

LEAKING

ZouZou Group's Radical Practice of Un/Framing the Syrian Uprising and Civil War

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Abstract

The challenges and constraints to visibility are what underwrite and impel the content and form of – *door open* –, a three-channel video installation by ZouZou Group. The collective is formed of two anonymous female artists, one living in Syria, the other in England, who exchanged photo and video material that they recorded between 2014 and 2019 in Damascus and countries that impacted the course of the Syrian uprising and civil war, such as England, Germany and Russia. But instead of picturing direct visual evidence of violence, – *door open* – exposes the conditions of its creation by manifesting the effects of warfare on the formal processes of its production. In doing so, ZouZou Group developed a visual vocabulary and aesthetic language to transcend the binary victim-perpetrator narrative and to convey forms of quotidian, structural, and networked violence. Considering their practice as a radicalised form of framing and leaking, I take this article as an occasion to reflect on responsive research methods that might disrupt and realign structures of visibility from within.

On the left of three screens, a narrow camera frame shows two bare feet walking in circles, one foot placed carefully in front of the other. The ground is tiled white and occasionally covered with orange leaves. The sense of restless confinement evoked by the pacing is contrasted on the middle screen with a view through a window onto green treetops under a blue sky. Both images break off when a female voice with a soft Arab accent remarks soberly: 'It's really very hard to see.'



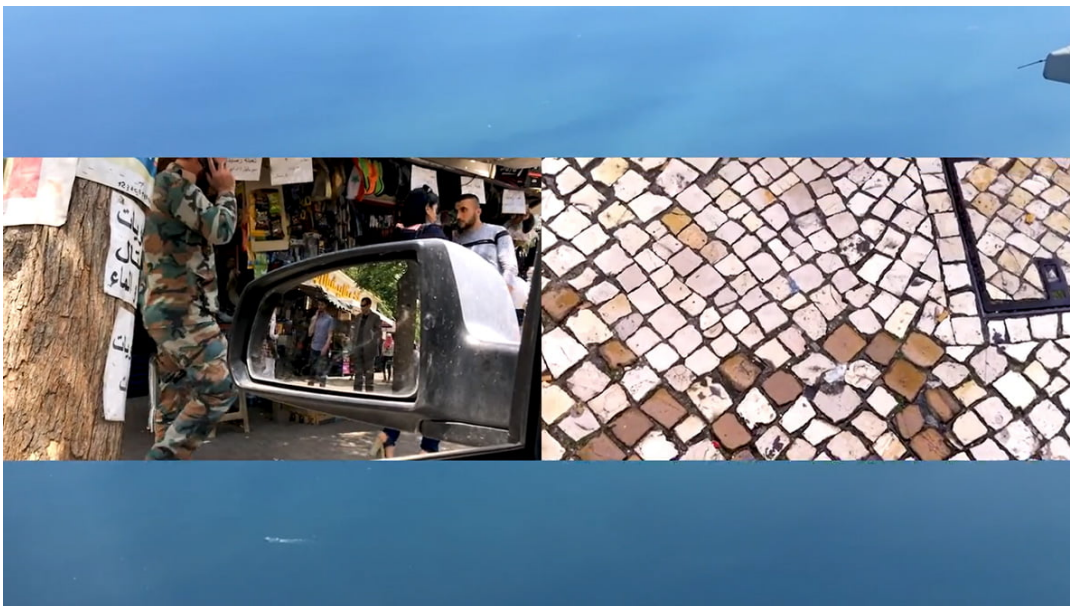
ZouZou Group, still from door open , 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

The challenges and constraints to visibility are what underwrite and impel the content and form of *door open* , a work by the collective ZouZou Group. Formed of two anonymous female artists, one living in Syria, the other in England, they exchanged photo and video material between 2014 and 2019. The screen on the left of the three-channel video installation assembles mobile phone footage recorded in Damascus, whereas the right-hand screen gathers video clips filmed in Russia, England, Sweden, Portugal, China, Greece, and overlooking Germany countries that have had an impact on the course of the Syrian uprising and civil war and the ensuing refugee migrations. The screens speak to and across each other, in a form of call and response between two female voices that stand for the Syrian and the British artists. Their visual dialogue is structured by voiceover and intertitles that crossfade a video loop of a white boat on deep blue water filmed through an aeroplane window. As friends and collaborators, the dialogue draws upon their ongoing online conversations and messages, contextualising and commenting on the visual material they have shared with each other, and giving insight into the various difficulties they have encountered in doing so. Together, they list eleven impediments to their collaboration, including 'Virtual & Physical Obstacles,' 'Mobility/Immobility,' 'Bitesize Communication,' 'Fear of the Other,' and 'Fear of the Self'. But instead of attempting to circumvent or sidestep these obstacles, they integrate them in such a way that they come to determine the visual language, structure, and substance of their artwork.

I remembered that right at the beginning of our working together, Amal said that what she really wanted to do is to show the ways in which people are still being creative and positive despite the conditions they were living under in Syria. I realised that, for her, the fact that Google Translate would turn 'impediments' into 'problems' meant that the structure of the film was not about the impediments to making the film, but actually that it was positioning Syrians as having problems and, thus, as victims. And that was exactly the opposite of what she had wanted to do. [...] So, although from my perspective, I still think that 'Eleven Impediments' needs to be the title, actually, from a Syrian perspective, it doesn't.

Image production and dissemination in Syria is closely monitored and highly charged. Restrictions on photography were imposed by Hafez al-Assad and severely tightened under his son Bashar al-Assad's regime

since the uprisings in 2011. Until today, acts of filming are punishable by incarceration, torture, and death. Yet, in the demonstrations and increasingly militarised confrontations, state as well as non-state actors have engaged in struggle with and through the image from which derived a format of conflict communication in which visibility and violence are dramatically intertwined. As Donatella della Ratta asserts, ‘the act of filming has become so inherently connected to Syria’s post-2011 everyday life that the camera has been turned into a device to perform violence, and the quintessential tool to resist it’.^[1] At this time, so Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, ‘picturing atrocity is an integral part of the activity that produces atrocity [...] and of the conditions that enable its appearance, its very being’.^[2] Characteristically blurry, hasty, low resolution and narrowly focused photos and videos streaming from Syria were credited by international media networks with immediacy and authenticity. The emerging aesthetic of “cruel images” generated an unending supply of images of suffering and destruction that propelled processes of anonymisation and the banalisation of violence. Ultimately, every new image of the Syrian civil war ‘may begin to appear “something-like,” though not quite, but rather “similar-to” the last addition to an inventory,’ as Oraib Toukan noted.^[3] A decade after the onset of the conflict, we face a disjunction between a seeming overrepresentation of the Syrian subject and an inability to see that subject.



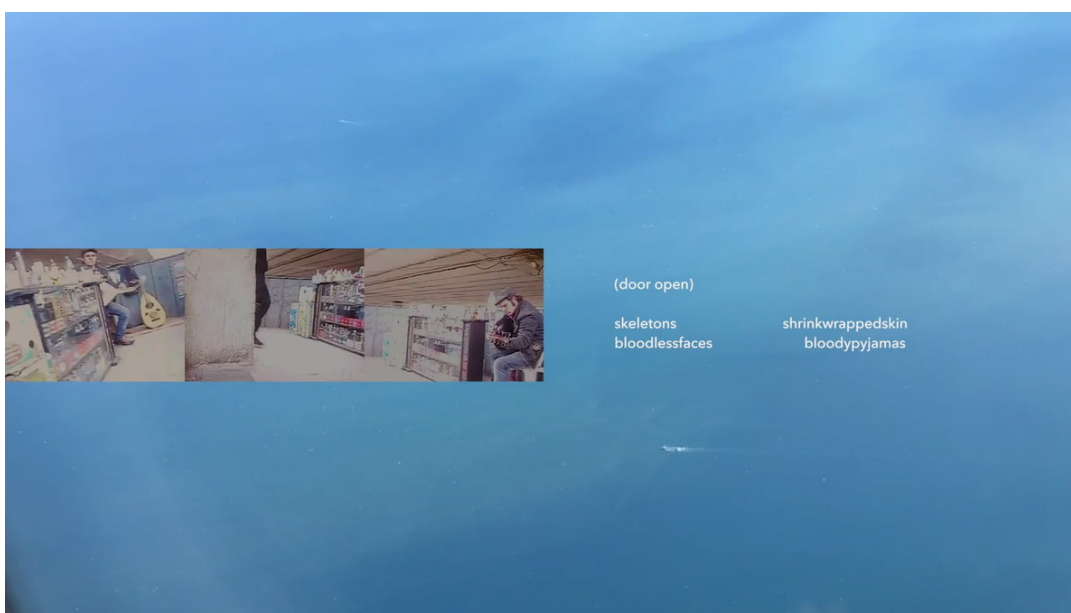
ZouZou Group, still from door open , 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

It is a relentless quandary, the disjunction between what feels like an overrepresentation of the Syrian subject, and a genuine frustration with an inability to see that subject. To explain this paradox, Susan Sontag’s original claim might resound that too many images of suffering anaesthetise viewership. While she rightly observes that the ‘account of war’s cruelties is fashioned as an assault on the sensibility of the viewer,’^[4] this assertion leads into a theoretical dead end and the problem persists, no matter how many cruel images have been overlooked. In order to gain a sensate understanding of war, as well as a sensate opposition to war, so Judith Butler contends, ‘[t]he critique of violence must begin with the question of the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?’^[5]

Throughout my research, I try to take this question to heart and yet struggle to grasp its depths and dimensions. As my perspective and positionality are always already implied in this question, how can I situate myself and my research in response to it? Rather than evoking a shared human quality, this question rather demands a careful consideration of different and differential patterns of recognition and regimes of representation and their very

real implications for body politics and lifeworlds. Recognition and representation are, in this sense, not only symbolic but also normative acts that participate in the constitution of communities of belonging. As spectator, I am at the receiving end of neocolonial patterns of recognition and hegemonic regimes of representation, and, as researcher, I am prone to extending them. As such, my research on ZouZou Group is marked by many of the very impediments that underlie *door open*, and this article testifies to my failures as well as continuing efforts to overcome them. By doing so, I hope to learn from ZouZou Group's visual practice and to harness the fallibility and limitation of my research as a productive impetus, ethical compass, and critical measure for my academic practice.

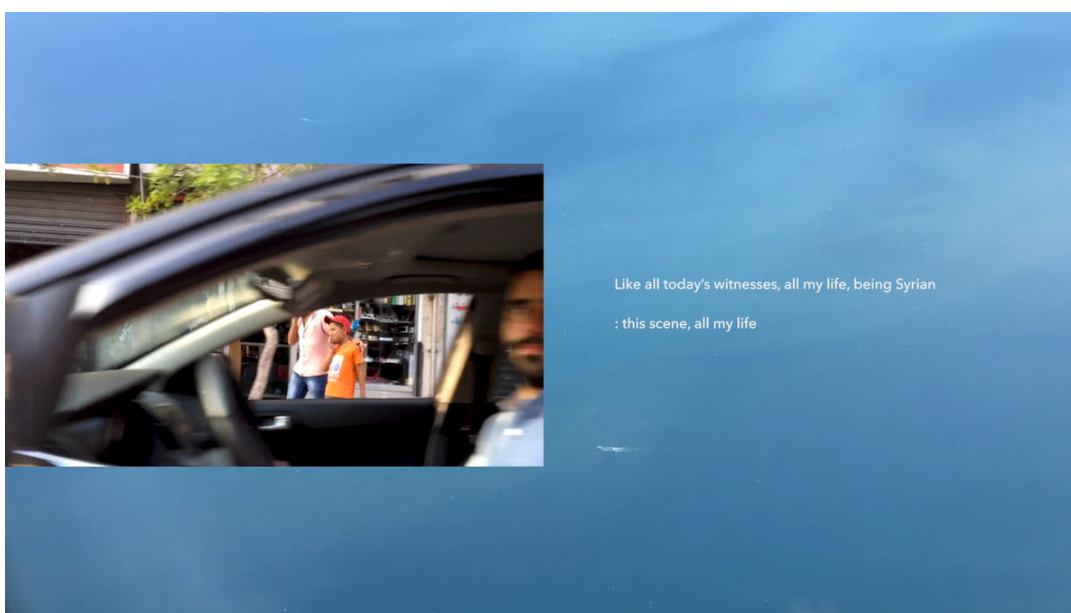
The untethered violence, of which the Syrian civil war is one particularly poignant example, presents a shift in the conditions of visibility and intelligibility. This calls for new visual vocabularies and aesthetic languages that transcend the binary victim-perpetrator narrative and convey forms of quotidian, structural, and networked violence without reproducing them. Butler suggests that cameras and their images form part of an extended materiality of warfare which comprises the entire social sphere in which a photograph is shown, seen, circulated, publicised, censored, contested, and debated. Interrogating the framing of war and conflict in media reporting, she discerns between ways of framing 'that will bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness, that will allow us to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for their value as lives;' and 'frames that foreclose responsiveness, where this activity of foreclosure is effectively and repeatedly performed by the frame itself its own negative action, as it were, toward what will not be explicitly represented.'^[6] As such, the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself and, by extension, our perception of the reality in which we operate. Prior to the events and actions represented within the frame, there is an active if unmarked delimitation of the field of vision, the non-thematised background of what is or can be represented. The networks within and along which images circulate and the platforms by which they are disseminated rest upon differential epistemologies and infrastructures, addressing distinct publics, allowing for varying forms of political action, and enabling particular claims to be made while foreclosing others. Thus, our visual apprehension of violence is an occasion in which we implicitly consent or dissent to the conduct of violence, or where our ambivalent relation is formulated; where we are also able to pose questions about what and how violence is presented, and what absences structure this visual field.



ZouZou Group, still from *door open*, 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

If those of us who watch the wars our governments conduct at a distance are visually solicited and recruited into violence, under what conditions can we refuse this recruitment effort? Since what we are being recruited into is a certain framing of reality, both its constriction and its interpretation, so this article argues, we need to generate leaks in order to expose and break through the structuring function of the frame. Framing cannot contain what it seeks to make visible or intelligible, invisible or unintelligible. This means that ‘the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version. And so, when the frame jettisons certain versions of war, it is busily making a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resources for resistance.’^[7] I want to suggest that one potential strategy to reconfigure the field of vision and to realign patterns of recognition and representation are radicalised practices of framing and leaking such as those undertaken by ZouZou Group.

ZouZou Group does not ‘want to hear any more about the drama of war,’ and thus enquires into ‘how to make art that people will not be bored by’. In order to shun the inclination to having their images understood via resemblance and the colonial gaze, the collective refrains from including any direct visual evidence of violence and destruction in their artwork. Instead, *door open* exposes the dreadful conditions of its creation by manifesting the effects of warfare on the formal processes of its production. The video installation functions like ‘a seismograph, a register of a particular moment in time that, through the very form it takes (or does not take), discloses a state of historical, social, political, cultural, and individual crisis.’^[8] By documenting small gestures and quotidian scenes instead of dramatic events, their images register the ways in which citizens and their lived environments adjust to violence, conflict, and their multiple dimensions of deprivation. Formal indicators, such as narrow camera frames and focal points, a rejection of panoramic shots and depth of field, and the denial of distinctly identifiable times, places and people through close-ups, evoke the disquieting feeling of ‘a sort of “neverendingness”,’ stuck between an erased past and a blocked future. This is also signified by the lack of images picturing the horizon in the Syrian artist’s footage, leading her British counterpart to suggest that ‘if you cannot represent the horizon, then you cannot depict the future’. Theirs can be considered a practice of leaking that calls for a critical, sensitive, and affective attunement to the processes, dynamics, and politics that condition and shape image production under a perpetuated state of emergency.



ZouZou Group, still from *door open*, 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

The ways in which images act within and upon the field of vision is not only determined by a confrontation of the frame from within but also by the tensions and ambitions that forge the frame from outside, namely the contexts and platforms within which images are disseminated and come to inhabit the present. As Butler notes, ‘the way that they are shown, the way they are framed, and the words used to describe what is shown, work together to produce an interpretative matrix for what is seen.’^[9]

And this is what door open is based on, how digital images can be transferred, how data is being stored and used on social media and elsewhere. How we can try and have, as it were, real life human voices going across the difficulty of these digital platforms. [...] We need to be very aware of the frictions of data and the frictions between one image and another. And, in this work, the frictions of data are a good metaphor for the frictions of understanding one another.

Technology enables *door open* to come into being but also limits the final form it can assume. The Syrian artist must access the internet by proxy to avoid detection, and maintaining anonymity is a key concern for ZouZou Group. This involves concealing the names of the artists and their supporters and advisors but also applies to the visual material that is made public, a carefully composed selection of video clips that give no indications as to the place of residence or personal environment of any of the protagonists. Because she can only film while pretending to read on her phone or through windows of safely secluded spaces such as private apartments or cars, the footage from Damascus appears surreptitious, showing little more than pavement and fleeting images of figures passing by her camera. ZouZou Group’s practice of leaking not only plays out in technological terms, finding leaks in digital networks to transmit image material and to contact each other, but also on the level of content, conveying the real dimensions of violence and terror through seemingly everyday and banal scenes. As such, their narrow frames are indeed images in spite of all, ‘images that have been shot and uploaded in spite of the danger and against all the odds’.^[10]

Amal was uploading photos and videos to Facebook, and I asked her to explain them to me so that I could understand better. But it was difficult to make each other understand what we meant and wanted. She constantly changed focus and I wasn’t giving her enough feedback. I just couldn’t do it because I only speak English and the power relations were just crazy. What was I going to do if I upset her? How could I deal with that?

While distant in spatial and temporal terms, ZouZou Group’s visual practice demonstrates the potential to remain close in affective and imaginative ones. Zooming in on a dark cloud of smoke rising over Damascus, the British narrator reiterates the Syrian’s initial claim: ‘It is hard to see the fire. It is hard to imagine the destruction.’ The film footage recorded by the British artist seems to continuously question the position of its own production and the potential of its visual response. The panorama of the cloud of smoke over Damascus is met with a 360-degree shot of a park outside of St Petersburg; views of street passages through narrow window frames of the Syrian artist’s grandmother’s apartment are mirrored by window views onto trees in southern England, and the confinement of mobility in Syria becomes more evident in contrast to images of travelling in trains and planes. What might at first sight be disregarded as a lack of initiative and criticality is, I suggest, ZouZou Group’s virtue: their collaboration attests to a courage to remain silent while listening intently, to work through visual preconceptions and fallacies by looking deeply, to hold out in order to nurture a caring and considerate relationship. To this end, the British artist documented her own process of looking: she films the videos by her Syrian collaborator playing on her laptop or reflected in train windows, and records herself retracing these

images as charcoal drawings. Thus, she introduces a meta-level of self-reflection into the image frame, a liminal space to decelerate the stream of images and the operations of the frame, to question the position of her own image production and the potential of a visual response.

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

ZouZou Group, video excerpt from *door open* , 2014–2019.
Courtesy of the artists.

The sense of shame that the British artist refers to stems from a fear to misinterpret or even overlook the actual effects of warfare evinced in the images she receives from Syria. For instance, she admits to having missed the fact that the canopies over the market were the reason for her Syrian counterpart to make this photo. These canopies are made from tents which were destined for refugee camps, a manifestation of structural violence and violations of social and human rights which becomes visible not in singular events but in quotidian gestures and environments. But what saves (or prevents) the British artist from privileged ignorance are her continued efforts (and failures) to listen, see, understand, and imagine something of what her partner in Syria might feel at the disintegration of her world; a disintegration not just of buildings and cities, but of values, trust, and dignity.



ZouZou Group, still from *door open* , 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

A cruel image ‘raises [the] bar of shame for even looking at such woe, and also for not having looked prior. I either look, or look away.’^[11] In this abyss looms a second, even more relentless quandary, the perpetuation of violence and participation in conflict through looking at it, and a genuine desire to express solidarity and foster resistance by looking at it. But unlike cruel images that ‘represent a degraded subject, become materially degraded with time and travel, and degrade a subject further by virtue of being seen,’^[12] *door open* does not seek to represent degradation and thus violence, but to expose the violence that is inscribed in the frame of

what is represented. It does so, I want to argue, by focusing on the margins of the image, by extending the process of image reception, by collapsing distance and proximity within the image, by abandoning any position of authority and interpretative sovereignty, by exposing the stains of violence on the act of seeing; in short, *door open* operationalises the operations of the frame. ZouZou Group open up leaks and break through the structuring function of the frame, exposing the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the structures of visibility and intelligibility. New visual vocabularies and aesthetic languages for representing violence not only call for accessing alternative contents but for reconfiguring received renditions of reality to show how they can and do break with themselves within which other possibilities for apprehension emerge. Forging a critical sensitivity towards the operations of the image frame generates leaks that expand the field of vision, to evoke Christina Sharpe, ‘toward seeing and reading otherwise; toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame.’^[13]

I want to suggest that ZouZou Group developed a practice of leaking precisely by framing the frame, or, indeed, the framer, which involves a highly reflexive overlay of the field of vision. Rather than resulting in rarified forms of reflexivity, so Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, ‘to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. [...] Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.’^[14] The point here is not to engage in hyper-reflexivity, but to consider what forms of authority and coercion are inscribed in the frame and, by doing so, to ‘interpret the interpretation that has been imposed upon us, developing our analysis into a social critique of regulatory and censorious power.’^[15]

Embedded in the digital sensorium that connects us through social networks and media platforms to distant violence and conflict, we are no longer confined to the kind of voyeuristic spectatorship that Sontag deplored. Paolo Favero goes so far as to claim that in order to understand the meaning of images and their circulation today, ‘we are increasingly asked to pay attention to the context surrounding them and hence to questions of materiality, social relations, community-making, networks, movement and space’.^[16] With regard to our contemporary ‘mediapolis,’ Roger Silverstone coined the term ‘proper distance’^[17] to denote the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated relationships to create and sustain a sense not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation, and responsibility. However, I certainly do not want to suggest that digital connectivity establishes a link between the lived experience of faraway violence and conflict and the privileged viewer that would be yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. My point is that distance and proximity are not just physical, geographical, or material categories, but ethical ones. As such, the overcoming of distance requires more than digital connectivity; it requires an intention and responsibility to position oneself in proximity with another. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes this position as “speaking nearby,” ‘a speaking that does not objectify, that does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. It is a speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without seizing or claiming it.’^[18]

But if you tell me that I can't speak for my friend, then who is ever going to hear her voice? She can't get her voice out. I have to work as a kind of platform through which she can speak, which has to be an honest platform where my own subjectivity and machinations are part of it. It just seems really straightforward to me. [...] The numbers of issues that would prevent us from knowing that Amal even existed are massive. That's how I see it.

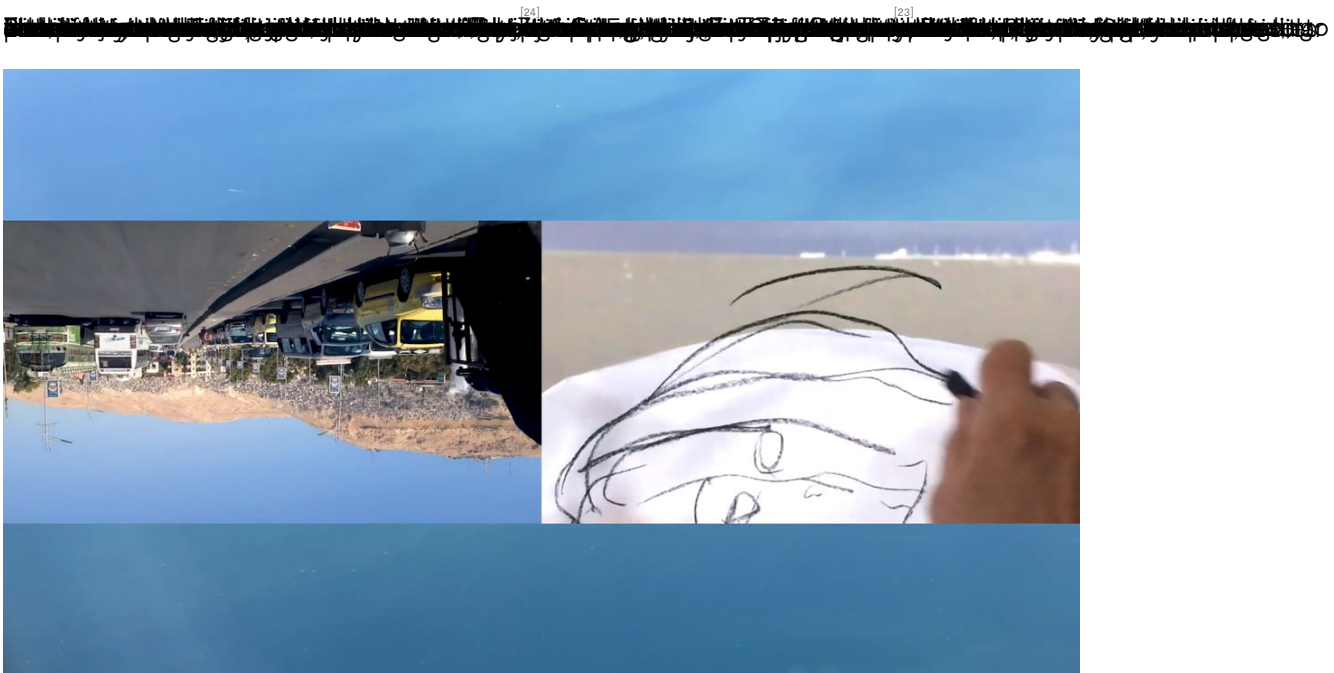


ZouZou Group, still from door open , 2014–2019. Courtesy of the artists.

The experience of my own research and of writing this article can attest to the number of issues that are preventing me from knowing Amal. To maintain strict anonymity, I know and refer to the two female artists throughout this article only by their chosen pseudonyms, Claire and Amal. Because any connection to me or my research might endanger her, I have not yet had direct contact with Amal. Attempts by Claire to act as an intermediary and to forward my questions to Amal or to convey any reactions or responses to me have so far proved unsuccessful. Therefore, I have to rely on statements and perspectives expressed by Claire in an interview I conducted with her and from which I quote in this article. Inevitably, these circumstances reinforce an imbalance in visibility, attention, and, by extension, authority. While the artist duo has developed visual strategies to disrupt such neocolonial patterns of recognition and hegemonic regimes of representation, I am still struggling to develop research methods that could penetrate the frame and generate leaks situated within a practice of care that nonetheless protects the two artists of ZouZou Group.

I cannot purport to occupy a position outside of the sensorium that permeates such patterns of recognition and regimes of representation. There is something to say about the technologies of war that connect us across the globe in everyday digital engagements and create invisible infrastructural proximities. Cruel images have become immanent to my, to our everyday media environments: they appear on our phones; they pop up on Google image searches; they stream on our feeds, undistinguished from other, more pleasant or mundane images. As Daniela Agostinho asserts, ‘the circulation of cruel images has become the very materiality of our digital sensorium, in such a way that we are always embedded in these images and sensorially implicated in the precarity they convey.’^[19] In Sharpe’s words, ‘these images function as a hail to the non Black person. That is, these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged.’^[20] She reminds us that the repetition of visual, discursive, state, and other quotidian and extraordinary violence ‘does not lead to a cessation of violence, nor does it, across or within communities, lead primarily to sympathy or something like empathy. Such repetitions often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence.’^[21] Rather, and here I concur with Sontag, as distant spectators we ought to set aside ‘the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may in ways we might prefer not to imagine be linked to their suffering’.^[22]

Amal said that this work was for a Western audience, not for a Middle Eastern audience. At the time, I wasn't sure why she was saying that. Now, I think she genuinely was saying that the work will make better sense to people who are part of the Western art world and it won't make the same sense for Middle Eastern people. But she may have also been saying that she didn't want it to be shown in the Middle East because she didn't want to be endangered by it. I think it was actually that she was worried, and understandably so. So, I think it's actually safer to think of the work as for a European or North American audience.



ZouZou Group, still from door open , 2014-2019. Courtesy of the artists.

Affect fundamentally concerns relations in encounter and, at the same time, as Brian Massumi argues, is 'positively productive of the individualities in relation.'^[26] With such affective agency, so Wendy Kozol, 'emotional complexities can destabilise the news media's hegemonic gaze at precarity. [...] These images are politically significant, and sometimes quite powerful, not because they speak a better truth or reach out past Orientalist narratives, but because affective elements within the images refuse a stable or monolithic reading.'^[26] She suggests that such affective instabilities 'turn the gaze back onto the viewer in ways that expose some of the complex visual politics of witnessing precarity.'^[27] Perhaps this is what Sontag indicated, that in seeing images of conflict and violence, we see ourselves seeing, 'that we are those photographers to the extent that we share the norms that provide the frames in which those lives are rendered destitute and abject.'^[28] Hence, the ethical force of such images is to reflect back the final narcissism of our desire to see, and to refuse satisfaction to that narcissistic demand.

My work with ZouZou Group and my research for this article have confronted me with my own narcissistic desire to see, to know, to understand and urged me to enter uncertain grounds where my own fallible interpretation and limited vision are the basis of my thinking and writing. Underneath this unstable foundation lie latent histories and landscapes that I cannot capture or grasp but only sense and imagine, and this is what I can learn from ZouZou Group, by remaining silent while listening intently, working through visual preconceptions and fallacies by looking deeply, holding out in order to nurture a caring and considerate relationship. I want to think of this uncertain ground as the substruction of the field of vision, braced and bolstered by neocolonial patterns

of recognition and hegemonic regimes of representation. And I want to think of the instability and porosity at the core of this field of vision as the very precondition for leaks, where any attempt at structuring through framing inherently bears the risk of leaking. The frame and its leaks are co-constitutive.

I felt like I pivoted my centre to that place and I started looking around, seeing the world, from there as well as from here.

Now more than ever, are we in relationships of moral, affective, and material intimacy with violence, and this calls for a reconsideration of how our senses are solicited by and implicated in the conduct of violence. The visual field provides the frameworks and frameworlds that define the ethical space within which others appear to us. Every image frame delineates a minimal social relationship: the recognition of another person in this field of vision evokes an awareness of the other's intentional standpoint; that is, of their ability to see me, address me, take turns and otherwise communicate about a shared world from a separate perspective. Consequently, the operations of the image frame invite, condition, constrain, and claim an equivalent ethical response from us, spectators even at a distance. As the field of vision is now structured by digital networks, commercial concerns, neocolonial patterns of recognition, and hegemonic patterns of viewing, I want to configure a critical sensitivity toward the operations of the image frame that will raise awareness and demand responsibility not only for what we see but for how we see what we see. This allows for a political and ethical reflection on violence not only by showing its actions and effects but rather by positioning us within the same frames of reference that enable such violence and, so I hope, open up leaks to eschew such violence.

Author's note

ZouZou Group's need for strict anonymity means that their artistic work is difficult to publicise and promote. If interested, readers can contact the author (lisa.deml@mail.bcu.ac.uk) and are invited to share information about ZouZou Group with others who might be interested.

Note about illustrations:

All video stills are taken from the laptop version of *door open*. This version was produced to ensure that Amal has a copy of the work to show in private spaces. However, the artists prefer the 3-channel installation of their work, as it can be seen in exhibitions.

Footnotes

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