



The Making and Breaking of an Icon

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Introduction

This essay is an effort to write my thoughts and reflections on my art practice, focusing on the work to-be-realized for my solo show in March 2021 at Galleri Mejan in Stockholm. I've had the intention to complement and stabilize my imagined-artwork with my writing, only to realize such a task's difficulty. Firstly, because language itself can be unstable. Secondly, fear of losing a quality in art that is unstable in its nature.

In the process of writing, I've generously used several online dictionaries to learn about the origin of words as a way to make sure their meaning aligns with my intentions. For example, for the above text, I've looked up the following words: Thought, realize, intention, stability, imagine, quality, and nature.

When looking back at their roots, I noticed that many words have metaphoric meanings inspired by bodily experience (for ex: the word grief stems from Latin *gravare*, which means to make heavy.) This process of thinking has enriched my understanding not only of the words I'm writing but also the way we communicate. Having language remain closer to the bodily experience of the world helped me stabilize my writing a little bit.

This essay consists of three sections:

- In the first one, I tell how I think and feel through my art practice. I also propose making space for new knowledge: In my art practice, I lean on magical thinking to stimulate bodily movements.¹ I think that we need to balance ourselves between rational thinking and other modes of thinking, and this in-between-space requires continuous negotiations of different kinds.
- In section two, I explain how I think of images and share how I process them through my work. Then I share stories of entangled images that I'm using as source images in my current work.
- In the third and last section, I delve into my deep desire to control images. I challenge told narratives and reflect on creative practices of destruction and reparation.

¹ I use the term 'bodily movements' to talk about emotions and thoughts as internal movements, but also about the potentiality of externalizing these movements into mobilized action.

Section One

A Practice of Necessity

Sensing Worlds and Thinking Through Art

Survival seems to be insufficient to us humans; We are curious beings, imaginative, and risk-takers. We want to comprehend the universe and ourselves as an integral part of it. We want to know how we relate to worlds around and within us. We desire meaning beyond the main struggle for survival. I desire meaning. I desire knowledge.

I think of art as one unique way to sense worlds and create meanings. Unique because it's not bound, hypothetically, to any rules, and it can play an important role as a mediator for stories, ideas, and knowledge. This, in turn, gives art the potentiality of activating movements that are much needed in society.

My art practice offers me a free and safe space to contemplate, feel, play, imagine, mimic, reflect, and speculate. In this space, the boundaries between worlds seem to disappear: I don't know where I begin and where the work ends. Thinking through art makes me more present and attentive to worlds around and within me. Art-making is my attempt to process and comprehend these worlds and to derive meanings from them. To create my work, I depart from lived experiences. I make connections between entangled stories and material knowledge. I like to weave stories about existence and the aesthetics of being and tell them from an instinctive perspective of survival and well-being.

Donna Haraway speaks beautifully about the state of presence in her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), where she writes:

“.. staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.” (P.1)

Haraway's words remind me that the movements in our bodies need to be present to perform solutions. We still have to think of the past as histories to learn from and the future as realities to care for.² But there are many presences in the thickness of now that get ignored when we are stuck in the cycles of grieving the past and fearing the future. Breaking these cycles is something that my current work is trying to do.

Thinking through art also allows me to make peace with uncertainty, which seems to be a major trouble for our minds. However good the knowledge we have, it will

² Recognizing that we are embedded in unjust, and destructive systems of power, we must demand a future that cares for all life forms and that accepts diverse perspectives.

most likely never be sufficient to predict things with certainty. Even science as ‘collective human knowledge’ is truths that work, not truths that are certain. However, one aspect of uncertainty is that it forces us to stay alert and observant. We are constantly looking for new information in the world through our bodies’ dynamics and movements.

Magical Thinking

Sympathetic Magic is a term coined by James George Frazer in his book *The Golden Bough* (1890). Frazer writes:

“One of the principles of sympathetic magic is that any effect may be produced by imitating it. To take a few instances. If it is wished to kill a person, an image of him is made and then destroyed; and it is believed that through a certain physical sympathy between the person and his image, the man feels the injuries done to the image as if they were done to his own body and that when it is destroyed, he must simultaneously perish” (Vol.1, P.15)

Few examples of Sympathetic Magic practices by which my work is inspired:

- Performing praise or acts of violence on sculptures or poppets of figures believed to hold spirit or represent persons.
- Holding onto an object that is believed to have magic powers and brings benefits such as prosperity, fertility, health, and wealth. Or to repel evil, envy, and illness.
- Drinking or touching water that has been exposed to prayers or in contact with divine verses.

There are some theories that prehistoric cave paintings may be the earliest documented examples of Sympathetic Magic. Archaeologist Abbe Henri Breuil spent most of his life studying cave art. He claimed that slaughtered prey images were made during magic ceremonies to ensure successful kills by gaining magical control over them. (*Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art*, 1952).

Whether or not his theory is true, I find it useful to think with. The painted images may have inspired power and confidence in the hunters before the hunt began. The graphic images perhaps served as a mental exercise, a way to visualize strategies, study locations and distribution of hunters around the prey, get familiarized with it, and mentally practice the act of hunting.



Photography of Lascaux animal painting.
Photo Credit: Prof saxx

Different social stimuli, such as words, rituals, and image-making, create avenues for the mind to imagine scenarios, spot opportunities and threats, and practice solutions. I tend to think that after tens of thousands of years of practicing magic, our bodies are in-tuned to respond to imaginative practices. We expect certain outcomes when we do certain actions, and that mere expectation is what induces a change in us. Methods like the Placebo Effect, Mirror Therapy, and the Rubber Hand Experiment might be good evidence of how imagination can influence the body.

The concept of Sympathetic Magic deeply inspires my thinking of images. It's about the desire to have some control in the world by virtue of sympathy, of 'feeling together'. It's also about handling images with a high sense of importance. For the teenager I was, magical thinking was a practice of necessity; I used it out of a need to heal wounds, fulfill wishes, mock fears, take revenge, and make peace. Today I use it more metaphorically, to convey emotions and ideas, to communicate bodily movements with other people. Thinking with symbols and metaphors and imagining an enchanted world can mediate, for us, different ways of experiencing the world. Should we take a moment and be impressed by our minds' ability to create meaning?

Section Two

Images' Entanglements with Bodies

Images in Our Bodies

Our bodies' entanglement with time and space is a mind-expanding, difficult to grasp, and a very poetic phenomenon. I, you, and every conscious mind of the different species are just one manifestation of that phenomenon, of one reality interacting with itself through images.

Images, the way I think of them, are everything we sense, everything we think, and everything we speak. If the universe were a brain, images would be the neurotransmitters. They are messengers that transmit messages. Images generate different meanings in different bodies and species because we obtain different knowledge and experience of them.

Accumulated knowledge (instinctual, emotional, and intellectual) dominates what kind of meaning we extract from images. The meanings of images among human societies are, to a great extent, constructed by these societies. Hence, Images can be shaped and reshaped forever. They can be demonized, normalized, or sublimated according to society's understanding of them. Most importantly, however, is that when we export our notion of an image and how we think of it, we shape its meaning and affect how others interpret it. This is very important because it influences how we relate to each other and other life forms. Making space for variant interpretations helps us overcome the illusion that an image could have one static meaning that adheres to it by nature. An art exhibition can be viewed as such space.

Processing Images

The flow of images in our bodies is only partially conscious. Bringing them into consciousness and/or expressing them in a work of art is the challenge. In my art practice, I try to collage fragments of fluctuated images and create a visual instance that suggests stories and meanings.

All types of images can be used as a source for my work: whether they are perceptual, mental, or conceptual, I try to allow them to intra-act freely in my body, without categorizing or labeling them. I think creativity arises when unique connections happen between different types of images.

Pencils and papers or the digital screen are usually the first places where my work takes form. I like the speed of registering thoughts and feelings. I search for the work through sketching, and when I find it, the work suggests its materials. At

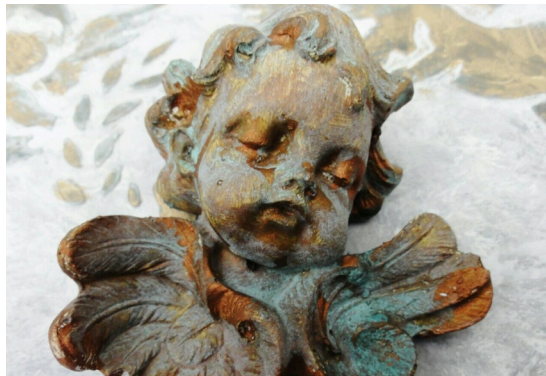
this stage, a clearer image of the work starts to appear. The suggested materials take me through another journey of sensing and making sense. I allow materials to inspire me, to speak volumes, and to mean. These meanings adhere to the concept of work. I cannot unthink the performative meaning of materials in my work. Oil painting has been my favorite medium for a long time. However, I find it hard to resist the temptation to work with the space when space is offered to me.

My mind is another place where a lot of work happens, my mind is a mobile studio. I do so much work there. However, I find working only in the head unhealthy; It needs to be paralleled with my hands speaking my mind.

Stories of images

The Story of Broken Kitsch:

We had many objects displayed at home when I was a kid. Few were costly objects made of porcelain and crystal. Others were kitsch figurines made of plaster: Religious statues from all sorts of religions and cultures, angels, birds, boys and girls engaged in different activities. Kitsch or not, they were all subject to breakage with my brothers and me playing at home. The figurines broke mostly in the neck, which was scarier to us than breaking any other object. Costly or not, they were all valuable to my mom. She would spend the whole night patiently repairing a broken kitsch figurine. She would glue it, sand it, and repaint it. The next morning the figurine would be standing proudly again, with hardly any visible marks of trauma.



Internet photo

Broken kitsch as an Element of Creative Work:

At home, we were raised in a culture of anti-consumerism. We had little awareness about environmental issues back then, but we learned that we shouldn't waste things because everything is made by hard work, and everything can hold meaning. We thought of squandering as arrogance and disrespectful to the blessings of life. We didn't throw anything away until it became impossible to repair, reuse, or repurpose. The impulse to repair broken things is almost compulsive in my body. In my work, I will place this compulsion against my desire to control images through destructive acts to create an endless cycle of breakage and reparation.

The Story of Grief:

In January 2020, in my cousin's car, on our way to Damascus back from my dad's funeral in Latakia city, I rested my eyes for a second and was struck by a flash of an image. Most parts of the image were clearly visible to my mind's eye. I couldn't stare at it; it escaped me quickly, my awareness boosted up and scared it away. I took an Ipad and rendered it quickly. Then, I looked out the window and was hypnotized by the landscape of ruin in the countryside near Damascus. I saw more horizons and fewer buildings where home used to be for thousands of people. I felt grateful that my father died of natural causes.



An Ipad drawing by me. 2020



A mobile photo of the ruins near Damascus city. 2020

Grief as an Element of Creative Work:

A couple of months before this incident, I visited the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. I guess my admiration for the Deities with many arms made their image remain in me. The many arms symbolize immense power and the ability to do several things at the same time. But what does it mean to give such power to a griever?

Grieving comes along with feelings of heaviness and emptiness. I sensed that clay is a suitable material to translate this subject. Clay is heavy, both physically and metaphorically. It carries the remains of countless past lives, of humans and

non-humans. We, the living, are connected to clay. For my show, I've processed 350kg of clay to build an icon with many hands.

The Story of a Heavy Burden

A couple of years ago, in Damascus. I witnessed a woman in her 60s or 70s passing by the street. She looked very poor; her clothes looked torn and very dirty. There was a thick layer of black grease covering her skin. She was wearing odd footwear that looked urgently made for survival: a linen fabric wrapped around her feet and tied with a linen rope. She was wearing incredibly many layers of clothes for that boiling time of the summer. Another linen rope was tied around her waist, gathering the heavy layers together. She was dragging behind her a big burlap bag made of plastic, like the ones they use to sell rice or sugar in the local market. The bag looked quite heavy and was torn in the bottom because of all the dragging. One could almost measure the distances she walked by the size of that rip. From the rip, more clothes and pieces of fabric were coming out and scraping the dirty street. The woman wasn't begging for anyone's attention. Neither was she giving attention to anyone. She looked unconcerned with the world around her. She looked...sane, but perhaps on the edge of madness.

Heavy Burden as an Element of Creative Work

The memory feels like a heavy burden. It has been haunting me to take a creative form. I tried to make an artwork from it but I struggled so much with that, and eventually decided to give it up. At a late stage of my exhibition-making, I discovered that I've actually done an artwork that might be connected to this story. A costume made of linen, the same fabric I use for my painting. On its back, tens of sacks are hanging, filled with rice and coins. The costume weighs around 4kg. I had it on me when I performed the breakage of the sculpture.

The Story of Horned-Caps

In ancient Mesopotamia, horned-caps were a symbol of divinity and lordship. The wild cattle bull must have inspired significant awe in people. This might explain the use of this animal as a visual metaphor for gods and heroes. The horned cap was worn by all the gods and goddesses of Sumer.



Akkadian cylinder seal, c.2300BC

Horned-Cap as an Element of Creative Work

Other than utility, headwears communicate timeless ideas of cultural identity. They can hold cultural and symbolic meanings: Power, prestige, status, and spiritual beliefs. Headwear still plays a prominent role in religion, social rituals, and ceremonies. It's an act of sympathetic magic that is still widely popular today. I've given my sculpture a horned-cap that also looks like a bug or a parasite. I find the human obsession with omnipotence very intriguing.

Section Three

The Desire to Control Images

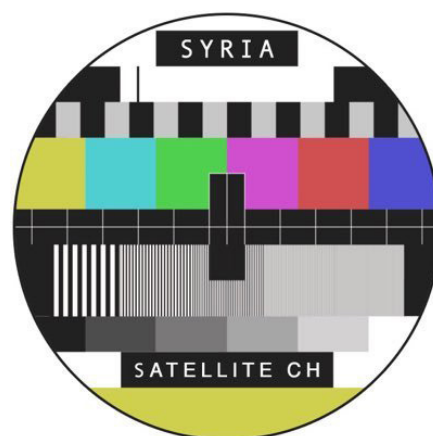
Parasitic Images

I came to think of images as parasites when I looked back at my life and realized that violent images hegemonized my imagination. Images with strong negative emotions that invade a large space of the mind, produce anxiety, and dominate the idea of self-identity, are what I call parasitic.

Growing up in Syria, I was exposed, at length, to extremely disturbing footage of war violence. Syria has been in a state of war (and fought several major wars) since the establishment of Israel's state in 1948. My generation and I lived our whole lives under a state of emergency, which the government maintained necessary to defend against plots by 'enemies' in the region. We were brought up as soldiers, not children. At school, we wore military uniforms, studied military classes, and were subject to a strict regime similar to the military regime. At home, the TV was usually turned on all day, and the breaking news banner constantly signaled dangerous red. The screen showed images of destroyed buildings, smoke, fire, rockets, tanks, bombings, armies, army aircraft, distressed people, piles of dead bodies, and flags... colorful flags. Even the motion graphics announcing the news repeated cruel images of violence like mantras. Violence leaked into our childhood; a lot of the games we played were acting out conflicts. Violence leaked into our language; Arabic expressions of everyday-life use the metaphors of war and death excessively, even when expressing love.

Armed conflicts that occurred in the MENA region since I was born (listing only those which resulted in over 1000 human life loss):

Date	Conflict	Casualties
1980–1988	Iran–Iraq War	1,000,000–1,250,000
1986	South Yemen Civil War	5,000–12,000
1990–1991	Gulf War	40,000–57,000
1991	1991 uprisings in Iraq	50,000–100,000
1994	1994 civil war in Yemen	7,000–10,000
1998	Operation Desert Fox	2,000
2003–2011	Iraq War	109,032–650,726
2004–2014	Shia insurgency in Yemen	8,500–25,000
2006–	Iran–Israel proxy conflict	~2000
2009–2015	South Yemen Insurgency	2,100+
2010–2015	Yemeni al-Qaeda crackdown	3,000+
2011–2014	Egyptian crisis (2011–14)	7,000+
2011–	Yemeni Crisis (2011–present)	9,000+
2011–	Syrian Civil War	250,000–470,000+
2014–2017	Iraqi Civil War (2014–2017)	73,361+
2015–	Yemeni Civil War	50,000+
2017–	Iraqi insurgency (2017–present)	5,000+



As a teenager growing in these conditions, I felt a need to control my reality through magical thinking. I thought I could capture 'Evel' on paper. I poured my violent emotions onto papers as both drawings and texts and scrabbled over them or ripped them off. These practices didn't help me overcome my trouble with parasitic images. They might have played some cathartic role, but I was still consuming and reproducing images of violence. It took a lot of practice to learn how to turn anxiety into critical attention and to turn aggression into meaningful action. To think through practical solutions instead of falling victim to the unfocused anxiety that parasitic images produce. I believe that most of the artworks I create, by impulse, are a sublimation to the aggressive energy I feel in my body. It's a desire to control images coming in and out of my body.

Today, I meet anxiety with this mantra:

I take one action at a time.

There is no emergency.

There is no emergency.

Falling for the Narrative/Making the Icon

A local story in the Syrian land says that the first crime on earth, after Adam and Eve's shameful descent from heaven, happened in Damascus. On top of 'Qasioun' mountain, Cain killed his brother Abel. Many claims that Abel was buried there in a cave known as "Cave of Blood."

Many cultural narratives draw a negative image of us humans. According to the mentioned one, not only are we inherently sinful for eating an apple, but we are also inherently violent! Thinking with this narrative, one could easily embrace suffering as the meaning of life on earth. One could also accept the violence in the world (including the one inflicted by humans) as a fated reality necessary for some sort of a 'grand narrative.' The risk with such narratives is that they reduce violent acts to only stories instead of viewing them as a challenge to social change.

Despite my doubts about whether anything at all is written in what we call 'human nature.' I like the perspective that Jeane-Marie Muller proposes in his paper "Non-Violence in Education" (2002). Muller says:

"[I]t is not violence which is written in human nature, but aggressiveness. Violence is not aggressiveness itself, but just one expression of it; and it is not a necessity of nature that aggressiveness should be expressed by violence." (p.18)

I like this view because it doesn't negate the energy I feel in my body. Muller says that aggressiveness is fire-like energy, "it can do good or harm, destroy or create." This fire, I think, is the desire to change, to create. It's the power of many hands.

In her book *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*, Melanie Klein argues that aggression is a fundamental part of human nature. She empha-

sizes that there is no division between the ambiguous feelings of love and hate in the human mind. “[F]eelings of love and tendencies to reparation develop in connection with aggressive impulses and in spite of them.” (p.306) Klein believes that these emotions first appear in the early infantile stage. According to her, love and hate emotions struggle in the baby’s mind, and this struggle persists throughout life. Klein writes in-depth about how the baby develops destructive phantasies against the mother, who the baby at times perceives as a whole bad object. The baby thinks that these phantasies actually take place, and this generates in her/him feelings of guilt and sorrow. The baby then wishes to make reparation to the mother and to heal her imaginary injuries. Klein’s object-relations theory helps me accept the ambiguity of my own emotions and overcome the naive narratives that claim that there is ‘whole good’ or ‘whole bad’ in the world. Even though I still crave narratives that simplify our chaotic world, there seems to be no such one.

To draw back to Haraway’s words about living between “awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures”. I feel that the absence of a grand narrative that promotes a savior or promises salvation and justice urgently demands us to start writing our own realities. When we tell and retell the same story, we tend to believe it, and perhaps we fall in love with it. To believe in a narrative, in my view, is to give it power, to make an icon of it.

Breaking the Icon

Iconoclasm (from Greek: icon smashing) has occurred throughout history and across cultures. Diverse political, social, and religious groups used iconoclastic acts to protest undesired reality and announce aspired change. Iconoclasm is such an interesting act, I think, in both its contemporary and historical contexts. It creates an image that is more powerful than the one it has destroyed. Iconoclasts often leave traces of the destroyed image as a sign of its powerlessness. This paradoxically implies that the image played a certain role to them and that it was, in fact, a powerful image. Most iconoclast vandalizes images not to erase them but to deviate their meaning. The images are used to send a message. It’s a sense of construction and destruction intimately related.

I never settled on agreeing or disagreeing with iconoclastic acts. Even though I don’t see them as solution-oriented practices, I tend to justify them when I agree with the transmitted meaning and share the desire to control the targeted image. After all, shouldn’t we use the power of public space and symbols to convey meanings? A big statue is usually associated with the image of gods or heroes, but who gets to represent what through such a form?

The sculpture I built is a reminder of monuments. I’ve smashed it to the ground as a way to release some of my iconoclastic impulses. Except, I have this compulsion to repair broken things, and now I’m assembling the pieces together. This is

a work of unsettling; the cycle of breakage and reparation is a symptom of its concept.

Icons are both material and mental. Statues can be erected in the heart and be internal and personal. Our ideologies can become stiff like a dead object, hostile to new ideas even if beneficial to us. In other cases, we may become consumers of trendy ideologies. We extract superficial meanings of kitschy representations made available for us in the capitalist market. We commodify other's cultures and rituals, driven by a desire to possess a piece of their gods, heroes, or narratives.

Either way, I think it is absurd to believe that full control over images is possible. Images are contaminating; they migrate through narratives and entangle with bodies. This is why many people are killed: for the images that they carry in them. Images cannot be destroyed, but they can be diversified and distorted.

Reparative Mourning

“How can I keep silent? How can I stay quiet?
My friend, whom I loved, has turned to clay,
my friend Enkidu, whom I loved has turned to clay.
Shall I not be like him, and also lie down,
never to rise again, through all eternity?”
— The Epic of Gilgamesh

When we lose a loved person, we are challenged to contemplate the ungraspable concept of death. We mourn and grieve. We perhaps feel that by staying with the pain, we stay closer to our loss.

In a state of war, one becomes too familiar with loss. Grief can become a habit, an identity, and a culture. I fear that this might hinder us from taking action. I fear it may inhibit our fire-like energy. Even in mourning, we need to care for our children, think of solutions, and take action. How to break habits based on sorrow, shame, or guilt, when the loss is too familiar? How to mourn constructively?

We can't bring back our loss by magical thinking or a work of phantasy. Yet, our bodies urge us to do something. To contain my losses, I occupy my body with hard labor and my thinking with solvable puzzles. I start a project that requires hard work and creative thinking. If I don't find troubles to solve, I invent ones.

I also try to remind myself that the past is nothing to be proud or ashamed of. It's just the narrative we tell. It's nothing to identify with. It's not us. It's just the narrative we choose to tell. When I feel conditioned to search for myself in the narrative, I start from the beginning and tell the full story: I tell how life on earth started 3.5 billion years ago, how we connect to the universe, earth, and every living being. The stars, the first cells, the bacteria, we're all part of one inseparable wave of connections.



A Story to Continue

I would like to end this essay with a story about how I learned to swim. My parents signed my brothers and me at a sports hall. One by one, the coach would carry us and throw us into the middle of the pool. We would thrash, trying anything and everything to keep above the surface, until we managed to get hold of his extended wooden stick. We then had a brief moment to catch our breaths before we were thrown into the water again. This was their teaching method, and my parents paid them actual money.

Retrospectively, this story is annoyingly funny to me. I want to draw an analogy from it to explain my attitude towards new scary things. In my learning processes, I keep jumping into mysterious waters. I do that forcefully because I find hesitation discomforting and painful. I take my learning very seriously; having gone through poor teaching methods as a kid, I greatly appreciate the education I'm offered right now.

With this project, "The Making and Breaking of an Icon", I've thrown myself into a deep sea. I know that this water won't be easy to navigate, but I'm willing to take the risk, for there are valuable meanings hidden deep inside the water; it is a knowledge that I desire.

Nada Ali
2021

