

## Civic Engagement, Public Intellectualism, and Art

Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah, Ph.D.

*Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, Agnes Scott College, Georgia, USA*  
*Research Fellow, Global South Research Consortium*

*Abstract:* Revisiting a previously unpublished analysis of the *Clamor* (2016) and *Tekist* (2017) art shows presented at the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, Cockrell-Abdullah considers the spaces in which artists are siting their work so that they may speak to specific public audiences and their social and cultural concerns, and how this work creates sheltered civic space in Kurdish society that allows for open discussion of social problems.

*Keywords:* Kurdish art, Iraqi Kurdistan, *Clamor*, *Tekist*, Sulaimani, site-specific art, intersectionality, conflict

“Call art whatever you want, and call whatever you want art. It’s not important. What is important is challenging tradition. For generations in Sulaymaniyah City, and many other communities, the artistic collective has been restricted by the borders of tradition. Only recently have those boundaries been pushed to encompass an entirely new perspective on what is truly considered art. It is the responsibility of these newer generations to keep breaking the walls of tradition; not to tear down what built the culture, but to create new paths for the culture to travel and allowing that culture to experience the feeling of contemporary artistic expression. And it is our responsibility to support those who are challenging the mores of their society; it is the least that can be given in appreciation of their courage and passion. When one way expires, it gives space and power to the new.”

— Artist Zewar Fadhil<sup>1</sup>

### Call Art Whatever You Want

It started with a question: “How are Iraqi Kurdish artists contesting notions of tradition, history, and the nation? What does an examination of the process of making art, starting from the site of production to the artwork’s visual content to where it meets its audience, tell us about how relationships of power are being negotiated, transformed, or contested?” Nearly a decade later, with sincere thanks for the help and patience of many artists, I learned that the answer to the first part of this question was not simple. Iraqi Kurdish artists are contesting notions of tradition,

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<sup>1</sup> Fadhil, Zewar. Facebook post, February 12, 2017.

history, and the imagining of the Kurdish nation in ways that cannot be easily characterized nor contained within the traditional territories of the gallery or definitions of art. These works are firmly rooted in the local geographies of Kurdistan in which they were sited. I have also learned that artists methods are diverse, highly contextual, intersectional, multi-sited, and fluid. They are curated for and speak to a specific public and to the social and cultural concerns of that public.

The shading, the distinctions, and the shadows in the second part of that question have come to preoccupy my mind in the years since beginning the work of researching contemporary Kurdish art and the work of Kurdish artists in Iraqi Kurdistan. “What does an examination of the process of making art, starting from the site of production to the artwork’s visual content to where it meets its audience, tell us about how relationships of power are being negotiated, transformed, or contested?” One thing it tells us is that defining what is and what is not art is important and means something. The patron class, artists, and society are wrangling with delimiting the range of objects that are referred to as art, and defining a central nature to the art produced by Kurdish artists in Kurdistan. I must disagree with Zewar Fadhil, quoted above, when he states, “*Call art whatever you want, and call whatever you want art. It’s not important.*” How art is defined and who gets to constitute that definition is important, as numerous scholars have pointed out, and it is a highly contextual, intersectional, and multi-sited frontline of conflict for Kurdish artists.<sup>2</sup> As I have argued in earlier published works, an examination of the patron-client relationships of artists in the region suggests that despite structural changes to the Iraqi state and the Kurdish Regional Government that brought about a weakening of the ability of powerful government patrons to support client-artists, the patron-client relationship continues to predominate. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that these relationships are changing and adapting, introducing the element of change into this relationship of power and into other areas of Kurdish political, economic, social, and cultural life.<sup>3</sup>



Audience at the Clamor art show, November 12, 2016 (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

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<sup>2</sup> Clifford 1999; See also Berleant 1964 and Davies 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (1).

Fadhil more accurately observes, “*For generations in Sulaymaniyah City, and many other communities, the artistic collective has been restricted by the borders of tradition. Only recently have those boundaries been pushed to encompass an entirely new perspective on what is truly considered art.*” The boundaries of many traditionally defined relationships within Kurdish society are being pushed. It remains to be seen, however, whether these longstanding relationships—integral to many of the social, political, and economic aspects of Kurdish society—will shift in ways that will allow for the incorporation of a more pluralistic imagining of Kurdish society that reflects both a shifting demographic and its historical contexts.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Fadhil, “*When one way expires, it gives space and power to the new.*”

So then, what does an examination of the process of making art, on the part of Kurdish artists in Iraqi Kurdistan, tell us about how relationships of power are being negotiated, transformed, or contested? The essays and interviews that have come together to form “Making Spaces: Art, Culture & Difference” offer a glimpse into the minds of one group of Kurdish artists and the social and cultural issues that preoccupy their process of art making. These glimpses allow us an opportunity to consider the physical, imagined, private, public, intellectual, gendered, exclusive, historical, linguistic, traditional, and newly created spaces in which artists are siting their work in order to speak to a specific public and to the social and cultural concerns of that public. The importance of the siting of an art object in contemporary artwork has increasingly become a subject of examination, as has the promotion of site-specific art in some circles. If we consider that visual imagery and visual events are constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledges, we can begin to understand the importance of siting. A more traditional approach to uncovering information nested within the art work’s sites comes to us through the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky’s 1972 work on iconographic/iconological analysis.<sup>5</sup> In this type of analysis, we must engage each visual event at three important sites: the Site of Production; the Site of the Image itself, and the Audiencing. Briefly, the Site of Production is where an image is made; the circumstances of the work’s production may contribute toward the effect it has. The Site of the Image itself is its visual content, not merely its symbols, but also the technologies and social practices that have created it. Finally, the site where the image encounters its spectators or users is referred to as its Audiencing—where an image’s meanings are made, negotiated, or rejected.<sup>6</sup> In considering these three sites, we must also consider the modalities within each, including an image’s technology, composition, social relationships, and author. It is tricky to pull apart each of these sites and modalities, as they are exceedingly intertwined and categories overlap with one another.<sup>7</sup> As Miwon Kwon’s 2002 work has shown, historically, art objects could only exist in the space of the museum or gallery and were the objects of commodification for an art market. Since the 1960s, artists looking for ways out of this confinement began to draw attention to the site and its contexts. Increasingly, works of art were created in sites where the art could only exist and be meaningful within the specific circumstances of that site. Site-specific art referenced the artwork’s current location as well as the site as an intersection of production, image, and audience within the built environment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Panofsky 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Rose 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Kwon 2002.

In the essay that follows, I take the opportunity to revisit an unpublished analysis of two art shows, *Clamor* (2016) and *Tekist* (2017), which I previously observed. In my initial analysis of these shows, I considered how the artists presenting at the *Clamor* show at the Fine Arts Institute and the *Tekist* show at the Museum of Modern Art in Sulaimani utilized these specific sites for public art shows in order to engage a citywide audience in critical reflection and questioning of the significance of these sites as spaces that emblemize socio-cultural institutions.<sup>9</sup> Considering the “spatial compositions we reside in,” together with the critical visual methodology put forth by cultural geographer Gillian Rose, helps us to think about the web of social, historical, and political relationships that the artwork is located in and that shaped the work. Rose’s work, informed by the work of Panofsky, helped me to frame the arts events I was observing in a way that considered the visual materials in terms of the interactions and relationships among these three sites.<sup>10</sup> It helped me to grasp the important fact that methods for producing the work in a specific space, together with the ways of interacting with images within a space, all served to mediate the visual effects of those images, thereby impacting the overall messaging of the art.<sup>11</sup> Utilizing this approach, I concluded: “The work of the Concept Art Group, in utilizing the context of the spaces of the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, reveals deep concerns about powerful systemic and social controls within traditional social institutions that creates space to consider the capacities that require further development if there is to be a well-functioning culture of Just Peace.”<sup>12</sup> I interpreted the work of these artists as work that was intended to encourage capacity building in terms of long-term thinking and planning that could potentially create sustainable, constructive relationships between people and that could support long-term peacebuilding, ultimately leading to transformation within Kurdish society.

Challenging the borders of tradition, the work presented in the *Clamor* and *Tekist* shows through the intentional siting helps to illuminate one community’s concerns about its own need to develop existing capacities and skills that will support the building of just structures and a sustainable culture of peace.<sup>13</sup> What are those capacities and skills? What are those “just structures” that would support a sustainable “culture of peace”? These are all subjects that deserve further attention, as do the subjects of public art and site-specific art in Kurdistan. Unfortunately, to maintain a focus, this essay will pay relatively little attention to their important aspects for now, though I expect to expand future research in these areas. In the limited space of this essay, I focus on the separate events of the *Clamor* and *Tekist* shows and suggest that these are examples of a group of individual citizens who are attempting to transform specific public spaces that have historically been rarefied and exclusive spaces available to a circumscribed segment of Kurdish society. Further, I also suggest that these activist-artists are working to transform their society by cultivating citizens’ abilities to accept disparate political views and social attitudes by disrupting certain privileged narratives about Kurdish society, culture, and the Kurdish nation that are produced within and through the spaces of the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Rose 2012; See also Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (1).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Shank and Schirch 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Norton 1995: 33; See also Anderson 2016.

In making such suggestions, my intention is not to attempt to fully answer these questions within this essay, but to use the space of this essay as a tool to frame future questions for research on the subject wherein I will more deeply consider the case of Kurdish activist-artists as an opportunity to further question the relationship of human agency to social structure, to be critical of the idea that civil society does not exist in the Middle East, and to emphasize the contingent argument that the emergence of civil society is a crucial step toward more democratic governance in the region. I also hope to frame future explorations into the often overlooked voluntary associations in the region, such as our group of artist-activists, which demonstrate high levels of political awareness and deliberate attempts at reforms that suggest an increased emphasis on individual rights and freedoms.<sup>15</sup> In the concluding section of this essay, I will not offer neat summative statements, but will instead pose some questions for future research. Let us now consider some specific pieces of artwork from the *Clamor* and *Tekist* shows.



Promotional flyer for the Clamor show (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

## Challenging Tradition: The Clamor Project

The *Clamor Project* was a one-day exhibition of conceptual artworks focused on sound and the memory of sound. As the curating artist puts it, “The everyday noise that makes up our life.”<sup>16</sup> Artists participating in the *Clamor Project* ranged in age from their late-twenties to mid-forties. All had the benefit of higher education abroad and, if not at that moment, had been teachers at the college level. Many had also spent time in Europe, where they might have earned their graduate degree or have had the opportunity to exhibit their work. A few, like the curator and his sister, still live abroad, making frequent visits to Kurdistan. Socially, while they were neither wealthy nor necessarily well-positioned, politically, these individuals do intermingle with political elites at occasions such as the production of this show. It is also important to know that all of the artists in the *Clamor Project* claim a heritage in one of the large urban centers of Iraqi Kurdistan and are

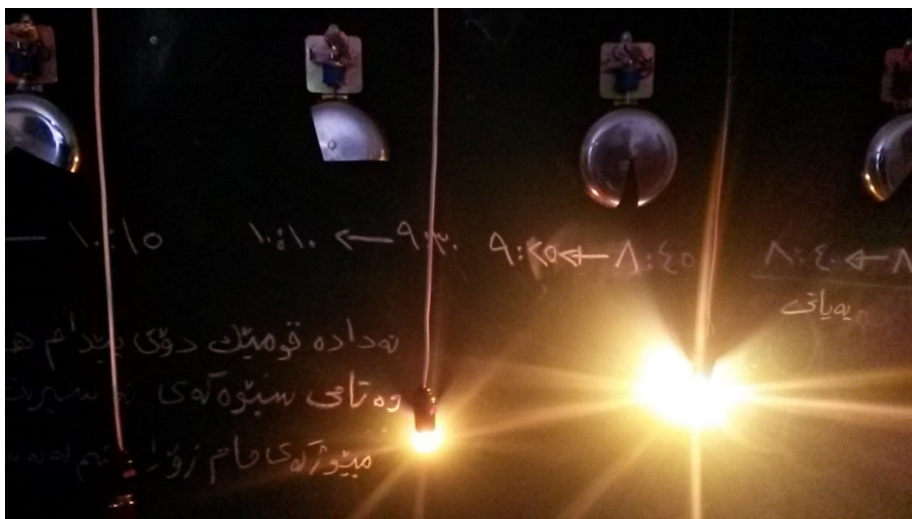
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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 33–34.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with S. Abas, November 12, 2016.

tied to networks of formal schooling, art galleries, and other interest groups that operate within an urban realm.

I have tried to pair images with the discussion of the artwork itself. However, during my visit to this one-day event, I was only able to get a few photos. During my fieldwork in Sulaimani, consistent and dependable electricity service was a constant problem, and it was very common to only have a few hours of electricity at any given time during the day. During the *Clamor Project* show, the electricity went out. It affected my ability to take photos and, more importantly, hindered the presentation of a number of the pieces that used electricity in some part of their project. The show was held in a large, downstairs studio at the Fine Arts Institute. All of the windows had been covered and a series of large white makeshift walls were set up around the room, maze-like—presumably to direct visitors through the exhibition. The show was very well-attended and there were numerous people, more than fifty individuals, including a television camera and crew from a local news station. At the time I arrived, the television crew was interviewing the curator of the show, Sherko Abas. Later, the television crew would also interview Barham Salah, a high-ranking member of the PUK party, and Adnan Karim, a famous Kurdish singer. I met Karim at the event and was invited to his own show of paintings, held at the gallery at Amna Suraka.



“The Dust of Learning,” by Ismail K. November 12, 2016 (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

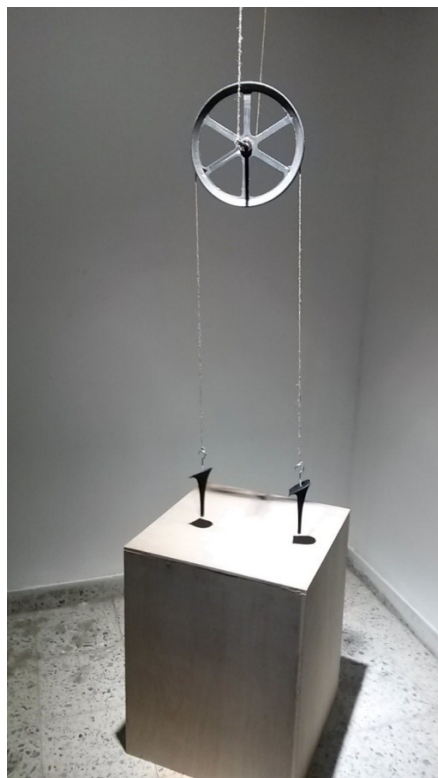
***The Dust of Learning* by Ismail K.** Entering the exhibition, my ears were immediately overwhelmed with a discordant symphony of noises from every part of the room demanding attention. It was quickly apparent why the show was called *Clamor*. Every piece in the show was designed to be both a visual and aural event. Despite the many individual sound events competing for attention, I was drawn to a disconcerting cacophony of shrill alarms and nagging buzzers toward the back wall of the exhibition. Bypassing the other pieces in the show, I found *The Dust of Learning* tucked into the far back corner of the studio. There hung a large chalkboard with old-style metal school bells attached directly to the chalkboard. The bells were the kind used to signal the opening and closing of the school day and the changing of classes. Each of the five bells, indicating five periods during the school day, had slices cut away from them, making each bell look a little like a pie that had a piece cut from it. Between each bell hung a single bright-yellow light bulb

suspended from varying lengths of electrical cord; the bulbs lit up when any of the school bells sounded. The overall effect of the piece was entirely visceral. Clearly, there was a well-ordered system that you were intended to engage with, but you never quite knew when one of the very loud bells was going to sound, interrupting a thought. I found myself attempting to read the notes on the board, but was continuously interrupted by the bells and lights. I actually found myself becoming tense and frustrated by the distraction and unable to even finish reading a few words on the board. The artist mentioned, very pointedly, that the light bulbs used in the piece were the same kind used in local prisons. This made me laugh a bit as I thought of my own sixth-grade class, which I had been teaching only a few months, being pushed and pulled by their own set of school bells. Yes, indeed, school could be imagined as a prison for children. *The Dust of Learning* makes its audience consider that, as a social institution, the school aids in a cultural transfer of the rules, expectations, and values of a society and functions to shape individuals within that society so they can successfully interact with each other and within their society. At the same time, it must be remembered that schools are places that contain spaces where the skills, values, beliefs, knowledge, and modes of behavior pertaining to that society are shared or passed on, aiding in transmission of a culture.<sup>17</sup> But what sort of prison is a school, exactly? The work of Bourdieu and Foucault recognizes “the School” as a dynamic location where different people within society come together with powerful actors, like the state (*place*), and where power and knowledge are produced and the status quo is reproduced (*space*). Justine Saldana illustrates this point: “In this notion the teacher would be the representative of the State and the exerciser of the power of the State; the students would submit to their teacher’s will in a compliant and conforming manner. It would be easy for a teacher to observe deviant behavior and take action to counteract it. It would also be easy for students to understand the expectation and conform or rebel against it.”<sup>18</sup> This explanation shows the state-teacher-student relationship within the confines of the school in a similar and parallel relationship to that of the relationship between the state, the prison, and the prisoner. In turn, *The Dust of Learning* asks its viewer-as-student to deeply consider and to be critical of what other lessons, perhaps hidden, each of us has learned in school in addition to our subject lessons.

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault 1977; See also Bourdieu 1980.

<sup>18</sup> Saldana 2013: 231.



“The Drawing of Sound,” by Shameran Fateh. November 12, 2016 (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

***The Drawing of Sound* by Shameran Fateh.** Unfortunately, the artist who produced this piece was not at the *Clamor Project* show, so I was unable to speak directly with the artist about their piece. Certainly, this challenge illustrates the trouble of continuing productive dialogue with consultants at a distance, once the researcher has left the field. At the same time, it presents an important challenge to the research that must be addressed—context—or in this case, the absence of context from which to inform and interpret. In other areas of my work, I have talked about the lack of literature about contemporary art in Iraqi Kurdistan, from which I might have built a framework for research and the same need to build a “foundation” of information to support the research to be done. I also talk about the importance of the historical and social context of the artwork, and that any piece of art is embedded in a larger system of interconnected processes and power relationships. That being said, much of the contextual information for individual pieces of art was derived through interviews with the artists themselves. As the viewer, or audience, my engagement with the piece is one of the three sites to be considered during a critical visual methodology.<sup>19</sup> To some theorists, the site of an image’s audience might be considered to be the most important site at which an image’s meanings are made, renegotiated, or even rejected by particular audiences watching in specific circumstances without much concern for the site of image’s production or artistic context.<sup>20</sup> However, my research is not interested in artwork so much as it is interested in the work of artists. More importantly, I do not feel comfortable applying the perspective of a universal aesthetic to the appreciation and understanding of the artwork I have encountered during this

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<sup>19</sup> Rose 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



research. Indeed, the very concept of an aesthetic, involving the comparison and discerning of visual events, becomes problematic to a study that hopes to understand and interpret, not judge. Anthropologist Ivan Karp expressed the debate between universalistic and relativistic approaches to engaging a culture’s art when he wrote: “I’m really torn between the arguments that are made for universal aesthetic criteria and the idea that we can only truly appreciate something from the point of view of the people for whom it was originally made—that aesthetics are ‘culture-bound.’”<sup>21</sup> In this way, this research is aligning with a relativistic approach to aesthetics and understanding art. At the same time, in the underexplored field of Kurdish visual art, we have very, very little in the way of historical or ethnographic documentation of the art itself, and no scholarly criticism of the art from which to build an understanding. Applying a universal aesthetic to the appreciation and interpretation of the artwork I engaged with during this research would be insufficient to discuss the work being done in an effective manner, and would serve to diminish its significance. On the level of documenting a marginalized culture, approaching the work of Kurdish artists in Iraq with the perspective that the art will have predictable content that is identifiable cross-culturally would serve to lessen the sense of urgency and importance of work still to be done in this area.<sup>22</sup>

Considering the challenges presented by the absence of the artist’s voice in the interpretation of this piece, let’s take a limited look at the *The Drawing of Sound*. The work of art is an articulated sculpture beginning with a moveable metal wheel suspended by twine from the ceiling. A pair of heels, clearly taken from a pair of women’s high-heeled shoes, is suspended by twine that has been threaded through the wheel. The entire apparatus is suspended over a hollow wooden box. Despite the lack of didactic panels to otherwise guide audience members, individuals seemed naturally drawn to pull on the strings. When pulled, the apparatus came to life, sending the high heels bouncing up and down, recreating the sound a woman’s high-heeled shoes might make as they walked across the floor. This sound, tock-tock-tock-tock, invariably produced smiles and chuckles from its viewers. Thinking back to how curator and exhibiting artist Sherko Abas described the exhibition as “The everyday noise that makes up our life,” I wondered how the sound of a woman’s high-heeled shoes might make up part of someone’s life.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, why would someone choose that particular sound to consider? It occurred to me at that point that, as a woman, the sound of high heels was something fairly mundane to me. For myself, it might signal an important event that I was getting dressed up for, but still I was left wondering why this particular sound might be interesting or significant to bring to bear on a piece of art. It occurred to me at that point that my reading of this piece was influenced through the lived experience of my own gender. Then I began wondering about the gender of the artist, and imagined a heterosexual male artist with the sound of tock-tock-tock-tock beating a steady rhythm in his mind, vexing him. Like the other viewers, I smiled and chuckled. The title of the piece *The Drawing of Sound* leaves one to consider its meaning as well. Of course, to “Draw” refers to producing an image using a pencil or pen. Another definition, according to Webster’s dictionary, includes to pull or drag. Does the title of the piece, in and of itself, give the viewer directions on how to manipulate the sculpture to produce the reproduction of a real person walking in high-heeled shoes? Of course, I am certain that a conversation with the artist who produced this work would have allowed for a more expansive and

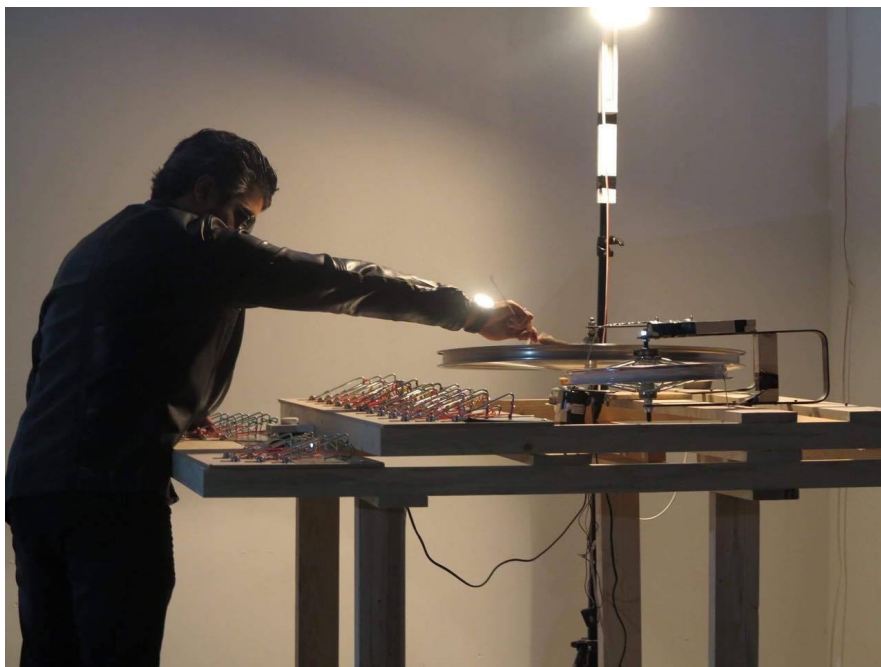
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<sup>21</sup> Vogel 1991:191–204.

<sup>22</sup> Dutton 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Personal interview with S. Abas, November 12, 2016.

nuanced description interpretation. However, *The Drawing of Sound* does strongly suggest that the artist wants their audience to consider the notion of gender.



“When the Wild Instrument Sings,” by Sherko Abas. November 12, 2016  
(photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)



"The Vibration of the Skin," by Khabat Abas. November 12, 2016 (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

***When the Wild Instrument Sings* by Sherko Abas and *The Vibration of the Skin* by Khabat Abas.** These two pieces, produced by brother and sister Sherko and Khabat Abas,

worked in tandem to produce a conceptual piece that evoked memories of childhood. *When the Wild Instrument Sings* was an organ-like mechanism made up of bent pieces of bicycle spokes, bent and arranged like keys on a keyboard. Underneath each of these mousetrap-like pieces of bent spokes was a small bottlecap firework that fired each time one of the mousetrap-like “keys” was played. At the top of the organ-like instrument two bicycle wheels, one large and one small, were placed horizontally so that each could be spun like a roulette wheel and played for their sound with a thin stick. At the same time the artist was “playing” his instrument, and his sister was playing what looked like a cello. *The Vibration of the Skin* was an instrument made by the artists to resemble a small cello and the artist played it in the same manner, drawing a bow across the fretless strings. Interestingly, the frame was made of wood and the body was made of animal skin. The small instrument was made of similar materials and in similar fashion to the way that Kurds in Iraq make a flat, wide-frame drum called the Def. The Def in Kurdish music is all-important and is often the distinguishing feature in the instrumentation of Kurdish music. Played simultaneously, *When the Wild Instrument Sings* and *The Vibration of the Skin* produced a deep-throated, melodic, trance-like music interspersed with percussive pops, cracks, and whirls. The electricity had gone out only a few moments before the artists began the presentation of their piece. Arranging two separate clip lights, each to the separate performing spaces, the artists performed in semi-darkness. The lack of electricity seemed to complement the work, allowing one to give up watching the performance, close their eyes, and listen to the music. Engaged in this manner, the deep-throated melody of the cello-like instrument laid the background scenery for youthful memories of whirling bike tires, popping bottlecap fireworks, and the snap, snap of makeshift toy noise makers held tense by tight rubber bands. When asked, most of the audience members I spoke to described the sounds created through the instruments as regular parts of childhood play. For many, the sounds perhaps were designed to evoke memories of growing up in Sulaimani. At the same time, through further conversation, it became apparent that those same audience members seemed to be comparing the past of their memory with the current time. We have to wonder what other sound-memories or associations surfaced for those audience members. Were they happy associations or possibly difficult ones? Utilizing sound to elicit a memory or an association becomes a powerful visceral experience. In an instant, you can be transported to a particular time, place, experience or feeling—usually, all of these things and all at once. Perhaps it may be a hazy memory that requires more digging into, and those memories are often highly sensual in experience. Coming out of that experience can be a slower process that allows the mind to meander through related thoughts and feelings associated with that memory, eventually bringing the individual back to the present. *When the Wild Instrument Sings* and *The Vibration of the Skin*, while clearly intended to make its audience consider the past, also seem to allow viewers to bring the world of their memories into the present. In this way, the artwork suggests the need to not only consider the past but also to reckon that past with the present.

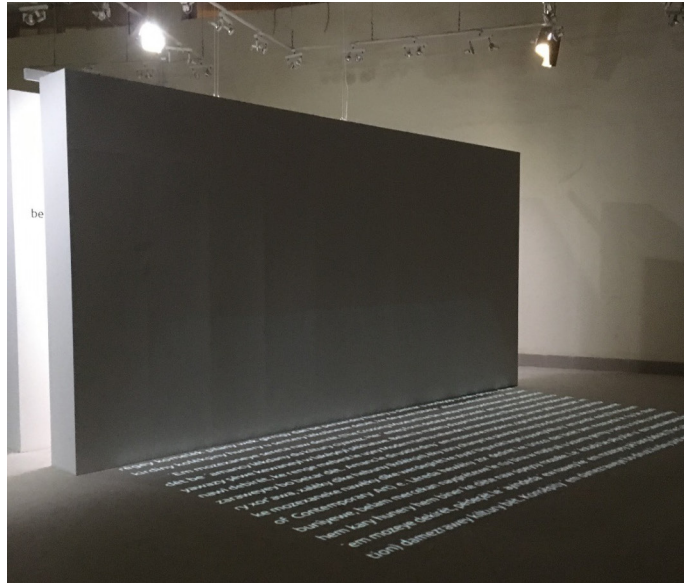


*Promotional flyer for the Tekist art show (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)*

### **Challenging Tradition: Tekist**

The *Tekist* show was an exhibition of conceptual artwork by Halgurd Baram and Ranj Hikmat, both members of the Concept Art Group, that was focused on the relationship between the viewer and language presented as visual text. The artists were interviewed on *Artography*, a local arts and culture show produced by KurdSat. In my own interview with the artists, both said the importance of the art presented was not simply for its visual appeal, but that the art was a tool to engage the audience, creating the opportunity for debate and for question. As Halgurd put it in his interview with *Artography*, “The art is the concept; the material is language.” The *Tekist* show garnered interest predominantly from those in the art world as well as a smaller group of supporters of some of the presenting artists. Those in attendance, along with the artists themselves, included many of the individuals I had seen at the other show, particularly other artists, teachers, and writers.

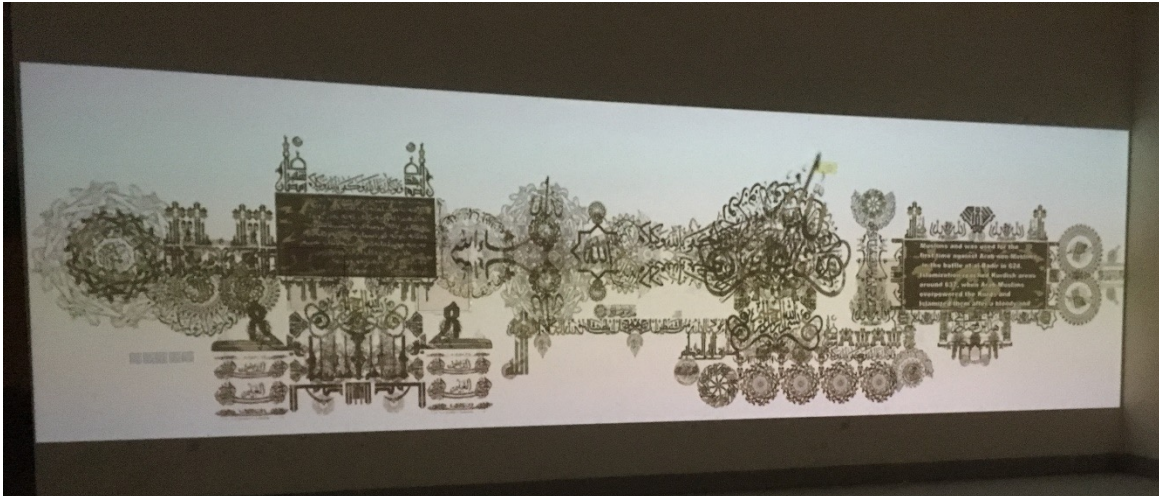
Having read about the Museum of Modern Art in Rebwar Saeed’s dissertation and having heard a great deal about it from members of the artistic community, I was excited to see the place that was intended to bring “the World to Kurdistan and to present Kurdistan to the World” in its most modern and progressive capacity. Carrying these expectations with me on my visit to the *Tekist* show, I was surprised by the mounds of rubble and broken glass, and the need to walk past garbage swept into piles in dark corners and into the semi-lit building that was the Museum of Modern Art. In conversation with the presenting artists, I was told that they themselves had cleared and prepared the space, including running electricity through a multitude of cords from the apartment building next door. In short, the Museum of Modern Art was empty except for the *Tekist* show, run-down, and in a state of severe disrepair.



“Untitled,” by Ranj Hikmat. January 22, 2017 (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

***Untitled by Ranj Hikmat.*** The artist described the idea for this piece and the idea for the show as a tension between two things brought face to face with each other. In that tension, there is the potential for something else to be created. We might imagine two friends, for example, sitting face to face; between them conversation and rapport are created. In this piece, the artist has built two large opposing walls. On the outside, a continuous stream of Kurdish text, written using the Latin alphabet, runs from the floor up the side of one wall. The text is the story of the building of the Modern Museum of Art, the ideas behind its creation, and the problems with the construction and the corruption surrounding the project that left the building uninhabitable. Text also appears on the inside of the two opposing walls. To read it, you must physically engage the artwork and walk between the two narrowly spaced walls. Down the length of each wall, about two or three feet higher than a person’s line of sight, the phrase, “If you are passing between these two walls, it is Art. If you are not passing between these two walls, it is still Art” is written, again in Kurdish using the Latin alphabet. The whole effect forces you to look up to read the phrase. In doing so, the imposing walls seem to close in—the tension between these two objects becomes perceptible.

The work is significant on a number of levels. The phrase “If you are passing between these two walls, it is Art. If you are not passing between these two walls, it is still Art” is something of a joke, while also something of a challenge to the local arts establishment that built the Museum of Modern Art. As a conceptual art piece, this artist’s work stresses the thought process and the methods of production of the artwork over more traditional concerns about aesthetic, technical, or material concerns. At the same time, it critiques formalism and the commodification of art. Said another way, this piece boldly states that even if you do not like the work and do not think that it is art, it has engaged you in thought and it is therefore art. The bolder statement is that this conceptual piece was presented in the derelict Museum of Modern Art. It seems to shout, “Hey! I am art because I am in a Museum of Art.” The powerful irony here is that the Museum of Modern Art was not functioning well, itself bringing attention to the impotence of the local arts establishment.



“Militarizing the Word of God,” by Halgurd A. Baram (photo by Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah)

***Militarizing the Word of God* by Halgurd Baram.** This piece, shown here as a still photo, was a video projected onto a large bare wall. The video installation appeared in the 2017 Tekist show and the 2018 Catalyst art show in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan. Animated geometric and abstract forms connected and overlaid with Islamic motifs and bits of lacy calligraphy interact with one another, as a series of whirring cogs and gizmos function to turn a great machine. A closer inspection of the interlinking designs on the right side of the image reveals the shape of an armored tank, its caterpillar track moving from right to left at a brisk pace. The tank appears again on the left side of the image, this time it appears to be moving directly forward, toward the viewer. On either side of the image, text runs vertically, like credits after a film, in ornately decorated frames. On the right side, the text is in English and on the left, in Arabic. Baram talks about his use of the written language in his art: “I broadly use Kurdish, English, Arabic, and Islamic texts in my practice, so I find my artworks inevitably engaged with politics, because the form of these languages in themselves are political identities for the nations possessing them. As soon as they are used in art making for any purposes, political concepts intrude into it.”<sup>24</sup> Baram explains that he hopes to show his audience that political messages always reside in the form of text as part of a visual culture, a visual culture that is more often than not perceived of instead of conceptualized. Said another way, Baram shows that people are both aware of and understand these political messages through their senses, but brings into sharp question whether or not people are thinking critically about them. To demonstrate this point, we can consider the running text boxes on either side of the image. Both boxes are presenting the exact same content, but in two languages—English and Arabic. Simply taking in the visual spectacle without reading the words, each written language, its form, and shape, visually represents and reflects both the cultural and political influence of a nation. “This is because they know if there is a language, there is a culture, a nation too,” Baram explains, “So in looking, the viewers are puzzled, because they are not able to read it, but they realize if there is a language there must be an owner.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Baram 2014: 7–8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

## Creating New Paths: Building Capacity

Earlier, in the introduction to “Making Spaces,” I described this special issue as an exploratory space that was created to bear witness and that the format of open-ended essays was a tool that I hoped would help those reading to imagine the journeys through which these artists have traveled. In this essay, I too take advantage of the exploratory spirit that infuses “Making Spaces” as an opportunity to reflect on an accumulation of artists’ stories and observations I have acquired over my years of research. It is a unique moment to create an analysis of action in a longer, drawn-out process of research that has been deeply influenced by the tradition of grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967).<sup>26</sup> The use of both methods from grounded theory and arts-based research perspectives is well-suited to reflect the idiosyncratic nature of my continued research with Kurdish activist-artists. They have proven to be approaches that are flexible and responsive to emergent phenomena and new understandings encountered in the field. I take this moment to remind the reader that the essays and interviews within “Making Spaces” were originally conceived of as devices to elicit stories, seeking to gather, understand, and interpret. Framing the *Clamor* and *Tekist* art shows as challenges to the borders of tradition, I present these shows and their intentional siting at the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art as interpretive frameworks through which we might be able to think more broadly about the work of artists that might be hidden—namely the transformation of these sites, albeit temporarily, into sheltered civic space in Kurdish society that allows for challenging ideas, discussion of social problems, critique, and the disruption of certain privileged narratives nation.

Michael Shank and Lisa Schirch’s arts-based approaches to peacebuilding described in their article “*Strategic Arts-Based Peacebuilding*” have also been a useful way for me to frame an analysis of artmaking in Iraqi Kurdistan, helping me to think about artist interactions with the space, their art, and their audience. Shank and Schirch’s four distinct, arts-based approaches to peacebuilding described in the essay are presented as methods to be applied to a given conflict scenario that would help people to prevent, reduce, or transform the effects of violent conflict. The authors meet those engaged in peacebuilding work at the moment of intervention and aim to strategically categorize approaches utilizing the arts into themes and tasks, while helping peacebuilders decide what approaches are most useful and when.<sup>27</sup> These approaches, then, are inherently prescriptive in nature. Interestingly, I have found that they are contextually ambidextrous and may be utilized as frameworks for the analysis and interpretation of conflict. In applying these approaches to observations in my own fieldwork in Kurdistan, they did not apply themselves in every aspect. However, as frameworks they offered valuable insights. In the case of the *Clamor* and *Tekist* shows, I utilized Shank and Schirch’s *Building Capacity* approach as a framework for interpretation. Using this approach to elicit and interpret, I first distinguished the main elements of the approach, considering the intended outcomes first, and asked myself where I saw these elements in the events I have observed. In a sense, I utilized the approach as an analytical framework by working the underlying assumptions in the approach in reverse. For example, during the capacity building phase, individuals impacted by direct conflict begin to consider long-term solutions that will

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<sup>26</sup> Glaser and Strauss 1967.

<sup>27</sup> Shank and Schirch 2008: 217–242.

lead to positive peace and hinder the return of direct conflict.<sup>28</sup> As an approach toward creating a culture of Just Peace, *Building Capacity* requires people to know how to take responsibility for shaping their culture, and being able to effectively shape their society's architecture, including institutions, policies, and organizations that support its function.<sup>29</sup> Also in this approach, Shank and Schirch posit, "Artists can use visual, literary, performance, and movement art as capacity-building mechanisms to build self-confidence, enable self-expression, and provide training in leadership, public speaking, and creative problem solving."<sup>30</sup> Finding these additional aspects was a pleasant bit of serendipity, in the way that John Paul Lederach describes serendipity within the peacebuilding journey as a flow and adaptability that allows for the possibility of gaining insight and understanding from unplanned occurrences while keeping our goals in mind.<sup>31</sup>

As venues for art in the city of Sulaimani, The Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art seem both a natural and inevitable *places* in which a group of artists might produce an exhibition of art. However, the work of the artists in the *Clamor Project* and the *Tekist* shows, particularly in locating these shows in these respective venues, thereby creating site-specific artwork, forces something of a confrontation with both the spaces and the places that are embodied and embedded in these sites.<sup>32</sup> Each of these sites is also a social institution that assists in the transmission of culture and spaces where individuals are subject to the power relationships involved in the production of that culture and within those social institutions.<sup>33</sup> In highlighting the nature of both the spaces (*space* refers to arrangements and interactions) and places (the lived and dynamic location) at work within these sites through the use of site-specific art, the artists have been able to also bring into question the nature of each site, and the socio-cultural institutions that have been layered on to the built environment. The overall effect of these art shows is to ask, "Why should these sets of values be the paradigm for the rest of us?" This creates a kind of disruption to the ideas, norms, and behavioral scripts that are brought to these sites and which aid in reproducing a certain status quo.

As *The Dust of Learning* demonstrated, we may want to step back and consider the *space* (human interactions) of the Fine Arts Institute as an institution of social control. Through the work of Bourdieu and Foucault, we understand that within the place/space of a school, students, teachers, and the state all meet and engage in the production of knowledge and power.<sup>34</sup> Remembering our earlier discussion, we must remember that the Fine Arts Institute was established as an alternative to schooling at the College of Arts in Baghdad that was both problematic and dangerous for Kurdish students. It is interesting then to consider the Fine Arts Institute today as an institution of social control that is now in the hands of a Kurdish "state" and reproducing a Kurdish status quo to include ideas about what fine art is (or is not), gender (*The Drawing of Sound*), histories and memories (*When the Wild Instrument Sings* and *The Vibration of the Skin*). Schirch remarks that, "Ideally, all forms of education provide all individuals with the values and skills needed to live peacefully with others.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 7.

<sup>29</sup> Shank and Schirch 2008: 217–242.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Lederach 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Hasso and Salime 2016; See also Foucault 1977.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu 1980; See also Foucault 1977 and Saldana 2013: 231.



Education includes informal socialization in the family, the media, and culture; formal schooling; and religious education. Each type of education has the potential to foster love and respect between people and can be a critical influence in building peace.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this is an ideal state. The work of these artists is suspicious of this institution of education. Their work points to deep concerns about what sorts of messages are being transmitted through institutions like the Fine Arts Institute, through societal and political leaders in Kurdish society. These contentions have already been seen to provoke conflict within Kurdish society. On the other hand, this also seems to signal a deep, self-conscious reflection about the ideas and traditions that form the very foundation of Kurdish society. After all, we must remember that not all artists working in Kurdistan are able to access this site, yet these artists have been able to gain entry, often through their own social roles as former art students as well as art teachers. In this way, we see the potential for change and the dynamic adaptation of elements of society to change. This is critical. This aspect of deep self-reflection on the part of the people as a society is a piece of life in Kurdistan that we do not readily see through other perspectives, but that which art allows us to glimpse.

Further, it would be reasonable to describe the assemblage of people in attendance at the *Clamor Project* show as for the most part members of the larger art scene, including art teachers, students of the arts, and the artists themselves. It would also be reasonable to say that all of the shows produced by the *Concept Art Group*, the group of artists who produced the *Clamor* and *Tekist* show, as well as those other shows I attended during my time in Sulaimani were primarily attended by members of the larger art scene, sometimes also including the media, elite members of the government, and wealthy members of society. If we compare the attendance at this show with the attendance at the *Visible Body / InVisible Body* show that was held at the basement of the National Museum at Amna Suraka, we note that it was also primarily attended by the artists themselves, art teachers, and students of the arts.<sup>36</sup> Attendance by singer Adnan Karim, political elite including Baram Salah, the media, and upper ranking university faculty at the *Clamor* show suggests that this show, or at least certain artists in the show, have friendly or possibly political or financial associations with certain political parties. The absence of these elite members of society at the *Visible Body / InVisible Body*, *Tekist* and other shows in this series like *Argue*, *Object & Place* shows further suggest that. Perhaps the Fine Arts Institute is an acceptable place where elite and non-elite spaces might overlap and possibly intermingle. One of the artists at the *Visible Body / InVisible Body* show quipped, “Can you imagine Ms. Hero down here?!” No, I smiled. I couldn’t imagine the wife of former Iraqi President Jala Talabani down in the dark depths of Amna Suraka surrounded by the multitudes of security, news cameras, and members of her political party that seemed to constantly swarm around her.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, though, I had seen her at the art gallery in another part of the National Museum at the Amna Suraka complex surrounded by the same cast of characters, which presents us with another question—what are the acceptable, or perhaps, traditionally held places and spaces where the elite like Hero Talabani might interact with a group like the Concept Art Group? More importantly, what happens to an individual or group that cannot gain access to those places/spaces?

In the *Tekist* show, the work of both artists demonstrates the capacity of the written word

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Schirch 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Cockrell-Abdullah 2018 (2): 65–91.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

within the context of art to transcend itself and to become something else. Through their work, the artists further demonstrate that culture resides in the characteristic shape of the written word, reflecting peoples and cultures. At the same time, the work forces the audience to come face to face with the visual use of written language and in doing so, to more deeply consider how text is presented and to create questions from this engagement. Baram's complex, multifaceted, and fast-paced machine suggests a rapacious, ever-awake system that continuously churns out propaganda. Competing text, on different sides of the image and in different languages, each underpinned by constantly moving tanks, lend tension and a sense of conflict yet to come. Hikmat's opposing walls—with a simple text message inside the walls and a more complex message flowing up the outside of the walls—directly address the Museum of Modern Art itself, questioning the ideals and motivations of those who built the failed institution. This piece also seems to ask, “Why has this space been ignored?”

It is an added bit of irony that in both the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, the failure of electricity in the city played a significant part in each of the shows. Every time the lights go out, one is reminded that you are living in a system that is struggling to serve the needs of the majority of its people. Utilizing the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, the artists of the *Clamor* and *Tekist* shows were able to create space for the questioning of cultural institutions like the school, notions of gender, history, memory, and written language as a visual tool. These shows also question the meanings brought to the places/spaces of the Fine Arts Institute and the Museum of Modern Art. In this sense, the hidden work of Kurdish artists inside Iraqi Kurdistan seems to suggest that building capacity in this context would mean not only creating opportunities within Kurdish society for citizens to reflect deeply on the ideas and institutions that form their society, but also having spaces where it is both acceptable and safe for those same citizens to be critical of socio-cultural institutions, belief systems, and traditions in a manner that provokes productive debate and long-term thinking. These artists are waging a kind of nonviolent conflict that seems to be seeking to engage their own communities in a critical reflection and questioning of themselves. There also seems to be a clear recognition on the part of these artists that conflict can be a positive force in its potential for change and when it signals that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. However, there is a suggestion that there is still deep work to be done in the transformation of relationships and social structures within Iraqi Kurdistan that will effectively support the people's ability to address a plurality of identities and interests within the society and to allow for the expression of conflict through cultural ideals that support safeguarded social structures.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Shank and Schirch, 2008: 217–242; See also Schirch, 2014.

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