate beliefs, or recall memories while working through past traumas. The artists likewise attempt to process the issue of conflict, into which their societies were inadvertently thrust, and so warfare, conflict, and other crises loom in the background. Speech and language—or conversely, silence—also characterize some of the works, as artists recall and re-enact the things that remind them of home. Moreover, a number of the artists blend reality with fiction, producing hypothetical or surreal narratives that grapple with the grief and pain of exile.

The exhibition “resurrects” works that tell an incomplete and ever evolving story about the woes of displacement, from isolation to disillusionment, from outrage to helplessness, and from recollections to imagination. It equally underlines the agency of those who go through the experience of losing a home, and the vital role that artists play in shedding light on the paradoxical logics of statehood, borders, and militarization, which produce the conditions of displacement and exile in the first place.

These artists’ powerful works counter the marginalization of displaced communities, while unveiling the perils of alienation, of never belonging. Their works suggest that a “surpassing disaster” might not necessarily be a major catastrophic event like a pandemic—but it might manifest itself in our collective apathy and oblivion to the suffering of those who live in our midst.

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**Amin Alsaden** is a curator, educator, and scholar of modern and contemporary art and architecture, whose work focuses on transnational solidarities and exchanges across cultural boundaries.

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tel 416 351-1317  
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**Curated by Amin Alsadén**

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