Art as a Catalyst for Dialogue:

Exploring Motivations and Methods in Contemporary Artistic Practices

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University of Lapland

Spring 2025

University of Lapland
Faculty: Art and Design
Title of the Research: Art as a Catalyst for Dialogue: Exploring Motivations and Methods in Contemporary Artistic Practices
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Degree Program: Master's Degree Program in Sustainable Art and Design
Supervisor: Maria Huhmarniemi
Type of the work: Master's thesis
Number of pages: 87
Year: Spring 2025

Abstract

This thesis investigates how the contemporary artists Kawita Vatanajyankur, Akram Zaatari, and Alia Ali deploy their art practices to catalyze dialogue, foster reflection, and engage with social and political issues. Drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and dialogic theory, the research situates their work within discourses of gender, identity, and collective memory. A qualitative methodology is employed: semi-structured interviews with each artist and thematic analysis of their responses and artworks reveal key themes and motivations.

Key findings reveal that each artist's practice creates participatory, narrative spaces that challenge dominant narratives and promote social awareness. Vatanajyankur's performance and video works critique gendered labor and power structures, using embodied metaphors and technology to provoke critical reflection. Zaatari's archival and filmic projects reframe historical memory and media imagery, encouraging dialogue about postwar identity, migration, and cultural heritage. Ali's multimedia installations and textile-based projects address postcolonial and feminist issues, using pattern and language to invite viewers into conversations about diaspora, citizenship, and representation. Across cases, themes of empowerment, cultural resilience, and reflexivity emerge.

The study concludes that these artists' practices function as dialogic interventions that contribute to social sustainability and collective awareness. It demonstrates how such creative processes promote community engagement and critical consciousness within sustainable art discourse. The thesis is structured with a literature review of relevant theories, followed by case study analyses of each artist, thematic findings, and a concluding discussion of key themes and thematic intersections.

Keywords: Socially Engaged Art, Feminist theory, Postcolonial theory, Dialogical Art, Thematic analysis, Archival Politics.

Acknowledgements

This journey would not have been possible without the incredible people who stood by me every step of the way. First, I want to thank Assistant Professor Maria Huhmarniemi from the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Lapland. Maria, your patient guidance, especially when I wasn't always the most proactive student, helped me find my way and stay motivated. Your thoughtful suggestions and steady support have meant more to me than words can express.

Thank you to Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali and Kawita Vatanajyankur. All of you allowed me to build my research on your opinions. Thank you for taking time out to talk with me and have a conversation which was central to my research.

Thank you to Postdoctoral Researcher Amna Qureshi, also at the Faculty of Arts and Design. Amna, your feedback during our class discussions sharpened my ideas and pushed me to think more critically. I truly appreciated your willingness to dive into the details and help me strengthen my work.

To my friend Fangchan Dai, thank you for reading drafts at odd hours, pointing out areas that needed tightening, and offering just the right corrections when I felt stuck. And to Md Faysal Amin, whose reminders about deadlines and requirements kept me on track, your solidarity and timely updates made all the difference as we navigated this process together.

Back home, I am endlessly grateful to my mother and grandmother for their unwavering faith in me, even from afar. Your love, kindness, and encouragement calls helped keep my spirits up. Warda Batool, your support and understanding were a lifeline when the stress felt overwhelming, thank you for keeping me grounded and sane.

Finally, thanks to everyone. Friends, peers, and Mentors, who offered a kind word, shared a resource, or just listened when I needed to vent. This thesis is as much yours as is mine.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary artists increasingly challenge programs and practices that define art by engaging audiences with participatory installations, digital platforms, interventions, and community-based art practices. This thesis, titled "Art as a Catalyst for Dialogue: Understanding Motivations and Practices in Contemporary Art," explores how artists conceive and implement their work as a way to engage and transform meaningful dialogues.

A core focus of this thesis is to investigate the practices of three artists, Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali, and Kawita Vatanajyankur, whose individual and collective work grapples with issues of identity, power, and cultural hybridity. This qualitative study employs free-flowing interviews as a methodological approach, fueled by the desire to have organic conversations rather than strictly formatted interviews. The research embraced the complexities between personal narrative and broader socio-political context and grappled with how these artists navigate their experiences as change agents. In each instance, the artists' various modalities immersive installations, digital activism, and so forth provided us entry points to understand how art creates an early form of democracy, listens to marginalized voices, and fosters empathy.

At the center of this research project is the guiding question: **How do contemporary artists conceptualize and implement their practices to catalyze dialogue?** The overarching guiding question organizes the study, which sets out to explore three objectives: recognize the personal and collective motivations of the artists, understand their practices and effects through the different mediums, and critically consider impacts they felt with audiences. The objectives provide interdisciplinary pathways of feminist theory to challenge patriarchal structures, gender studies to evaluate performative identities, and post-colonial cultural theory to interrogate historical power dynamics and cultural hybridity.

This research is significant because it assists both academic and cultural practice. As a theoretical contribution to feminist, gender, and cultural studies, it advances conversations about art as a vehicle to normalize difference and disrupt the normative. Practically, it provides practical, actionable research for institutions, educators, and policymakers wishing to generate engagement with art and social justice for wider social contexts. By documenting Zaatari, Ali, and Vatanajyankur's innovative practices, this study promoted supportive policies for artists to continue to act as catalysts for inclusive, equitable, futures.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, I contextualize the importance of art in a fractured world. The second chapter discusses available literature to understand the major themes of this thesis.

The third chapter goes through theoretical frameworks and methodology. The fourth and fifth chapters comprise the findings chapter and discussion chapter, respectively, which present an analysis of the findings of the interviews, providing audiences with examples and themes related to resistance, identity negotiation, and impacts as perceived by audiences. In the last chapter, a reflective conclusion on art's power and potential to shape discourse is discussed. The thesis ultimately provokes a rethinking of art and its potential place in the public discourse of the world we currently live in currently, where connection is needed, action is needed, and liberation is needed.

1.1 Background

Within this framework of contemporary artistic practice, over the past few decades there has been a shift in how artists work as they move away from singular, traditional ways of making art, toward a multi-disciplinary framework which includes aspects of participatory, digital, and community-engaged art. This shift signifies a cultural change and includes artists that no longer engage strictly from a studio or gallery space and exist within a moment where they co-create art with others in an immersive or collaborative context. They have come to solicit their audience, and the communities in which they live, work and exhibit through immersive installations and experiences, online digital platforms, and through public art interventions in particular ways. As well, they can address complex issues including, identities, power, and cultural hybridity.

This thesis proposes to look at the emerging forms of contemporary art through the artistic practice of three multidisciplinary artists, Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali, and Kawita Vatanajyankur, as they all produce work that is responsive to the ongoing social and political challenges of the time, and serve as key practitioners in the conversation of art as dialogue. Rather than follow a formal interview protocol, this thesis primarily consists of a series of exchanges with the artists, so that they can reflect upon experiences and trajectories organically and portray how their personal narratives intersect with larger socio-political stories.

In considering "dialogue" I acknowledge the theoretical frameworks that have shaped this inquiry. My sense of dialogue is woven with many of the critical theories which have shaped modern discourses. Feminist theory, for example, acknowledges the structures of power and

challenges patriarchal narratives. Other inspiration comes from gender studies. With a focus on identities as performative, the lens of gender studies can help to articulate how artistic expression can destabilize normative identities (with no place of welcome). The ideas and theories of cultural studies are particularly relevant at this moment as they expose issues of cultural hybridity, inherited power structures, and the consequences of colonial legacies. This is complemented by sociological views that might studies those behaviors using an artistic lens and public consciousness and dispute symbols of social change. As these various theories entwined with one another we can explore the role of art as a conduit for dialogue.

1.2 Research Question

Central to this study is the question:

How do contemporary artists conceptualize and implement their practices to catalyze dialogue?

This question serves as the guiding thought for the research, inviting an in-depth exploration of the interplay between artistic practice and social transformation. It challenges me to consider not only the aesthetic dimensions of art but also its potential to provoke reflection, inspire collective action, and foster inclusive conversations that address both historical grievances and contemporary challenges.

1.3 Artist Profiles

Akram Zaatari

Figure 2: Akram Zaatari. After They Got the Right to Arms (Early 1970s/2006). Fund for the Twenty, First Century. Reproduced from Eva Respini and Ana Janevski, "Akram Zaatari and the Arab Image Foundation," MoMA Magazine Website.

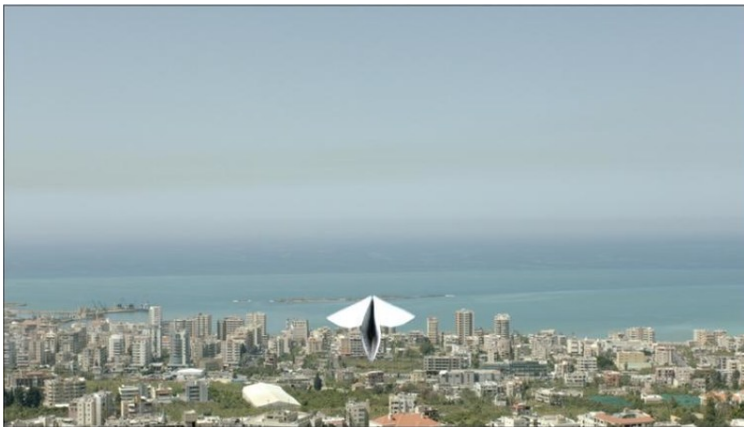

Figure 2: Akram Zaatari. Screengrab from Letter to a refusing pilot. 2013. Reproduced from Video Data Bank website

Akram Zaatari is a versatile artist working across photography, film, and writing who bases his practice in the socio-political aspects of his home county of Lebanon and the Middle East. Recognized for his representations of the post-war urban changes of Beirut, Zaatari has emerged as an artist who uses the camera to draw visual narratives about the socio-political landscape where he has lived. His works explore the tension between modernity and tradition, as well as changes that affect the identity of a city and its inhabitants in the midst of decades long war and reconstruction. His Wikipedia page describes Zaatari's photography as part of a larger project to document social change stating that his 'images fit somewhere between documentary photography and a poetic urgency that accompanies both personal experience and collective memory'.

Zaatari's artistic practice assumes hugely varied approaches despite being sensitive to the politics of our cultural narrative affecting everyday life, life as we are living it. For instance, with his films, he underlines how a film is more than a mere audiovisual representation; it showcases the minutiae of urban space, processes of urban living, and social relationships. As there is more to the scene than its depiction on film, Zaatari's exhibitions and film projects create the experiential element where people can perceive the evolution of a city caught in transitory states (Kurimanzutto, nd). Furthermore, photographs use light and shadow in composition from imagery on urban scenes to create a dialect about identity, memory, or transformation. By dealing with these issues, Zaatari positions his work as a critical addition to existing contemporary conversations about art, politics, and recognition to rethink space and history.

In interviews Zaatari has dealt with the artists' role as to represent change and provoke thought. He equates his practice to activism because every photograph or sequence of film becomes part of a larger conversation about who we are as humans and the impact of political unrest. This emphasis on story and narrative is the basis of Zaatari's validity for engaging with the marginalized voices of his community, and his work is considered a necessary record of a historical moment of conflict. Zaatari transforms mundane activities into compelling narratives by presenting them in a certain way, not only becomes a record of the history of Beirut but alternatively engages the viewer and potentially ignites conversations of hope and resilience.

Alia Ali

Figure 3: Alia Ali, Cartographies of Pattern (2021). Digital photograph. Reproduced from Alia Ali's website

Figure 4: Alia Ali, Pomm (2022). Ikatitkat, Digital photograph. Reproduced from Alia Ali website

Alia Ali is a contemporary multidisciplinary artist working at the intersection of identity, cultural practice, and social engagement. Ali works with a broad range of materials from painting, sculpture, and digital representation, that come from her lived experience and cultural background. In her official website, Ali asserts her commitment to inquiry around identity and social justice as a personal practice, and claims to work as a consideration, regarding the positioning of personal narratives underlining larger cultural and political forces (Alia Ali, ND).

Ali uses an artistic language that is both personal and collective and is structured in a way that welcomes the viewer into her process of considering everyday experiences as worthy of critical reflection and inquiry. Ali's work reconciles and challenges categories of practice based on a merging of its traditional craft dimensions with contemporary digital technology, creating hybrid forms that represent the fluidity of contemporary identity. This merging of old and new demonstrates Ali's value of art being engaged and relevant to wider audiences. By working from wide range of cultural references, Ali's practice engages dominant narratives that have framed the historical basis of art, by representing other narratives connected to underrepresented groups.

Ali's artistic practice has been noted to engage the political dimensions of identity. She uses art as a way to examine social norms and advocate for equal footing in a cultural landscape. Ali assertions that art is not something that is only created, but a conversation to be lived, a

conversation that incorporates artist, work, and audience and their respective realities that allow for an evolution. Ali's approach aligns itself with a variety of contemporary feminist and postcolonial theories which seeks to redefine art away from aesthetic and signify the lived experience of individuals. Alia Ali continues the effort to democratize art as well as reclaim the power of narrative.

Kawita Vatanajyankur

Figure 5: Kawita Vatanajyankur, The Scale of Injustice (2021), Screengrab from the video. Reproduced from Kawita Vatanajyankur website

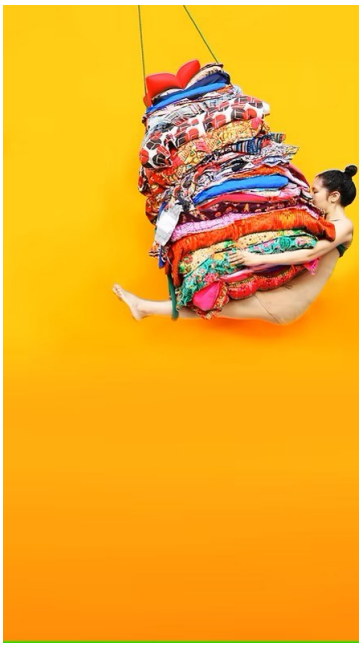

Figure 6: Kawita Vatanajyankur, Carrier (2020). Reproduced from website

Kawita Vatanajyankur is an interdisciplinary artist whose work employs media, technology, and traditional methods to address issues around identity, resilience, and agency through social critiques. Her practice recognizes the artworks' relation to her own cultural context while acknowledging the political relation to all potential or actual audience by taking into account both oppositional and complimentary positions on topics ranging from gender and sexuality to the embedded characteristics of globalization and local communities. Kawita Vatanajyankur's official site details her practice, clarifying the method of combining narrative, visual art, and digital art (Kawita Vatanajyankur, ND).

Vatanajyankur can transform commonplace areas into contextual narrative terrains where people inhabit layers of connectedness, and often more intimate aspects of the human experience reside. Although Vatanajyankur is engaging with normative ideas of space with shadows of linearity in place, often questioning the relationship and participatory experience between public and private space. The works explore using conventional visual language with

digital tools as emergent elements that not only embrace fragmentation of contemporary life but also encourage collective experience and dialogues.

Vatanajyankur's work collaborates with the need for enlightenment on resilience for the marginalized voice within the experience. Evaluating these feelings through the artistic practice often brings to bear the interconnectedness of how we live our lives in essentials of varying identity to race, class, and gender. To expand out from conventional visual art as well as narrative forms or practices that exist to bring forward a visual experience that both resonates with and is easy to interpret. Technology continues to augment and cultivate broader audiences while fostering an interactive experience; allowing and urging the audience/viewer part of the experience to engage with the themes or exchange process by creating space for inquiry. Vatanajyankur's direction embraces the evolving trajectories and terminology of activism on social media than to consider how the role of visual art is explored and defined within the context of contributed engagement, social change, and advocacy. Not diminishing the importance of aesthetics, but for Vatanajyankur and with all artists, the acts of creating conversations and possibly spaces against the dominant forces are compelling more than the outputs.

1.4 Research Objectives

Recognition of Artists' Motivations:

The study is set to investigate the individual and mutual motivations of, as well as their lived experiences together, Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali and Kawita Vatanajyankur. This includes exploring the arts pathways the artists devote themselves to as well as, their socio-political contexts when they address the arts through a commitment to dialogue. The study elaborates on the personal stories and cultural considerations that embody their mode of participation in art and their arts practice.

Thematic Methodical Analysis, Across Various Mediums:

The primary aim is to thematically analyze the diverse strategies that the artists use. Their work takes place in a range of mediums, including immersive installations, digital and virtual interferences, public art/public humanities/community-based projects. By classifying and analyzing the work of my study objects I will be able to not only describe their strategies but also demonstrate how each medium provides a unique approach to engaging participants or audiences through a specific act of dialogue. The analysis will account for interactivity, accessibility, and the capacity to disrupt traditional ways of thinking in visual culture.

1.5 Significance

This research has significance for both academics and policymaking in the cultural sector. At the academics level, this study adds to legitimate contemporary debates that arise out of several eclectic theoretical paradigms. For example, feminist theory and gender studies, with their robust critiques, provide important entry points for analyzing the ways in which art can disrupt established forms of power and provide opportunities to reframe narratives of identity and inclusion. Whereas, cultural theory especially in its postcolonial and decolonial perspectives offers useful accounts of the ways in which cultural and historical legacies have and continue to shape contemporary artistic practice. With both sets of theories, the research presents a way of thinking about art in society holistically.

At a practical level, the findings of the study may be useful for art practitioners, educators, and cultural policymakers. As the role of art within cultural institutions is called into question during a time when its social and political value are an increasingly popular and topical concern, this research offers tangible examples of how importance to creative practice can shape an environment to foster dialogue and change. The examples from interviews conducted with both Zaatari, Ali, and Vatanajyankur can stand alone to promote a discussion of the potential to increase public engagement, expand community role, and develop learning initiatives that use art as a change agent. In turn, this may lead to developing policies that not only acknowledge but also consider options to facilitate the inclusion of art into larger social benefits agenda.

Finally, the research demonstrates the need to support artists that are exploring possibilities outside of conventional artistic practice. Documenting and making sense of their practices is one way to support a broader definition of what is socially important art. This is especially relevant given current debates surrounding representation, diversity and equity in cultural production and dissemination democratization. Ultimately, this research intends to be a part of a much larger re-evaluation of the role of art as a component of social change.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1: Introduction – The opening chapter sets the stage for the research by outlining the broader context of cultural fragmentation, social polarization, and inequality. It introduces the central research question, defines the objectives of the study, and discusses the overall significance of the research in both academic and practical realms.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework – This chapter critically engages with existing literature on contemporary art practices, dialogic engagement, and the role of art in social transformation. It reviews key theoretical perspectives, including feminist theory, gender studies, cultural theory, and sociology. This interdisciplinary foundation situates the study within ongoing scholarly debates and provides the conceptual context for the analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology – This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach of the study. It details the use of qualitative methods particularly free-flowing interviews conducted via Zoom to capture the authentic voices of the artists. The chapter explains the rationale behind choosing a thematic analysis approach and describes how digital tools such as Voyant and Atlas.ti were utilized to systematically identify and interpret recurring themes in the interview data. The methodological discussion also addresses the challenges and limitations of capturing nuanced artistic expressions through qualitative research.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis – The fourth chapter presents a detailed analysis of the interview data. It examines how each artist negotiates the interplay between personal experience and broader sociopolitical contexts in their creative practice. This chapter is organized thematically, with sections devoted to key dimensions of dialogue such as engaging communities and audiences, resisting dominant narratives, and negotiating identity. Through close reading of the artists' narratives, the chapter reveals common threads that underpin their diverse practices and highlights the innovative methods they employ to engage and challenge their audiences.

Chapter 5: Discussion – This chapter delves into the interpretation of the findings and their implications. It links the emergent themes from the interviews to the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, discussing how the artists insights confirm, challenge, or expand existing ideas about art as a form of dialogue. The discussion situates the study's results within the wider context of contemporary art discourse, reflecting on what these findings mean for my understanding of art's role in social engagement and transformation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Reflections – The last chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing the key insights and reflecting on the overall research journey. It highlights the study's contributions to academic knowledge and cultural practice, acknowledges its limitations, and suggests avenues for future research. This chapter also offers a brief

personal reflection on the research process, providing a first-person perspective on the challenges encountered and lessons learned. In closing, the conclusion reaffirms the thesis's central findings and emphasizes the enduring potential of art to generate dialogue and social change.

This expanded introduction establishes the framework for a comprehensive exploration of how contemporary artists use their creative practices to catalyze dialogue. By integrating theoretical perspectives from feminist theory, gender studies, cultural theory, and sociology, the study seeks to offer a nuanced analysis that not only advances academic debates but also informs practical strategies for leveraging art in the pursuit of social transformation. The free-flowing, conversational approach to interviewing the artists ensures that their voices are captured in their authentic form, providing rich, detailed insights into the complexities of contemporary artistic practice. As the subsequent chapters unfold, the reader will gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which art functions as a powerful agent of change, fostering connections in an increasingly fragmented world.

2 Literature Review

In this thesis, I defined the critical terms "art" "dialogue" and "catalyst" as tools to help understand how artistic practices can yield social change. This literature review extends my definitions and offers my research problem in a wider academic context across theoretical approaches, including feminist theory, gender studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial critique in order to better understand how art can shift cultural understanding and values, in addition, to how art not only reifies aesthetic values, but rather develops and reshapes conversations and manifests itself against established power.

Art is a process far beyond an object, and it is simultaneously a communicative act and creative expression. In this sense, I agree with Arthur Danto's (1997) statements regarding the role of contemporary art as art that compels critical contemplation on the part of the public; it is always a living dialogue, rather than an object full of beauty. To take Danto's considerations a step further, Gombrich (1995) reminds us that art continues to change with people's social values and due to social change, as the production of art has always been a part of social change.

The topic of dialogue in art emphasizes the interactive nature of the art itself. In drawing on Bakhtin's (1984) perspectives, dialogue takes personal expression and allows it to be a series of dialogues - the meaning of which is constructed through the interlinked exchange of the artist and the viewer. This dialogical process is important because it changes art from a solitary act into a continuing dialogue that encompasses various perspectives and experiences. Engaging in this kind of dialogue not only undermines the hegemonic versions of the dominant culture but can also create a broader understanding of identity, and how we relate to one another socially. In addition to changing the dialogue around identity and making space for new understandings, art can provide the impetus for change and stimulate new ways of thinking. Relational aesthetics, as described by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002 p. 10), presents the changing value of art from dialogical engagement that includes the viewer as an active participant in the construction of meaning. The participatory model of relational aesthetics creates the possibility for the emergence of meaning, rather than simply projecting the intentions of the artist as a singular author I hope to have demonstrated that art has the potential to be an agent of change in society. Paulo Freire (1970) also supports this notion of cultural expression as an empowerment for people to contemplate their oppression and reformulate the ways they navigate social norms.

Additionally, Academics have highlighted the importance of reimagining existing artistic practices. Feminist theory interrogates existing forms of representation in art, which connect to the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Important texts like Dekel's Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory (2013) and A Companion to Feminist Art (Robinson & Buszek, 2019) make visible how feminist practices have challenged dominant narratives by using art as a way to expose power differences and to affirm the value of the everyday. These texts are evidence that art is not just about aesthetic enjoyment, but that it can be a political engagement that can create dialogues and encourage change.

In addition to reimagining existing artistic practices, postcolonial critiques invite me to question the overarching definitions of universality and grand narratives constructed by the dominant western ideologies around artistic expression. Basu (2015) asserts that postcolonial theorists reject simplistic definitions of literature, advocate for recognizing the complexities of histories and cultural particularities in understanding artistic expressions. This is further enriched by Elkins et al. (2010), and Tlostanova (2017) in reminding us that art must be framed within its own culture Latin American, Asia, or Africa, then we may consider its role in mediating cultural hybridity and resistance.

In conclusion, the literature review has developed a framework for my thesis which encompasses various perspectives from the literature of contemporary art in regards to dialogue and catalyzing social change. It establishes that art is not a passive representation of society, but engaging in a conversation about its circumstances using art as an active participant in the construction of meaning art is an active process that can challenge norms of knowledge expressed through cultural monopoly, while creating possibilities for dialogue and social change.

2.1 Art - an embodiment of past tradition, and a resource for new ideas

Art represents a vast field that is constantly evolving, and which is always both reflecting and critically engaging with cultural values. Art scholars have understood art as always a process for some time now, both as a means for making meaning, and as a means for dialoguing with society. Art is usually represented by aesthetics, however as Danto (1997) states, but it is also about ideas and history. Danto suggests that art pushes us to think about what art can be; and it is now well established that art will not stop at the image or artifact, but will be considered as a legitimate form of intellectual inquiry.

Bourriaud (2002 p. 32) talks about relational aesthetics, in which what defines art in our day is the relationships created between people. His view emphasizes that the value of art is not held in the artwork, but created through the combination of artist, artwork, and audience. Bourriaud's relational aesthetics invites viewers to take part in the act of creation, therefore offering a collective art experience versus an individual art experience.

A more historical account is provided by Gombrich (1995), as he articulates the way art, and definitions of art, have changed over time. He demonstrates that as societies change, or have changing ideals, so do ideas about beauty and artistic value. Gombrich is clear that art is an evolving story; a story that is an account of the changing social, political, and cultural values of the time period. Gombrich's work reminds me while many view art as a static, art is anything but static; art is invariably shaped by context, both in terms of creation and experience.

Additionally, art is now being studied in an increasing interdisciplinary manner; researchers are looking at art as it interacts with technology, politics, and everyday life. As society has begun viewing art in the recent past in ways that go beyond traditional, object-based forms, this contemporary context is critical as it has moved the view of art away from pure aesthetics or appreciation of beauty; instead towards a medium that can embrace critical thought, emotions and social engagement.

In conclusion, the literature supports the idea that art supports its duality as both an embodiment of past tradition, and a resource for new ideas. Danto's (1997) framing of art as critical thought and Bourriaud's (2002) framing of art has relational meaning created through interaction are worth further attention. Gombrich (1995) also provides historical context that gives us a glimpse of how values have evolved in the past. From a focus of the visual in art to one that engages with society, prompts critical thought and engages. As such, a contemporary and evolving view of art is critical to understanding its impact as a valuable and powerful force in culture.

2.2 Dialogue - Dialogue as Collaborative Practice and Catalyst for Social and Creative Transformation

Dialogue, in both artistic and social contexts, describes an active conversation around ideas that grows understanding and creativity. For some time now, scholars have argued dialogue is not just sharing words with one another, but is a collaborative engagement of thinking, and what plays out in dialogue is a negotiation of meaning. For example, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin claims dialogue is an actual communicative genre that fights against stable,

authoritative regimes of discourse; we can achieve this through dialogue because it constructs spaces for responses from other voices (Bakhtin, 1984). Bakhtin argues dialogue does not destroy individual expression, but rather transforms individual events into social dialogue, with social meaning being developed with each parties' contribution to understanding the world.

When we think of art, dialogue breaks down the hierarchy between artists and audience members, since art can no longer be defined just as an object. Rather, art can be the conversation. Artists produce works which hope to engage the musings of the viewers and audience members who contribute their interpretations, questionings, and possible transformations of the meaning of the productions in their own respect. This interactive process is central to contemporary theories of art, which argue that the meaning of a work is co-created through its reception (Dissanayake, 1992). Thinking of art in this way detracts from the solitary genius of the artist, and facilitates a more collective, dynamic experience with dialogue being the leverage through which art redefines itself.

Dialogue serves to cross cultural and disciplinary boundaries, as it grants various individuals with unique perspectives the ability to share these perspectives into a democratic and inclusive cultural environment. As theorists claim, through dialogue we allow for dominant narratives to be contested with trajectorial perspectives of marginalized voices (Freire, 1970). This is essential in many contexts where, due to power relations, people have been silenced. Engaging in dialogue allows art to become a medium for social change; reflecting, redefining, and shaping pre-existing frameworks.

Beyond a method of understanding, dialogue becomes a part of itself as both a method and goal in art, it is a method in that artists have outlined production as a means for stimulating discussion and problem identification and it is a goal in that the justification for the existence of the work is a space for the convergence and translation of different perspectives into emergent shared meanings. In both the method and goal, one can see the transformative nature of art since it is beyond just expression; it includes an interactive element that can, unlike expression, layer together collective understandings and foster social and individual change.

In conclusion, dialogue can enhance artistic practice and enrich social dialogue. Bakhtin's interpretation of the pluralism in dialogue makes me think that dialogue is inherently resistant to fixed and static meaning. For art and everyday life, the act of exchanging ideas with others through the dialogue actively dismantles the one-sided interpretations. In this way, we invite

the diverse and varied tones and voices to articulate themselves in the exchange and can create a space with more transitory, fluid, democratic, and transformative conditions.

2.3 From Conversation to Dialogue: Art as Social Exchange

Socially engaged art often moves beyond casual conversation toward genuine dialogue, a process of reciprocal exchange that reshapes both artist and audience. In conversation, people exchange ideas; in dialogue, they transform one another through shared inquiry. Kester (2023), emphasizes that true dialogue is marked by mutual influence rather than domination. He describes dialogic encounters where "One self is not collapsed into the other through empathetic overidentification, but neither does one self seek to vanquish or objectify the other. Instead, these dialogical relationships challenge the very concept of self reflection as the sole origin of critical insight" (Kester, 2023, p. 195). In such exchanges, each participant is receptive to being changed by the other. In other words, dialogue in art is not a one way lecture but a dynamic, empathetic conversation. Unlike a simple conversation, it requires artists and viewers to listen and respond, opening space for real understanding. (Kester, 2023, p. 3) argues that this dialogical mode "how does the experience of resistance itself encourage the emergence of new forms of creativity and critical insight", highlighting that insight often emerges in the intersubjective space between people.

Empathy is central to this dialogical exchange. By refusing to "vanquish or objectify others" dialogical art invites participants to understand each other's experience (Kester, 2023, p. 195). Kester notes that reciprocal dialogue is built on a "conscious disavowal of sovereignty and a deliberate receptivity to the shaping influence of the other on the self" (Kester, 2023, p. 195). In practice, this means artists and audiences share perspectives, each side must be willing to be moved by the other's voice. This mutual openness implicitly cultivates empathy, viewers are not mere spectators but partners whose feelings and insights matter.

Co-creation naturally follows from dialogue. Contemporary artists often design works so that audience members become collaborators. For example, Charnley (2021) describes "police whose participation is considered an integral part of the artwork. The army of beauty, in its procession, was accompanied by mounted officers, their horses' manes decorated with flowers. Police also served free chips to residents at another event included in the project to highlight the problem of child poverty in the area" (Charnley, 2021, p. 146). The artwork was co produced by ordinary people, blurring the line between maker and audience. Kester similarly observes the "work mobilizes forms of prefigurative experience through a commitment to

nonhierarchical decision-making systems" (p. 170). In other words, the participatory process is built into the art itself. By sharing authorship in this way, artists acknowledge viewers as co-creators. This creates a dialogue of doing: socially engaged pieces often generate a "reciprocal cycle of call and response" between project and community (Kester, 2023, p. 170). Each input from the audience is met with another from the artist, and meaning is continually negotiated. Over time this loop builds knowledge that belongs to everyone involved, as Kester points out, because new insight "emerge through the act of resistance" and exchange (p. 170).

Some theorists contrast this stance with an idea of dialogue as building consensus. For instance, Chantal Mouffe (Dias Ramos et al, 2023, p. 36) suggests "critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony." In this view, the artist's role is to question the dominant order, making hidden power structures visible. Such political artworks may seem confrontational rather than merely conversational. Confrontation can be seen as a form of dialogue, one that acknowledges deep disagreements and uses them to push society forward.

In all these approaches, what matters is that empathy, co-creation and politics are woven together. Socially engaged artists deliberately create settings where people learn from each other's perspectives, while working toward common causes. Kester (2023, p. 151) shows that this means linking the transformation of the self with collective action, so that art practice becomes both personal and political. Instead of art simply speaking at viewers, dialogical exchange makes the artwork a living social event, one that can expand beyond its original context and replicate the values it teaches. By designing experiences of shared making and feeling, artists aim not only to start conversations but to build a movement of understanding and change.

Together, these sources suggest that the shift from conversation to dialogue is at the heart of political art practice. Dialogue implies an open-ended exchange where all participants empathize, learn, and transform together. Its importance in politically engaged art lies in combining that empathic exchange with purposeful action. As this literature shows, artists who catalyze dialogue do so not as lone geniuses, but as facilitators, creating space for collective meaning-making, insisting on co-creation, and guiding the discussion toward social ends. In

this way, conversation becomes a springboard for a deeper, shared dialogue that has the power to reshape communities and ideas.

2.4 Catalyst - Igniting Critical Dialogue, Relational Engagement, and Social Transformation

The term catalyst used in art refers to the aspects or processes that can help trigger change and start new conversations. Art, as a vibrant force, can act as a catalyst by enabling social, political, and cultural transformations. In this case, art is not a product to appreciate, but an active agent that encourages the viewer to question the way things are and to imagine the way things could be. Danto (1997) suggests that by confronting existing ideas, art can help change conversations in public discourse, creating space for forms of critique. In this sense, art acts as a spark to ignite the chain reaction of thought and dialogue.

Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics also demonstrates the catalytic role of art. Bourriaud (2002) contends that contemporary art is about creating connections between people, ideas, and cultures. He proposes that the value of a work of art does not exist in isolation, but rather it evolves based on the disposition and relations the artist, the work and the audience create. The engagement transforms the work from an object of art to one of social interaction and collective creativity. By prompting participation and dialogue, art is able to disrupt the notion of passive consumption and create an environment where new ideas and outcomes are possible.

A third example of how we can understand the catalytic force of art comes from Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's account of critical consciousness suggests that education or cultural expression can allow people to expose oppression. Correspondingly, art can be educational; it advances society's ability to scrutinize paradigms held for an extended amount of time and more relevant faculties of consideration. When art incites discussion and critical thinking, it can disrupt social contexts and allow for a more democratic exchange of viewpoints.

Importantly, the power of art as catalyst does not only encompass intellectual engagement. Art also has the potential to stimulate emotions, which can be equally transformative. The joy and emotion that audiences experience while interacting with art can yield insights personally and inspire collective action. Understanding that art has the ability to act as both a cognitive and emotional catalyst to art, is important to understanding how art may activate communities for meaningful change.

While each of these analyses of art propose different attributes, literature on art often emphasizes art as catalyst due to its ability to serve as a bridge between disparate and relative

dimensions regarding the individual and society, the past and the present, the relational and communal, and the subjective and collective. For example, Danto (1997) draws out the ways in which art can act as a breakdown and disrupt cultural narratives. Bourriaud (2002) discusses the role of relational dynamics, in creating vitality across relations.

Finally, Freire (1970) reminds us that opportunities for critical consciousness are meaningful when focusing on people's empowerment. Together, it is clear that art is more than an object, art is a moving process that can create dialogue and initiate change.

2.5 Feminist Theory - Reframing Feminist Art through Intersectional Histories and Transnational Practices

The debate about feminist art has always been double edged - the advocacy view has the potential for change but the problems of definition have thwarted women's art from being fully realized. Robinson and Buszek (2019) claim that "the term ‘feminist art’ has been misused as often as not," , suggesting that feminist art has often been classified too early in the academic and musicological landscape, which Robinson and Buszek (2019) as classifications that are based on convention - geography, time, style, materials, influence that "restricts consideration of feminist art to a particular overt content, style, use of materials, or chronological geographical influence" (Robinson & Buszek, 2019). They also contend that, this reduction places feminist art in a historical context that is determined by Western milestones in time by examples such as the "women's liberation" movement, since it denies the investigation into fuller meaning of feminist art.

It is against this reductive view that Tal Dekel (2013 p. 3) describes how women artists in the US who were advocating radical feminist ideas, negated the hierarchical constructions of artistic practice during the 1970s by using their work "used their work to demonstrate the conceptual influence of feminism in its many and varied forms." These artists linked their lived experiences to their art because their subjects were presented as deplorably trivial. "frequently depicted the quotidian lives of women small, seemingly unimportant moments," and argues that "every subject including those which, prior to that point, had been deemed trivial, minor, and (thus) ‘feminine’ were worthy of discussion and museum exhibition." Such subjects ranged from housekeeping and child raising to everyday indignities like "over-friendly bosses with a habit of patting their behinds" and "body-image issues manifested in the worried looks they gave to their expanding waistline in the mirror" (Dekel, 2013 p. 3).

This interest in the everyday is where these artists disrupt the aesthetic standards of their field. Alongside that, critique the structural issues around the ongoing marginalization of women's lives and experiences. By valuing that which was once insignificant, they re-imagined their personal issues as possibilities for political action, demonstrating the political stance that the personal is political. The practices of these artists allow Dekel (2013) to see the trivial as a medium for cultural and political discourse and confronts and expands upon how we see what is considered legitimate in art.

Robinson and Buszek (2019) move the conversation further through the complications of describing "feminist art" in cultural contexts. In Latin America, for example, the word has different layers of meaning because of the diversity of historical, social, and ethnic particularities that characterize feminism's development at this location. They share that feminist art in Latin America must also confront historical consequences such as the historical violation of women's rights through the creation of a sphere of actions that "were historically forbidden for women" (Robinson & Buszek, 2019). Many women, due to necessity, found their economic prospects in this competitive field, which even further complicated social issues in terms of ethnicity and class with feminist praxis. In addition, illustrated by the early struggles for suffrage based demands in countries like Bolivia, Peru, and Guatemala, where literacy was required for voting, has pointed out, there is a historical combination of gender, class, and ethnicity shaping feminist movements in this region. Robinson and Buszek (2019) also remind me that rooting feminist artistic expression did not just begin in this moment, but instead was also an ongoing historical practice. They remind us of historical reformers, as examples, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who set an early precedent by making a historic opposition against oppressive practices like sati and calling for changes to the law, prior to nationalist movements confirmed the identity of a 'pure' Indian woman whose status has often been 'in order to eliminate feminist critique'. Partha Chatterjee's (as noted by Robinson and Buszek, 2019) research has demonstrated, this position has created a gap between the material, masculine outer world and the inner femineity of a spiritual world and has been part or our discourse and interpretation of feminist art.

In conclusion, kudos to both Dekel (2013) and Robinson and Buszek (2019), above all, that the analysis of feminist art practices must be framed as an evolving knowledge field rather than an individualized collection. Both authors have offered perspectives where Dekle's study of American women artists of the 1970s documented mostly and outlined that radical feminist would envision everyday lived experience as a radical site of political action or critique through

cultural resistance. If Robinson and Buszek's were extending the work of Dekel with a perspective of shedded light on the challenges of narrowing the field by using the term "Western" definition of feminist art, Robinson and Buszek were equally, in praise, extending how we think of assessing the field by "other feminisms" or regional and diversely given accountabilities talk about devastating content as feminist action. This wide variety of world views emphasizes the need to critically reflect on feminist art practices and how we evidence, archive, curate, teach, present, and write about arduous issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and public space.

2.6 Post-Colonial Theory - Post-Colonial Art, Knowledge Production, and the Politics of Aesthetics

Post-colonial theory is critical of the prevailing two-dimensional model offered by Western epistemological systems and can be used to build a broader understanding of how Europe operates to define itself over knowledge, culture, and aesthetics. Indeed, where post-colonial theory is most successful is in its opposition to ontological questions, grand narratives, and universal definitions. Basu (2015 p. 18) provides an apt description when they note that post-colonial theory "are distrustful of ontological questions, grand narratives, and universal definitions." This resistance is to an increasingly problematic identity: that of the Enlightenment's envision of a West that functions as a universal definition of truth, dismissing the specific histories, provincial truths, and pluralized cultures of non-Western systems. If it does not set out a single overall set of beliefs, postcolonial theory can provide a more critical basis for inquiry, it analyzes how Europe appropriates power the processes of knowledge-production, reaching a position of entitlement and power through histories that it writes (Basu, 2015).

In this sense, postcolonial theory functions as an interruptive methodology among mainstream academic discourses, as it renegotiates the established conventions of Enlightenment reading and interpretation by refusing to accept a transcendental signifier capable of establishing meaning across cultures, forms, and histories. Basu (2015 p. 19) describes postcolonial theory: "interrogates the processes through which Europe constitutes its position as a sovereign locus of truth and power via appropriation of and control over the modes of knowledge-production." This description is essential for my thinking of art as discussion generator because it demonstrates how art practices find ways to reveal and dismantle the reminders of the power dynamics set up by colonialism. In a volume edited by Elkins et al. (2010 p. 257), another take on postcolonial art also contributes to the discourse about the geopolitics of art and artist

networks that fuel contemporary aesthetic practices. Elkins and colleagues pointed out that postcolonial thinking, understandably, is more useful to analyze countries that acquired independence fifty years ago, while for Latin Americans the question was, how to reorient modernity. They tackled the changing nature of the postcolonial context: elsewhere, independence indicates a relic of the past; for Latin Americans, modernity was in motion. Artistic networks and biennials do not have to rely solely on Western cities like Venice, Kassel, or Miami to activate their meanings or functions; they are multiplying in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This shifting paradigm is disrupting what Toby Miller and George Yúdice (2002 p. 145) call 'international division of cultural work' based on circulation of aesthetic prestige and organized via networks that privilege global centers over the periphery. (Elkins et al., 2010).

These historical practices of coloniality in the Caribbean, and beyond, and now affect predominantly marginalized communities cultural and social lives, even as global art markets continue to build on 'hybridizations' and fragmented cultural identities. For example, colonial city is often portrayed as "divided into compartments of native quarters and European quarters" (Elkins et al., 2010 p. 159). This compartmentalization is not just a historical artifact; it resonates within current conversations of the persistence of social and spatial inequality. In this way, decolonial art practices begin to provide a critical vehicle for examining the "unwarranted anointment of Europe" and its volatile relationship to global cultures.

Tlostanova (2017) provides a complementary critique by scrutinizing the appropriation of postcolonial problematic by dominant art institutions and theories. She argues that in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the radical postcolonial potential of thought has been "appropriated" re-packaged into what she calls "neatly wrapped and instantly recognizable postcolonial goods." This process (Tlostanova 2017) creates an easily recognizable postcolonial art from which the contesting element of postcolonial art is absent; just another commodity that the familiar forms of Orientalism, exoticization, and progressivism may take. This critique is important for my thesis because it illuminates the potential for art, once freed from previous confinements, to potentially fall back into new forms of cultural production that would include Western precedence. Tlostanova (2017) cautions that without some form of criticality, the potential for postcoloniality to be transformative could erode into just another commodity in the global art market.

An additional complication postcolonial theory offers art is its focus on contextual specificity. As noted, for example, by Elkins et al. (2010 p. 145), there is "no reason to celebrate a global

market of hybridizations or the dispersion of the falsely autonomous fragments falsely so exalted by postmodernism." yet the theory calls upon the frame of art to theorize art within a contextual history and the persistent differences but also their intercultural aspects, or crossings. This is crucial to note within a schism of cultural production that is becoming globally connected but is entrenched in deep divides from the coloniality and modernity of historical processes. This means that artists supported by non-Western contexts are enjoined to engage local vernacular traditions at the global art fairs, and produce local art from specific cultural experiences, while being able to be connected to and be engaged in global discussions at the same time. They, too, can offer "other feminisms" and other narratives that can ultimately balance out, as it were, the dominant Western discourses (Elkins et al., 2010; Tlostanova, 2017).

Moreover, postcolonial theory becomes a site to interrogate and disrupt contemporary processes of postcolonial globalization and not just the legacies of colonialism. The regimes of capital have globalized contemporary cities, remaking them wherever migration takes place. Tlostanova reminds us that "the new cohorts of dispensable lives constantly join the global ranks of the disenfranchised," The process continues. Those who have gained inclusion and recognition before others stand in competition with others for inclusion and recognition. This process resonates with the thesis of art as dialogue as this shows the ability of an artist to intervene and provide their economic and cultural position as a site for these disenfranchised voices to name their experiences, resist their disenfranchisement, but also dream for a more just outcome from this experience.

In summary, and as has become clear in synthesizing the literature on postcolonial theory and art, the entanglement of histories, global culture, and local particulars is complex. Postcolonial theorists reject the notion that there is one universal signifier that implies meaning, yet offer a way to intellectually critically unpack colonial power. This critical thinking is a useful premise for contemporary art, as contemporary art is meant to acknowledge culture in an increasingly global space that is still unequally exhibited and shared.

2.7 Cultural Criticism - Intermediaries, Democratization, and the Dialogic Economy of Contemporary Art

Cultural criticism has become increasingly prominent in how we look at how artistic expression engages with social processes. According to Hauser (2011), who in arguing for the need to create "new languages be developed" to change meanings from what their cultural precedents meant, says that many modes of interpretation of art are framed within an inadequate

framework which has been established in perpetuating oppressive power discourse. The conceptual framework is important and difficult because they are all linked to the fact that cultural monopolies are not easily broken down and are constructed in struggles, and, therefore, the movement to transform cultural monopolies within any aspect of culture will always be contested. The struggle for democratizing culture, (Hauser, 2011) explains, is critically examining the value systems with which art and language have been limited to prior understandings.

It can be argued, that an artwork can not be only about contemplation or expression, but rather it can also be viewed as a mode of communication, which is a dialogue. The argument is that nobody makes art for themselves, since nobody speaks to himself in verse, nobody experiences nature in paintings without wanting to make them seen. This argument illustrates that every work of art anticipates some kind of audience, either a real audience or a fiction audience. Thus, each form of art, whether seen objectively or as a subjective experience, contains two elements: one is something natural, substantially stable activity, and the other is built from something socially, culturally, and historically variable. Art is meaningful not only as it relates to each side as an act, but as it is mediated by each, as the process is always a negotiation between free, variable ways of acting spontaneously on natural data and more stable ways of acting that can draw on cultural data that is also usually social and historic.

Intermediaries such as curators, critics, and institutions play a crucial role in this process by providing access to works that were previously inaccessible. These intermediaries bring to bear works one has not access to, however, they also dictate the way one proceeds to understand those works. Bradley and Esche (2001) state: "to the same extent that the intermediaries provide access to works which had previously been unapproachable, so those who have been taught by them often depart from the original and normative meanings of the works." This presents a paradox with respect to access in the cultural field: while they may democratize access to art, at the same time they have also provided a meaning and at times a meaning which is distinct from the original intent of the original artist.

The process of reconfiguring meaning is linked with how art has shifted in orientation within society as it has continues to grow. Art was once recognized as a decidedly passive archivist of the creator's subjective worldview, but 21st century practices have changed our thinking such that art is now imagined as an active agent of influence over details of social, cultural commentary. According to Hauser (2011, p. 431), the elements of an artwork are separate

between the constant, natural occurring, and the changeable, culturally determined. This tension therefore brings us to an identifiable space of engagement when art can become a conversation, not predetermined by the creator, but between the work and the audience. For art can stretch the boundaries of dominant culture, allowing for expression equivocal to other ways of telling the story not told.

To that end, cultural critique continues to counter the long valued aesthetic values entrenched in an artwork. It maintains that the liberation of art from the "prison of rigidity and lack of expression" rests on two ideas; the democratization of culture and the criticism of traditional values. As this view indicates, culture can liberate art and culture from conventional constraints in as much as it is democratized and traditional values are critiqued. However, as Hauser (2011 p. 431) points out, this liberation is not absolute; "this key does not open all doors and certainly not without wanting some reward." In other words, cultural democratization comes with its own contradictions and limitations and transforming art is always about negotiations of power and privilege.

The discussion of cultural criticism is also enriched by Nicolas Bourriaud's, (2010 p. 9) idea of "culture of use." Bourriaud argues that a work of art is no longer being defined only by the artist's intentions but is also being defined by how the artwork is being utilized, interpreted, and repurposed by audiences. He references Duchamp's well-known quote; "it is the viewers who make the paintings" and argues that meaning is collaboratively produced in the interface between the artwork and the audience. This perspective draws much more attention to the collaborative nature of contemporary art-making and the power that art has in creating interaction and dialogue. In the current digital time, where the importance of the Internet in shaping new ways of communicating has surged, the collaborative process is especially evident, with audiences interacting with art in multifaceted ways that exceed traditional moments of reception.

Simultaneously, the work of cultural critic Françoise Vergès has informed my thinking of how art, history, and power are tangled. Vergès reminds me that the transatlantic slave trade was a system of globalization articulated through a violent power economy that decimated native cultures and languages. In this world, the process of creolization emerged the mingling of cultures through resistance and oppression. Some contemporary conversations praise creolization in a manner that favors trans local creativity and exchange, and Vergès reminds practitioners not to too easily re-envision this word in a purely positive light, as this could erase

the underlying violence and power dynamics of these cultural encounters. Vergès is adamant that creolization is understood as "a creative practice in a world characterized by brutality, domination, and violence" (Vergès, 2003 p. 11), reinstating that art is inseparable from the sociohistorical frameworks from which it is produced.

In addition, the relation of art to economic relations is a recurrent theme in cultural criticism. Bradley and Esche (2001) contend that contemporary art institutions redefined themselves through the language of economic regeneration and cultural industry, a representational shift that demonstrated the economics of art were ever more absorbed in market relations. In this context, artists are more narrowly assumed to be "consultants and expert consumers" who are expected to work through creative thinking to solve social problems. The escalation of the artist's role, where oppositional presence in public institutions has been absorbed, and is contributing to more expansive experimentation with social space, illustrates how the critical potential of art has been co-opted while still being managed by narrower definitions of commodity production. The contradictions that cultural criticism exposes challenges me to rethink the value system that has shaped the art world, and to consider other model of giving focus to dialogue and collective engagement, rather than profit and exclusivity.

2.8 Gender - Performing Gendered Identities and Subverting Norms through Art

The subject of gender and art involves complicated histories and contexts. Scholars have emphasized for many years how art as creative expression signifies not only aesthetic sensibilities, but also gendered experiences that can be articulated and contested. Significant contributions to this area of study include Rituparno Ghosh: Cinema, Gender, and Art (Datta et al., 2015) and Studying Gender in Classical Antiquity (Foxhall, 2013). Although the authors of the texts engage different genres and periods, clearly articulated in both text is the ability of art to understand, represent and ultimately shift ideas about gender norms and trajectories of identity and desire.

For example, Ghosh's films in Datta et al. (2015), are examples of how contemporary cinema engages and deliberately disrupts traditional masculine genres by placing feminine perspectives in dialogue with genre. An important element of genre shifting is articulated by Datta et al. (2015) as "feminization of masculine orders through the feminine mundane," where Ghosh creates a sense of attached genre-values in his use of films such as Shubho Muhurat (2003) and Salanweshi (2013) while also reconstructing classically masculine conventions. Importantly, Ghosh never neglects the detail of the visual codes I mean lighting, camera

movement, setting, and color palette, which together engender what Ghosh calls, "an intimate interface, where narratives of gender and longing intertwine."

An important component of Ghosh's films is the transformation of the domestic (interior) space into a narrative terrain. In Chokher Bali, the careful fabrication of interior spaces delicately soft silken light, a stable, sweeping camera, and artfully placed props emphasizes both the visual beauty of the film as well as the representational issues at the heart of its narrative. According to Datta et al. (2015), such "chamber dramas" contemplate situations relevant to bhadralok (middle and upper-middle class in Bengali society) from what can tangibly be perceived as feminine perspectives, which is significant because it emphasizes a more intimate portrayal of everyday femininity over an external, potentially stereotyped, version of gender performance. In one sequence, Ghosh holds his shot on Ashalata who, it is worth noting, is dressed in an identical costume to Binodini, until it is clear that she is utterly captivated, almost sexually fascinated, by Binodini's beauty and strength of character.

As not just an instance of Ghosh's developing style, it gestures towards the "affective presence of lusting women," or homoerotic attachments. Ghosh demonstrates how mise en scène complicates the "gaze of the camera," thus allowing for the female gaze reclaimed if only temporarily a potential challenge to the imaginary and material realities operating in the traditionally male gaze of cinema. Ghosh's narrative technics involve more complex examinations of desire and identity and much of this is within a duality of gender and longing that allows Ghosh to connect multiple contemporary narratives into a singular story. Consider the ways in which interior spaces are remapped and reinterpreted as they are removed from the rough exteriors of natural landscapes to the closeness of a bedroom, or the camaraderie of dining; for Datta et al. (2015), these acts of remapping turn physical spaces into dynamic topographies and "new liminal space thick fabric of contemporary tales are woven" (p. 319). In this conceptualization, even the inferences of the homosexual closet are linguistically transformed; rather than a container of disavowed desire, it becomes a space of activity where subjectivities can be renegotiated. Though Ghosh's work does not explicitly identify as feminist in a normative sense, it addresses the politics of gender, representing both the modalities and difficulties encountered within contemporary expressions of gender relations.

In analyzing historical perspectives, Foxhall (2013) gives a critical assessment of gender in classical antiquity, a period which, notwithstanding differences from contemporary issues, highlights important approaches to the question of gender representation. In other words,

Foxhall contends that studying gender is one of the most challenging topics to research because it is interconnected with both our social lives and who we are as people. Although this reasoning presents a biological element to gender, for example "male" and "female", this is a starting point. In the words of Foxhall (2013 p. 2), "the extent to which gender is built into human biology, evolution, and behaviour is passionately debated," and what becomes most significant is how gender is performed in any particular socio-political context.

Foxhall's work highlighting continuity and change in gender illustrates this. Although "male" or "female" can be physically distinguished in previous times, Foxhall (2013 p. 70) emphasizes how the cultural meanings of "male" and "female" were open to socialization, learning, and practice. The representation of gender in classical literature and art is one example. Foxhall (2013) reminds me, as opposed to directly writing about social history and thereby portraying people's lives, ancient literary texts like the letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger, offer valuable insight into how upper class Romans understood gender relations. At the same time, Foxhall encourages me to think critically about any literary text's representational context, as it is not direct windows into ordinary people lives but narratives that reflect elite ideologies. The study of gender in classical antiquity reminds us the study of the contested and negotiated nature of gender roles, what is seen as natural and what is socially constructed.

Another important theme in the literature discussing gender and art is how art engages the subjective and objective. The significance of pleasure in aesthetic theory, as described in the previous chapters on aesthetics, must be highlighted, and although we are not firmly able to determine whether beauty would be described more accurately as an objective quality or subjective effect, the debate has important ramifications for the understanding of gender. As theorists have commented, the ability of an artwork to evoke pleasure would be tied to a confluence of multi-sensual qualities and often these sensual qualities are informed by gendered perceptions. One could speculate if their notion of "feminine" taste for pretty and charming artworks, and "masculine" taste for profound or challenging art, illuminates some particular cultural assumptions about gendered sensibilities (Korsmeyer, 2004 p. 47).

Furthermore, the work of contemporary artists continues to disrupt the rigid notions of gender from historical and contemporary contexts. Thus the artist's role in contemporary art is not to simply represent gendered realities but to engage and open a dialogue that questions and reconstructs it.

In terms of understanding the broader implications of these discussions for my thesis Art as a Catalyst for Dialogue: Motivations and Approaches in Contemporary Artistic Practices it is safe to say gender is an inescapable denominator in the trans-formative qualities of art. Art that engages with gender signals something more than just illustrating differences, is typically a critique of the power and cultural assumptions which frame those differences. The literature provides insights about art that reveals itself as a dynamic form for negotiating identity, desire, and social norms, deriving from Ghosh's contemporary cinema and classic analyses of gender. The dynamic interaction between gender and art, whether it is the re-envisioning of interior spaces in film or several layers of analysis around historical texts highlights how the channeling of difference through gender and art presents a dialogue that is necessary and trans-formative.

2.9 Conclusion

The references discussed in this chapter all emphasize that art is more than an ornament; it is a living, breathing, communicative activity that can subvert existing power structures and ultimately bring about social change. Danto (1997) and Gombrich (1995) remind us that art is contextually and historically contingent and that art encourages the viewer to think critically rather than passively. Likewise, Bakhtin's (1984) notion of dialogue demonstrates that art is inherently interactive, directing us to the space between artist and viewer to nurture an ongoing conversation. Bourriaud (2002) is on track as he proposes that the value of an artwork arises in the viewer's relationship to the work, a work becomes art only by way of its relationship to social interaction.

Feminist and postcolonial critiques inform our understanding of how art can change and shape the world we live in. Dekel's (2013) analysis of American women artists from the 1970s demonstrate that art can deconstruct popular patriarchal norms by exploring issues of everyday life and making reference to topics that have been trivialized. Robinson and Buszek (2019) extend this argument to clarify the limitations of defining "feminist art" narrowly, by referring only to specific historical moments identified within Western art history. They propose a more diversified understanding of art that brings a range of cultural and social contexts to the understanding of art. Like other scholars, Basu (2015), Elkins et al. (2010), and Tlostanova (2017) both critique the universalist narratives that are tied to an essentialist experience of Western domination and call us to an interpretive framework for art that involves establishing local histories and global transactions.

Cultural criticism, as talked by Hauser (2011), and supported by Bourriaud (2002) takes art institutions and the social institutions that surround them to task. Not only does it question the bounded structures that have defined art, it brings attention to the actors who act as mediators and appropriate art and act as channels who democratize art and its significance. The operational aspect of meaning and the dialogues that emerge from art practices is relational but has deep roots in the socio-political conditions from which it emanates.

This is the aspect of knowledge that I take as my own initiative to expand on, based on the thematic analysis of the interviews required by the present research. Specifically, I engaged the artists/cultural practitioners in my study and inquire into how they articulate their convictions in establishing meaning, negotiate their challenges and articulate how they use their creative practices to engage and create dialogue about social change. From the interviews I was able to both attest to the theoretical positions examined here, as well as uncover altogether different experiences of art that suggest dialogue may be more inclusive and critically engaged.

Based on the literature, my thesis, "Art as a Catalyst for Dialogue: Exploring Motivations and Methods in Contemporary Artistic Practices" is build upon these theoretical positions to incorporate how to synthesize contradictory/parallel perspectives. As I indicated, I also use thematic analysis of the interviews to discover new variations in possible methods for contemporary artists to develop dialogue as form of interrogating and inverting the powers that facilitate cultural monopoly. The analysis also suggest new ways art can facilitate transformation amid society's convenience rather than temptation towards social transformation.

I have drawn on themes and research that call for further research that confound clear definitions of art in contemporary contexts, I plan to contextualize and expand on issues which I indicated as important to the dialogue about that gap between abstract theoretical frameworks of art and the practices of artists. I hope the direction of my thematic research with interviews in the context of collaborative practice of making art, reflect on the lived realities of artists and therefore will contribute to new meaning of how art is a catalyst for dialogue in a fragmented world.

3. Research Methodology

The study examines how contemporary artistic practices can catalyze dialogue and social change. This study is qualitative in nature, this is guided by an interpretive, experience-centered

perspective that emphasizes practitioner reflection and ongoing adaptation. Framing the work in this way helps clarify how the theoretical outlook shaped both the ways data were gathered and the reflective processes used to make sense of them.

The rationale for utilizing qualitative methods align with the ability to explore the otherwise subtle and nuanced subjectivity of the artists experience. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that qualitative methods uniquely allow us to interpret patterns in narrative data, making them particularly relevant for understanding how art prompts dialogue.

Framed by Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of critical consciousness, the research conceptualizes art as a way in which to analyze and confront "oppressive" structures, and like Jokela and Huhmarniemi's (2018) view of art as a "Art can also be the subject of development or the tool for the research's data collection and analysis" (p. 9) and as a means to inspire action for "development work", the interviews illustrated artists utilizing their artistic practices as a means to provoke dialogue, inspiring others for social or transformative work. Integrating qualitative methods and analytical sensibility in digital ways, the research provides a significant intersection between theoretical perspectives and the artists' experiences working through their artistry, offering an understanding of how the arts inspire dialogue and engage communities. Ultimately, this study adds to our understanding of how the arts can promote transformations within contemporary cultural contexts.

3.1 Pre Planning for Interviews

I reached out to around fifty artists internationally via cold email, and ten responded favorably; with scheduling issues though, I only managed to talk with four during my research period. One respondent, a Pakistani artist I knew, seemed great at first, but I decided not to include her so as not to introduce personal bias because she was a personal friend. The list then went down to three practitioners with varying levels of familiarity: I had seen two of Akram Zaatari's short films; I had come across Alia Ali's website a few months prior by coincidence; and I had no prior knowledge of Kawita Vatanajyankur and her practice. In my selection, I made a conscious effort to consider artists whose work I believed promoted dialogue and had political relevance, even if they weren't necessarily making political statements and I found it interesting that all of the ones that did agree to participate had some link to Asia even if they were not based in Asia.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The collection of data in this study consisted of two forms of data collection: Short and loosely structured interviews were conducted over Zoom. This section addresses the archival aspect, as it is an important part of understanding the interview data and supports my comprehension of contemporary artistic practices as facilitators of dialogue.

Archival and documentary analysis is a process of collecting and analyzing a variety of materials, including exhibition catalogues, press releases, critical reviews, and official online publications. In the context of this research, primarily I relied on official websites and published materials from the following artists: Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali and Kawita Vatanajyankur. Akram Zaatari's exhibited works are documented in official platforms such as Kurimanzutto (Kurimanzutto, n.d.) which detail both Zaatari's exhibitions and film projects, and capture the urban context of post-war Beirut. Alia Ali's official site (Ali, n.d.) offers a large variety of published material to speak to her interdisciplinary practice which focuses on identity and social justice. Kawita Vatanajyankur's official website (Vatanajyankur, 2020) presents her innovative project work in which she reconfigures interior spaces into narrative landscapes while inspiring social engagement and cultural transformation. I would not be analyzing or commenting on their work as the focus of the research is more on their process and primarily on their opinions.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes in the case of Akram Zaatari and around 50 minutes for Ali and Vatanajyankur. Rather than adhering to a fixed questionnaire, I adopted a semi-structured approach to minimize any bias that a predetermined set of questions might introduce. Initially, each artist was invited to describe their artistic practice and underlying motivations, subsequent questions were then formulated in response to their answers, allowing the conversation to unfold in a more flexible and participant-driven manner.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study is primarily qualitative and executes thematic analysis to inductively analyze the data the transcribed interviews systematically to identify themes, motifs, and narratives that demonstrate how contemporary art practices foster dialogue and lay the foundation for social change.

Research also utilizes Voyant and Atlas.ti to analyze large amounts of text for recurring themes and to encapsulate themes and patterns within the data. The use of both software allows for the text analysis to analyze word frequency and thematic mapping. Using Voyant, and Atlas.ti helps

me understand my thesis topic corresponds with and extend the ideas expressed in the interviews. By tracing terminology such as "dialogue," "identity," and "transformation" and using Voyant and Atlas.ti to analyze coordination and repetition across documents with these terms, I may better interpret how artists conceptualized engaging their work as opportunities to initiate social dialogue.

First, I took all of the interviews, conducted via Zoom, and transcribed verbatim, and imported them into both Voyant and Atlas.ti. These are online tools used for extracting data from documents. I used them to explore the frequency of particular words and phrases. I was interested in common language in relation to some key concepts (dialogue, identity, transformation, and resistance). I looked at the word frequency lists and the word clouds generated by the Voyant and Atlas.ti software to begin to construct dominant themes in regard to the interview data.

Next, I hand-coded the qualitative data with a thematic analysis approach. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, the first step is to thoroughly read the interview transcriptions and archival materials to fully understand both the content and context. Once I had a good understanding of the entirety of the content, I generated codes capturing significant ideas and patterns within the data. For instance, the codes that I was identifying, such as feminist interventions, cultural criticism, and postcolonial resistance, which aligned with and were connected to the theoretical frames described in the literature review.

Once I generated the initial codes, I looked back over the codes and collated them into broader themes. This process involved looking for connections between different codes and asking if the identified codes fit into a thematic category that is faithful to the research question. The process of identifying and constructing themes, codes, and connections was iterative: themes were continuously and consistently refined and reevaluated through both the interview data and archival documents.

In addition to my manual coding, I used Voyant and Atlas.ti to inform the thematic analysis by providing more data through a quantitative lens of word usage over time. Integrating the two processes of manual and digital analysis gave further credibility to the validity of the study's findings and afforded a richer, fuller comprehension of how language is utilized by artists and cultural practitioners to articulate their experiences and motivations.

Throughout the analysis stage, efforts were made to ensure that the themes were based on data. Constant comparison methods were utilized as segments of text are examined repeatedly to

ensure the appropriate coding aligned with the participant's perspective. This process of scrutiny ensured a strong degree of trustworthiness and reliability of the analysis.

Using the flexibility of thematic analysis and analytical capabilities of Voyant and Atlas.ti allowed the study to uncover the ways in which art fosters dialogue. The thematic analysis revealed both the overt expressions of artistic practice but also the subtler cognitive connections of meaning-making that bridge the personal and artistic experience to social and cultural transformation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This research found that ethical standards were applied throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data. Informed consent was thoroughly obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of each recorded session as interviews occurred via Zoom and the participants were both experienced artists. As an initial part of these interviews, the participants received thorough and clear information about this study, relevant discussion topics, and the participants' rights for example, to withdraw at any time without negative impact on them. And as all interviewees were professional artists having a general conversation on practice and motivation, the participants knew exactly what they were discussing and providing consent and feedback that would be recorded with their name attached to their contribution.

In this research there was no confidentiality as anonymity as the names of artists are central to the context and analysis of the findings. The research engages with the artists' own experiences, and by naming the participants, it retains the integrity of the names, voices, experiences shared as well as the contribution to the knowledge discourse by making it clear their feedback is linked to their contributions to the field of art making

The data collected from the Zoom interviews were recorded, securely transcribed, and kept in a password protected device and in encrypted cloud service. Despite knowing the identities of participants, all data storage and collection had safety procedures in place to ensure all information was secure and would only be used for the purpose of this research.

Because the conversations were conducted in general terms and the interviewees were professional artists, there were no negative risks to any participants in the research. The conversations did not involve discussions about sensitive personal issues and all artists were accustomed to talking about their work in professional settings. The research environment ensured perspectives would be shared in a supportive environment which did not create potential for discomfort or harm.

This research followed standard of ethical practice since it ensured informed consent was appropriately documented and participants clearly understood their involvement which conforms to the data management practices around the data. The honesty regarding participant names also added value to the study as it allowed the reader to have clear and verifiable information about the practices and perspectives of established artists. This ethical practice kept with the guidelines from any organizing research body, and it also adhered to standards of professional accountability toward scholarly inquiry in a respectful and responsible manner.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter explains the research methods and the theoretical framings associated with the research methods, providing a methodological insight framing the process of art-based action research, which examined how elements of contemporary art practices serve as a vehicle for dialogue and change-making. By pairing qualitative interviews with analytic processes using Voyant and Atlas.ti, the study has the potential to interrogate these artists narratives within their respective socio-political contexts.

The interviews of Akram Zaatari, Alia Ali, and Kawita Vatanajyankur provided informative details on the motives of their artistic process, and through reflection on practice, reveal practical and ideological implications of contemporary artistic practices, providing a solid theoretical foundation based on realities of practice and contemporary culture.

The methodology utilizing semi-structured interviews and archival and documentary analysis informed by experiential and interpretational perspectives aligns with Jokela and Huhmarniemi assertion that interpretational and experiential processes facilitate a "deeper understanding and development of conceptual and theoretical knowledge" (p. 11), supporting complex histories into the interrogative trajectories, the power of art, and the possibilities resistant practice can illuminate in regard to addressing the central research question.

The research procedure was planned with an awareness of relevant ethical dimensions throughout the processes of conducting research including informed consent, data management, and record keeping of openly shared data with the participants. These ethical coordinates ensured that participant relationships engaged in a respectful and transparent manner.

4. Findings and Analysis

The findings presented in this chapter came from recorded and transcribed interviews that were manually coded, and also coded using Voyant and Atlas.ti, which are digital text analysis software tools useful for identifying samples of repeated wording and recurring themes in the artists' language. The findings are organized in two sections: artist-specific themes, and cross-cutting themes. The first section include six themes that were specific to each artist, which showed how their specific practices reflected their perspectives and intentions as creators. The second section highlights six themes that were common across all three interviews that exemplified something shared in their thinking or artistic practices. Notably, this chapter does not intend to interpret the artists' artworks or judge their work in anyway, but focuses on the voices of the artists to explain the conceptual framework for their practices. Through the course of these conversations, it was clear that the artists were more than material makers of images and objects, but rather they were telling stories, critiquing culture, and participating in a bigger context of social and political infrastructures that shape us all. This chapter aims to explore through their own words how the artists enacted art as a site of dialogue, of memory and resistance, to engage politics of identity and as a means to negotiate complex and fractured identities today.

Each section is organized by artist, starting with a discussion of Kawita Vatanajyankur's physically demanding performances that expand the limits of the body to critique systems of work, gender, and consumerism. The section is followed by Akram Zaatari's practice that closely engages with archives and memory, and the ways these issues complicate politics of representation. Following this, Alia Ali is elaborated on, in her exploration of the significance of language, materiality, and movement to offer her resonances and resistances against colonialism and cultural borders.

4.1 Kawita Vatanajyankur - Themes

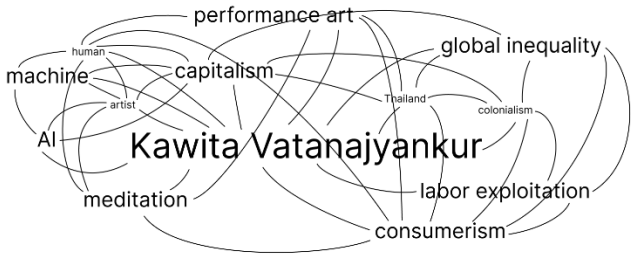

Figure 7: Ideas and Themes which were prominent in my conversation with Kawita. Designed using Figma

Kawita Vatanajyankur's practice is a visceral and unflinching interrogation of the unseen systems that shape modern consumer culture. Based on her own experiences as a Thai woman and an artist engaging with feminist critique, Vatanajyankur works through her own body as a site of resistance. She engages with the everyday use of domestic spaces and objects through performance-based video works, and she racializes the notion of labour in the domestic space as a site where work is entangled with themes of repetition and pain. This section addresses the six central, interrelated themes that arose during the interview: Embodiment of Labor, Critique of Consumerism, Female Experience, Performance as Medium, Visual Violence and Metaphorical tools. Each theme demonstrates Vatanajyankur's approach to art, that turns personal and political discourses into visual conversation.

4.1.1 Embodiment of Labor

What is clear in Vatanajyankur's practice, is her visceral working with her own body as a site of labor: "I am using my body as a tool, and I am part of the machine in order to reveal the repetition and labour ". Said Vatanajyankur (2025)[1] The choice for her to use her own body as a site of labour is intentional, as she underlines the physicality of work, and collapses the distance between subject and object in performance. In this way, Vatanajyankur's art is not only about labor; it is labour. The bodily strain, repetition, and weight that she shows through performance, became a metaphor for the invisible, often shared privations that many people,

[1] Following excerpts are taken from Interview with Vatanajyankur, 11 February 2025, Via Zoom

and especially women, carry whether they be in the domestic, or industrial spheres. Vatanajyankur's performances amplify that which we often take for granted the unseen work that goes into the products we consume every day. She explains, "When I am doing the work physically, I can feel the fatigue - that unites me with the people for whom this is the everyday reality." This acknowledgment of a bond anchors her empathetic thread in the work. Vatanajyankur is not doing labour to imitate or mock it, but to re-live it and re-enact it in order to create solidarity and to create contemplation. Her embodiment of labour is personal narrative and social critique at once, collapsing the art/work divide.

In the spirit of feminist theorists like Silvia Federici (2004), who argues that domestic labour has always been devalued in capitalist contexts, her works retrieve these actions as worthy of attention. Her body, a representation of the other, becomes the vehicle for expressing repressed narratives. "I think while I am doing these tasks, I am performing the work of women, and also pushing my limits of fatigue, to make visible the work that goes by without recognition," she said. This self-inflicted intensity is an embodied critique of patriarchal expectations of women's labour and their endurance and submission to silence as their labour goes unremarked. By making her own body perform what so many others do without recognition or care on a daily basis, Vatanajyankur immediately becomes a body of labour herself and a reminder that there is often an invisible amount of labour to modern living each day. The body of labour in her work is a feminist statement, calling for recognition of the values of women's labour and women's bodily autonomy that are suspended in an overtly invisible context.

4.1.2. Critique of Consumerism

Vatanajyankur's work is continuous with critique of consumerism. She contends, "We consume with such ease, without knowing the hands behind every object." Her performances confront the specific capitalist structures of consumerism which cover or breach the substantial laboring moments behind commodities. Such as in works like The Scale of Justice and Carrier, Vatanajyankur's body is placed into dual balancing acts and a kind of physical work simulating industrial labour cycles of exertion. The performances are not merely representations, but stand-ins for various excluded workers of the global economy, the majority of whom are women working in labor-intensive situations. In making these invisible workers visible, Vatanajyankur disrupts the seamless surface of consumption. The body becomes both representational object, and acting agent of critique. "My work is a protest in the body's language," she implied, as through physical endurance and more specifically the display of strain she is speaking back to systems of exploitation.

Through this critique of consumerism, Vatanajyankur makes visible how patterns of personal consumption are linked with global labour disparities. Every agonizing posture and heavy load carried in her performances underline the hard labour under consumption. Through the exaggeration and presentation of the bodily costs of production, she dislocates the audience's position in consumption. This artistic tactic is reminiscent of broader social critiques of late capitalism, and re-affirms the intentions of feminist economists who highlight the often invisible work of both paid and unpaid labour necessary to sustain markets (Folbre, 2001). Vatanajyankur's performances, in one sense, are an activist act, demanding consideration of ethical consumption and the human cost behind consumer products.

4.1.3 Female Experience

Gender is central to the performance work of Vatanajyankur. As she states, "The body I use is always female, it's important as domestic labour is gendered." By using female bodies to further her work, she hopes to insert herself into a feminist discourse that persists despite feminist attempts to end the historical erasure of women’s labor. Yet her performance is not all simply women’s work; her entire program draws out the banal realities of cleaning, carrying, balancing, and other labour associated with work at home, but is performed at an intensity that hyperbolizes them. She is accomplished at making banal activities monumental. "I perform work traditionally done by women, adding to that, I push myself to the extreme of avoiding what becomes invisible approximate labor, the unattended and unaccountable undertakings of a woman to her task," Vatanajyankur emphasizes. In a sense, she does not/represents women's labor, she becomes women's labor, she exaggerates women's labour and asserts women's labour in public awareness. Her performances become evidence or acknowledgment of all women whose efforts are unrecognized and unpaid.

Her embodiment of the "female experience" is not passive. Her work is a radical act of reclaiming space, a radical act of reclamation and visibility. By revealing pain in her performances, she is actively protesting, and the methodology creates a reality in which the invisible could be seen and felt. In many ways, her approach mimics feminist consciousness-raising, in that it converts a personal, gendered experience into a public act (Hanisch, 1970). By physically enduring and showing the burdens customary in women's everyday labor, Vatanajyankur legitimizes those experiences, she gives them artistic and social significance. The female experience, as made manifest through her art, becomes a potent narration of survival and resistance to gendered oppression.

4.1.4 Performance as Medium

For Vatanajyankur, performance is not merely a device to deliver her message, the performance is the message. "Performance is immediate-it's physical, emotional and real," she states. The medium of performance enables her to examine temporality, endurance, and vulnerability in ways that static forms do not allow. Her performances are all typically continuous loops of action, underscoring both repetition and futility, attributes that many forms of labour body. She states that, "It is the pain and difficulty of the act that gives it meaning." This truth is evident in works in which she is maintaining very strenuous positions, balancing heavy objects, or engaging in what seemed to be impossible tasks. These activities are not merely physical trials, they are symbolic confrontations to systems that normalize the exhaustion and sacrifice of females.

Through the dislocation of her own body, Vatanajyankur engenders an empathetic and uncomfortable space with the viewer. The video or work of Vatanajyankur's that has been performed in real time or captured on video in unbroken sequences requires the presence of the viewer. The viewer's presence is crucial, the audience's presence is expected. Her body is not merely the canvas upon which the meaning is displayed; her body is the artwork. She is confident in using performance as her medium because performance relies on the act of art-making and the message of the art are one and the same. When the viewer witnesses struggle, the viewer is not witnessing representation of struggle, the viewer is witnessing the struggle as it happens thereby producing a strong empathetic connection. The immediacy and liveness of performance brings authenticity and urgency to the concerns of her practice.

4.1.5. Visual Violence

Vatanajyankur's performances provoke emotional responses. "Some people say my work is difficult to watch. That is the experience," she revealed to me, recognizing that there is discomfort in viewing her performances. This discomfort is deliberate: it mirrors visual violence inherent in the normalized structures of labor. In other words, Vatanajyankur's physical strain, discomfort, and pain are aesthetic decisions that have forced viewers to confront the brutality of systems often overlooked. Her body is twisted, her face either focused or in pain, and endless gestures are performed in repetitive and exhausting actions visually these things displace. By putting the body in intense positions of duress, the often invisible violence of our lives is made visible under the troika of patriarchy, capitalism, and choice about life.

This approach resonates with Laura Mulvey's (1975) idea of disrupting the pleasure of visual spectatorship. Just as feminist screen producers disrupted the passive acceptance of images, Vatanajyankur disrupts the mode of passive viewership associated with art. She exaggerates action to the point of being unbearable, and forces a reconsideration to what is normal or acceptable. "I exaggerate the action so that the invisible becomes visible," she said, and thus encapsulates her visual aesthetics. By boring into these acts of overwork, gendered expectations, and consumer exploitation into acts of resistance and endurance, she makes visible the subtle violences of women, and the viewer's discomfort becomes part of the function of the artworks. It is not meant to be static, it is supposed to be an enduring marker of the systems which create inequality and invisibility. By deploying a "charged moment of looking," Vatanajyankur creates an ethical confrontation with the act of looking that previously was regarded as passive.

4.1.6 Metaphorical Tools

Vatanajyankur's performances noted above, take the everyday familiar object of buckets, mops, scales and ropes, and reify them into oppressive machines. "The broom, the scale, the bucket, all the things that are so mundane, become oppressive machines in my performance because that is how I am using them," she said. Vatanajyankur's metaphors are not simply utensils, they are agents in the story. They represent systems which act in control and repetition in our everyday lives. Vatanajyankur's practice is anchored in moving from the domestic, and into the performative, and into the political. The objects take on extensions of systems in social practice, and she explores them with her body, potentially complicating the division of object and performer, worker, and agent. In her performance, tools may serve multiple roles; one may access power in action, may explore their meaning as symbols, and lastly are engaged in a form of complicity in resistance, as the tools embody ritual as Vatanajyankur plays with a kind of materiality of the intersection of gender, labour and control, often in poetically expressive ways. Vatanajyankur's act of repurposing domestic tools can align with Michel de Certeau's (1984) "tactics" of the everyday, then, it is an act of subtlety from an ordinary objects, with ordinary behaviors, to create another meaning. Therefore, in Vatanajyankur's appropriation of domestic tools, and domestication as critique represents a clever turn - a symbolic inversion that translates banal to radical. When using the tools of domesticity she produces a language of protest that is tactile, mundane, and embodied. For example, the broom and mop in her context is no longer a broom or mop; it could become a fantastically heavy or even impossible to manage object of/manageable or even impossible managing process, a representation of the

weighty accumulation of considered unthought labour or contain once effective object-find and agency-find roles. She gives voice to tools to stage exchanges about power agency: who is using the tools, and who or what are the tools acting for? In her performance the answer gets down to uncommon place - she is using them to do power critique - not engage power.

4.2 Akram Zaatari - Themes

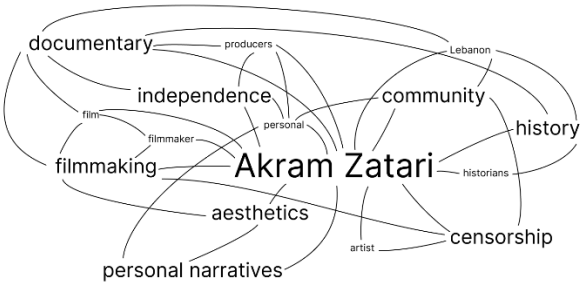

Figure 8: Ideas and Themes which were prominent in my conversation with Akram. Designed using Figma

Akram Zaatari, a Lebanese artist, filmmaker, and co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation, has profoundly redefined the position of the artist as not just the creator but as archivist, storyteller, and witness. Zaatari's work has been sustained and devoted to photography and the archive as modes, and to examine memory, identity, and socio-political relations of the Arab region. Zaatari's engagement with collected images and oral histories, media artefacts, and the archive itself, lead audiences to research the politics of representation and the complex nature of truth through visual documentation. I continued the analysis of Zaatari's interview thematically, which led to six themes that structure his practice, these were: Archival Exploration, Queer Representation, War and Memory, Collaborative Authorship, Reflexivity in Practice, and Resistance through documentation. The document demonstrates Zaatari's art practices as personal and historical, archives become a point of critique and conservation.

4.2.1 Archival Exploration

Zaatari's practice is based on the idea that archives are never neutral. Zaatari states simply "The archive is never neutral. It is curated, it is shaped and it is political." Said Zaatar (2025)[2] This conviction establishes Zaatari's approach to archival material, it is not merely a curated

[2] Excerpts taken from Interview with Zaatari, 10 January 2025, Via Zoom

collection of fact, but a complex and interpretative space of political enquiry. Zaatari's work with the Arab Image Foundation is symbolic of this approach to archival material, where Zaatari excavates, preserves, and replants photographs from the Middle East, hoping to bring forth narratives neglected by historic bias. For Zaatari, "photographs are narratives which exist outside the frame," placing the archive as an active participant in historical and cultural narrative rather than passively recording the past.

Under Zaatari's guidance, the archives work to reclaim history as a form of artistic counter-history. By selecting and sequencing images, (studio portraiture, snapshots, or documentary images) Zaatari prompts consideration of whose stories are recorded and whose stories are not. While Zaatari's work supports marginalized voices and perspectives, he implicitly urges us to consider the possible narratives behind the construction of archives, both in the sense of establishing personal photo collections to state and national collections. While engaging with ideas about history and memory posed by postcolonial theorists, Zaatari is doing what Edward Said (1978) has described as the bias of cultural collection, but rather than "uncovering" hierarchically located narratives, Zaatari is actively editing the archive to reflect untold stories among the hegemonic narratives that dominate. Zaatari re-frames archival labour through these selections and sequences as a way to inquire artistically and oppose politically, because he thinks about and engages with memory as living and contested.

4.2.2 Queer Representation

Another quieter but important aspect of Zaatari's practice are the representations of queer desire and intimacy. "In my practice I try to reflect intimacies that go against normative accounts," he offered. Even though Zaatari could issue a declarative statement, he often treats queerness discretely, coded, and poetically. Zaatari's practice tends to involve young men, and also suggests gazes and tenderness in the gestures of his young men. "It's about making desire, but still in subtle and complex ways," he remarked. In works like, This Day (2003), and Red Chewing Gum (2000), the framing of images and characterization of gazes confront the act of voyeurism in very subversive ways that challenges the privileged gaze, or notions of heteronormativity. It creates a the possibility of nonsensical masculinities or affections without resorting stereotype or spectacle. Through his queer narratives added to the archive and into his films' stories, Zaatari is actively not only resisting erasure, but he is also questioning ways in which desire is documented, remembered, and displayed. Queer representation is inherently political as it concerns repression, and the intimacy he produces also serves as a quiet activism that questions how identity is formed, and re-formed, in visual culture. Further, Zaatari's work

regarding this theme dialogues with the larger context of queer archival work and reclamation of histories. He infuses the archive with tender and somewhat private moments, making them visible to the public, thus his quiet act of intervention works to disrupt cultural norms and build an archive that also has queer affect. Where LGBTQ has almost been rendered invisible in a region, his subtle insistence on their inclusion is an act of artistic presence and commentary.

4.2.3 War and Memory

Zaatari's formative years were impacted by the Lebanese Civil War, and the experience continues to shape and influence his artistic practice. "My generation lived through war--it altered how we remember, and forget," he remembers. In naming this personal reality, he proposes the basis of the larger question of collective trauma and memory. For Zaatari, the archive is more than a receptacle, it is a platform to work through the after effects of violence and to confront it. His motion pictures and installations often included testimonies and artifacts around the war that layered the stories of the eruption and embrace of everyday and domestic life. "We have collective trauma and the archive is about how to process it," he said, to which I would add that it becomes seen through a process of remembering, not simply remembering but ongoing ways of remembering.

In pieces like Letter to a Refusing Pilot (2013), Zaatari blends autobiography, historical truth, and fiction to narrate personal encounters with war. That film, for example, grappled with a real event from 1982, when an Israeli pilot refused an order to bomb a school in Zaatari's hometown of Saida. Refusal becomes memory - a kind of vocabulary for remembering to take us away from the cyclical violence. Zaatari often locks into the fine - the texture of walls, the breaking down of buildings, the silence between the voices. And those littles often can say much more than the macro notions, and gives us an aesthetic of absence which at once is intimate and is troubling. In focusing on traces and ruins he makes the devastating consequences of war transparent, while being aware of what stays in memory. He frames his practice in both a therapeutic and testimony sense, to suggest how art can respectively provide a challenge for our societies to mess with the implications of war and to grief in living with the difficult memories. This framing connects with post-conflict memory theories to think about how we remember to learn to heal (Huyssen, 2003). Through his work, Zaatari keeps the lessons and scars of war in the cultural consciousness, rather than out of sight.

4.2.4 Collaborative Authorship

One of the I identified in Zaatari's process of image-making is his use of collaborative or collective authorship. He states, "the people in the photographs are not subjects, they are participants." This stance has challenged traditional dynamics of power between artist and subject in documentary or ethnographic practice. By asserting the agency of people he photographs or documents, Zaatari participates in a redefinition of relationships between viewer, artist, and image. Zaatari explains, "meaning lives in the space between the viewer and the image," in which he charted the interpretive agency of art. Zaatari's claim that the meaning a viewer attaches or assigns to an artwork is less important than the process of attaching meaning demonstrates that art is not a monologue, but a dialogue – a theme shared across these three artists.

In practice, when Zaatari adopts a collaborative stance in a project, he is reflecting how it becomes common for him to become close to his subjects, or sometimes, the communities attached to the archives he works with. For instance, it may be commonplace for Zaatari to talk with participants in video projects for long periods, so that he considers interviews or personal narratives as part of the development of the work. As a result, he occupies a position of documentarian and documenter that is almost collaboration in practice. What results are works that have intimate relationships and respect for their participants. Zaatari considers the spectators in a similar manner where he does not want them contributing as largely passive consumers, but instead as active interpreters, "the viewer is then left with nothing untouchable, interpretable, and open to the text." Zaatari is effectively inviting the viewer into an interpretative space where there are no certainties surrounding fixed meaning, and instead consideration is given to dialogue and multiple perspectives. By advancing collaborative authorship as important, Zaatari was effectively modeling an ethics of representation that was aware of power and attempting to create a more democratic exchange in the act of making and viewing art.

4.2.5 Reflexivity in Action

As a reflexive practitioner, Zaatari constantly reflects on his role in the artistic, and archival, process. "I am always aware of my position as the one framing the image," he says. This reflexivity is especially relevant in politically charged contexts, as it emphasizes the constructed character of representations. Zaatari encourages both himself and viewers to "question your own role in the production of a story"; by doing so he does not exempt himself from the same critique he employs against others. In his work, there is often evidence of meta-

commentary scenes of him handling film negatives, or narrating his thoughts as he determines a narrative which serve to remind viewers that they are viewing something constructed: through choices, interpretations, and so on.

This critical self-analysis is embodied not only in his curatorial and editing choices, but also in his public presentations of photographs and moving images. Zaatari does not assert neutrality, but rather accepts subjectivity as an inevitable, and even advantageous, aspect of the process of making art. In exhibitions, he might show contact sheets or archival ephemera as part of the preparation of photographs and encapsulate and expose the act of making. By including this reflexive practice into his works, Zaatari positions audiences as critical consumers of images, which includes questions of authorship, perspectives, and interpretations. The result is educational and dialogical; the audience becomes aware of how narratives are formulated and are empowered to interrogate the many meanings in his work. In this regard, Zaatari is a model of a critical visual literacy, where the realization is about the photograph or film are frames in frame- changes depending upon who is taking the photograph, and why.

4.2.6 Resistance through Documentation

For Zaatari, it seems the inherent value can be seen as a resistance to the act of documenting. As he states, "Preserving these images is a political act. It resists erasure." In regions that have seen official histories fragmented, and even obliterated, to document is a type of defiance. Zaatari's work showcases the importance of protecting cultural memory, from the detail he puts in his archival work, to how he builds creative knowledges through archives. He reminds us that "sometimes resistance is quiet, it is keeping a memory alive." We find in Zaatari's work these quiet acts of resistance; his work examines small and personal narratives as counter-narratives.

Zaatari's shift might seem to favor ephemera or overlooked histories, yet he is highlighting that memory can also be a political space. To preserve a photograph of an everyday street scene, or a love letter, is to stand up against the forces telling a singular, sanitized history. For Zaatari, the very existence of a rich and diverse archive that includes so many aspects of the lives and experiences of people in the Middle East is a blow to the grips of cultural imperialism and oblivion. These practices also relate to the James C. Scott (1990) concept of "everyday forms of resistance", wherein a practice of remembering and recording becomes another, almost indistinguishable, means of resistance to forgetfulness and concealment. Zaatari's work illustrates that resistance is not always loud, nor must it confront. Rather, the careful instillation

of an image and an intention to remember what others forget is resistance found in this practice of curation. The preservation of a photograph in the collection or the retelling of a story then becomes a refusal for history to be dictated only by the powerful. More deeply, the resistance that is found in Zaatari's documentation guarantees that alternative histories - histories of war, histories of desire, histories of daily life - continue and are entered into a public consciousness. In this sense, Zaatari's art is a record of, or an arsenal of, archives, and histories - a repository of memories from which the present can use to arm itself with knowledge of the past while confronting the council of the present as they eradicate, erase or extinguish that same knowledge.

4.3 Alia Ali - Themes

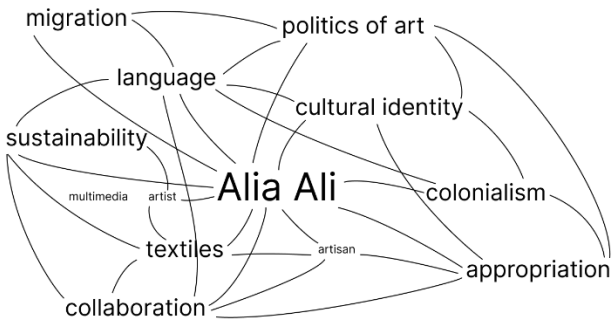

Figure 9: Ideas and Themes which were prominent in my conversation with Alia, Designed using Figma.

Alia Ali is a Yemeni-Bosnian American multimedia artist working in photography, textile arts, video, and installation. Influenced by space and meaning in previous works, she uses her art practice and her full body as a medium to problematize an understanding of boundaries that are both imposed and oppressive we know boundaries such ass geographical, linguistic, ideological etc. can be problematic but Ali celebrates these boundaries when she engages the senses and respects the multiplicity of cultures and identities she inhabits. During the interview, Ali was very clear and intentional on how making art is about seeing art and how the purpose of her artworks is to interrupt and disrupt colonial narratives and invite the viewer into a spatial, immersive dialogue. Six main themes presented in the interview showed how Ali's art engages and expresses decolonial thinking while addressing sensory experience; Textile and Language,

Cultural Translation, Sensory Engagement, Soft Resistance, Transnational Identity, Dialogic Engagement. Collectively, they show how Ali deploys materiality and personal narrative to signal political action for art that is beautiful, personal, and can be subversive.

4.3.1 Textile and Language

"Textile is a language in itself-it speaks of origin, belonging, history," said Ali(2025)[3], which sums up one of the main arguments of her practice. To Ali, textile was always more than materiality; it became a method for archiving movement, ancestry, and cultural memory. In photographic series such as Borderland and FLUX, textile is not just a backdrop or part of costume textiles have also become subject, voice, and resistance. Frequently, figures in Ali's photographs are draped or hidden by brilliant textiles that make you question visibility, as well as knowledge. By wrapping bodies with rich patterned textiles, Ali blurred the identity of the bodies in her images so that it is there, but hard to recognize. This action demands a reckoning with the limits of language and seeing: if we can not "read" a face or other typical portrait, we must engage with the language of textile. Ali's use of textile as a medium of communication is a bridge between art, heritage, and memory. "I’m captivated by the ways fabric holds memory and identity," she states, and this fascination has propelled her to collect textiles from Yemen, Bosnia, and other places in colonial history and conflict. Each textile embodies a cloud of unwritten stories, and the patterns and textures carry genealogies of belonging and alienation. In this way, Ali makes textile a type of speech act, one that requires no translation, but demands acknowledgement. The cloth itself bears witness to the routes of trade, to grandmothers' hands, and to migration and return. It is this language of textile that echoes the idea of material culture as narrative: that objects can preserve and encode stories, transmit stories, over long time periods (Hoskins, 1998). By making textile central, Ali underscores both that there are languages in addition to spoken and written words, such as the languages of touch, craft, and visual symbol, that can parallel quantity of roles in describing who we are and where we are from. In her work, to look at a textile is to read and witness people's history. The importance of textile, or textiles prominent among everything else, also critiques the hierarchy of Western fine art as it often relegates fabric to craft. Ali situates it within high art and theory as a purposeful feminist and decolonial approach, legitimizing feminine, non-Western knowledge that has been passed down.

[3] Excerpts takes from Interview with Ali, 15 January 2025, Via Zoom

4.3.2 Cultural Translation

Ali's practice resists singular readings and simple classifications. As Ali stated, "I work across language, across geographical jurisdictions, and that hybridity intersects in my artwork." So, this hybridity locates Ali literally in the layers of her work, where language both verbal and visual intersects, yet coheres. Her structuring of photographic installation work often combines Arabic, French, and English writing, sometimes simultaneously, in a way that refuses to be erased or collapse into themselves. One work could have multiple texts in many scripts overlaying a figure cloaked in patterned fabric, with each layer demanding reading while also resisting singular and immediate interpretation.

Her refusal to maintain one language is political. "My works are deliberately multilingual - they resist singularity." In her multilingual practice, Ali challenges the viewer's desire for legibility and certainty. Her works construct a space, and not an easy conclusion, where the messiness of identity is honored, where cultural and linguistic contradictions are not reconciled, but demonstrated, and where viewers reflect, even momentarily, on what it means to proceed without certainty. This practice resonates with Homi Bhabha (1994), and with his notion of cultural hybridity and the "third space," a space where new meanings and identities originate and beyond binary categories. This embrace of ambiguity and complexity also resonates with Édouard Glissant's (1997) call for the "right to opacity" in postcolonial contexts that is, that marginalized cultures do not have to normalize for the pleasure of others. Ali's work grants that opacity: as a viewer, you cannot "decode" all of the symbols or text immediately, and this is intentional. The viewer is encouraged to live with the ambiguity, to realize that comprehension is always incomplete and contingent. Ali does decolonial translation by presenting works that are multi-layered and multilingual in nature. She does not translate non-Western content or elements into Western terms for the viewer, but asks the viewer to expand their understanding and potential for comprehending cultures different from their own. This is a decidedly political act, it is a chorus calling forth the idea that no one culture or language is superior to another in meaning-making.

4.3.3 Sensory Experience

Ali's work engages the body as well as the mind. "Touch, texture, and color; all of these things are bodily, not just mental," she remarks. Often when a viewer steps into her installations, they are experiencing an immersive experience, with large fabrics hanging or placed around the space, colour saturating the visual field, and the presence of immersed sound like ambient sounds, spoken word, or other audio configurations, the viewer is ushered into both a personal,

yet confusing, sensory field. Ali creates environmental experiences that are at once intimate and perplexing, and that usher the audience into a world of sensory experiences. "I want the viewer to feel something visceral before they think about anything conceptual," says Ali, pointing to an intentional flipping of the typical order we engage in art for example think first and feel later).

In these installations, texture is as engaged as text. The viewer could literally brush up against fabric; they may also hear whispers of multiple languages that they only partially understand. It is therefore an art encounter that is affective. the artwork "speaks," as much by the textures and tones of its artistic medium as it does by its symbols and vocabulary. The prioritization of multi-sensory engagement can be understood as an extension of a broader decolonial aesthetic initiative: it confronts the dominant visual, "white cube," mode of art consumption of Euro-American art galleries by inviting touch, which are prohibited in traditional art environments. Ali's strategy here is also compatible with dialogic and pedagogical theorization (Freire, 1970), because it engages audiences where they operate - at the level of fundamental human sensory experience, in so doing, broadening the audience to whom they cater and meaningfully engage with participants who may feel excluded from an art object that requires specialized knowledge to interpret.

4.3.4 Soft Resistance

While Ali's work is, of course, aesthetic and sensory; her work is as much about resistance and protest, albeit, in a way she refers to, as soft. "My art is a protest. A soft protest, visual and persistent," she told me, stressing that the beauty and tactility she incorporates into her art, are intentional weaponized tools to destabilize and remove colonial and patriarchal presumptions. Rather than use overtly political art, evidenced by aggressive imagery or slogans, Ali's acts of resistance are not direct or invasive. Rather, through acts of seduction she subverts: the richness of the textile, the exciting color, and the envelopment of the installation, all seduces the viewer, and within the space, Ali plants the seed of subversion. Ali's resistance does not yell; it whispers, repeats, and endures. Such resistance finds power in beauty -ensured by beauty, it is a soft power strategy (Nye, 2004) in cultural terms, where hegemonic power is exerted not through force, but through attraction and subversive instigations.

To illustrate, Ali obscures the faces of her photographic subjects with textiles, impairing the traditional notion of the power of the gaze, and women's visibility. The images themselves are beautiful and intriguing, which draws the viewer in, and, at the same time, frustrates the

viewer's desire to objectify or fully "know" the subject. And through this, Ali performs a feminist and decolonial resistance: the subject will not be fully unfurled and conquered by way of the viewer's eye. Similarly, her choice of materials traditionally ascribed feminine code such as decorations and fabric, and in the context of fine artistic production well, that is a light-handed aggression against art historical notions that separate craft from art, and feminine from serious. Ali's soft resistance is in reconceptualizing the context and reusing these signifiers, which is also a form of everyday resistance, as described by Scott (1990). A floral textile pattern may seem just decorative in one context; in Ali's work, when it covers a body, or is inscribed with text, that same decorative pattern, becomes a comment about identity and the influence and legacy of colonial trade on design.

Soft resistance can also be found in the way she takes on the burden of heavy topics (such as colonial violence, or displacement), and manage them with accessible forms. This is not performative neutrality of demeanor or of purpose, but to assure the subject can sink in. There is a place for soft sounds in persistent change. A beautiful song version of a song can carry a message of rebellion that sits in the mind for longer than it could if it was a loud slogan. In her installations, the gently surrounding the audience by the light, sound, and texture can create a contemplative experience in which challenging ideas process quietly on the inside of the self, possibly more openly than in a confrontational form. Her work demonstrates that art can be an expression of protest and still be beautiful. It also stands as a counter-argument to the idea that effective political art must be loud, abrasive, and ugly. Ali can take the many different expressions of beauty and turn it into discomfort while bringing audiences into difficult conversations about people, power, relationship to history of colonial violence, and gender. This approach of soft resistance widens her audience for this message and works by making the gallery a safe space for the engagement of unsafe ideas.

4.3.5 Transnational Identity

Ali has been situated in numerous cultural environments throughout her life and is influenced by this transnational identity, which is prevalent in her artwork. She often speaks about being influenced by her mixing of Yemeni and Bosnian heritage and her experiences in Western locations. Although the theme may not always be indicated by this title in her work, Ali's practice runs through a theme of border crossing along with diasporic identity. Ali notes that she is deriving patterns, techniques, and stories from different areas of the world, and then demonstrating their capability to be in conversation with one another within composite works. This mixing of material is representative of many people in the globalized world we live in:

people's identities exist not in one landscape but in many, or even in movement. In this sense, Ali did not condense her identity into a direct story in the interview, but it was evident that straddling different worlds has caused her to become aware of how arbitrary and restricting borders can be.

Often, in Ali's artwork, she lists the material she has used physically from different geographies in one composition, for example, but not limited to, combinations of West African wax print textiles with other patterns from Middle Eastern traditions or lace from Europe. Through this she structure covert visual syncretism inherited from her multicultural background, similar to how Ali is contextualizing her relationships with dominant knowledge forms. This is an intentional response to the notion that identities need to be singular or attached to one state. Ali describes identities closer to a tapestry, with different colored threads woven together. This is visually appealing; but is quite radical in a world that demands people choose a side, or a flag. The textiles Ali makes and employs show that hybrid identities are something to be engaged with, not shunned.

The theme of transnational identity also connects to the notion of mobility. Ali is referencing movement, through either people moving through nations, or textiles moving through trade and migration. The textiles Ali uses also travel like many communities who become displaced members of the diaspora. For example, the common "African" wax prints she talked about are produced in Europe, and originally referenced Indonesian batik. Together, the textiles Ali employs are pieces of cross-cultural exchanges and colonial globalization. In emphasizing these cultural aspects, Ali embraces visible quirks of real cultures, and demonstrate that cultures are not static or regimented, but happening and dynamic as they influence and are influenced. Furthermore, Ali is not only opposing the purity and separation of "East" versus "West" but also presenting a culture as woven and fluidly framed. If a viewer finds a tactile connection to a pattern that resembles something familiar, they may be surprised that it is from an area of the world they never would have assumed as a form of historically reflected visual existence.

By allowing for transnational identity to emerge as a theme in her work, Ali gestures towards postcolonial strategies that critique nationalism and offer the citizenship of cosmopolitanism and diaspora as viable forms of belonging (Hall, 1990). There is also a catharsis in a personal sense with the theme: Ali is creating an artistic space where all parts of her identity can exist. This might also be a type of inspirational or model space for audience members that also must move in complex and plural identities. Ultimately, the transnational identity theme

appropriation in Ali's work reinforces and depersonalizes a humanistic message: that identities are multi-faceted and that the threads/events/people which conjoin the different facets of who we are, should be embraced and appreciated.

4.3.6 Dialogic Engagement

For Ali, art is about opening conversations. "If the work doesn't open dialogue, it hasn't done enough," she noted, believing that it is the audience's engagement, or interacting with it, that completes the work! She sees the audience as activating the piece it is not a work of art without the audience's interaction. This perspective considers the viewer as not just a consumer of a finished product, but a co-contributor in the creation of the meaning around the work. There are layers to the dialogic nature of Ali's art. First of all, as mentioned, her installations rely on a very physical invitation to enter, which creates a space for interactivity. Beyond inviting interactivity, Ali wants the viewer to engage on an emotional level or intellectual level: she wants viewers to be inquisitive, to theorize, and to challenge their biases with the work. The meaning, at its essence, must start a dialogue which will emerge in the mind of the audience and, ideally, with each other. This focus on dialogue closely supports an idea of a pedagogy approach to art that closely resembles Paulo Freire's, "dialogic pedagogy", where learning is a collaborative transaction between a facilitator or and the learner (Freire, 1970). However, Ali defuses the power dynamic of who is teaching and who is learning in the dialogue opened by her objects, she is equally interested in what is brought to an interpretation by the audience. During our conversation, she displayed a genuine interest in the varying reactions by people: confusion, curiosity, and even frustration. These are all valid and become part of the life of the work. Ali sometimes engages in participatory elements in her exhibitions for example, she will encourage participants to touch the fabrics, write a thought and pin it to the wall, etc. Even when not explicitly participatory, the work has a wealth of sensory and semantic experience, and therefore a wealth of discussion, where some observers will focus on the political, some will focus on aesthetic beauty, and some will focus on personal remembrances. Ali welcomes different forms of engagement, which relates back to her rejection of a singular meaning. That dialogic engagement is, in a way, a theme and method for Ali: her art is about dialogue, and also literally initiates dialogue.

As a result of positioning art as a conversation, Ali's practice refuses the idea of artist-as-meaning-maker. Ali instead approaches the meaning as given. This position also democratizes art appreciation, where the viewer feels what they think and feel is important. It is a relationship based in respect between artist and audience. As noted by Claire Bishop (2006) in her analysis

of participatory art, for example, participatory art practices represent a democratic ethos that privileges others' experiences and contributions in creating an artistic moment. Ali shares similar thoughts in saying: "The viewer must feel what I feel that's how empathy is built", and indicates that only through that relational exchange can art be most fully achieved. More broadly, dialogic engagement in Ali's work ensures that art is not a thing or an object or a product - it is lived and living exchange.

4.4 A Thematic Synthesis

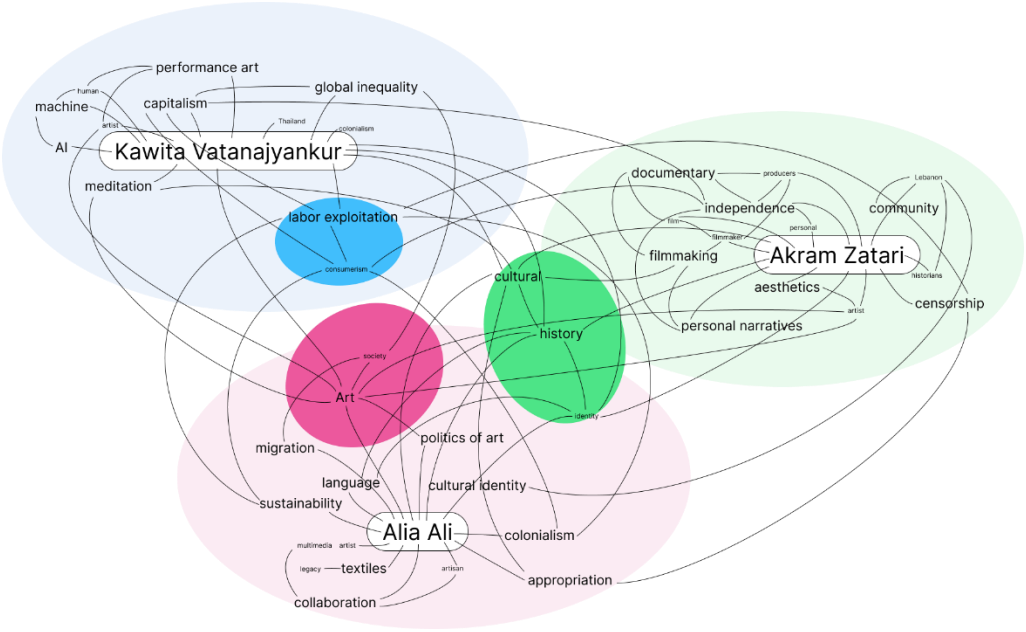

Figure 10: A interconnected Thematic network to make sense of their opinions and ideas. Designed using Figma

After dealing with the themes in the context of specific artists, I now address the crosscutting insights that emerge when viewed comparatively -- through a lens that places the voices of Kawita Vatanajyankur, Akram Zaatari and Alia Ali alongside one another. Although their art involving different mediums and coming from different cultural and other contexts, the reflections by each artist prompted similar ideas about conceptualizing the role of art and artist. These include themes that we can summarize in six interrelated terms: Art as Dialogue, Materiality as Meaning, Personal Experience as Basis, Resistance and Power, Audience Engagement, and Multiple Meanings. In the following part, I outline each of the themes including examples from all three artists to illustrate a compelling synthesis of ideas. Taken together, the themes indicate a contemporary model of art practice that is dialogic, material, personal but politically laden, participatory, and open to multiple meanings.

4.4.1 Art as a Form of Dialogue

Across the three interviews, the concept of the art as a communicative form was strongly emphasized, one that instigates dialogue across differences, and stimulates thoughts and feelings. Vatanajyankur mentioned that not only does "the work start conversations", it is not "just about watching, but to feel, and then to reflect". Zaatari, likewise, stated that "art should provoke - we need to question what we think we know about anything", situating his practice not in the terms of asserting, but of interrogation. And Ali observed that, "if the work doesn't open dialogue, it hasn't done enough". What joins these observations together is a common belief that art is an active process with a relational reality rather than one that remained stoic or decorative. In Vatanajyankur's performance work, the dialogue is mostly sensory - a felt engagement with pain, pressure, bodily endurance, etc., that produces internal reflection for the viewer. In Zaatari's photographic and archival practice, dialogue is brought about through visual juxtaposition and narrative layering, creating moments of engaging with history and memory. In Ali's work, dialogue is multilingual and trans-geographic, occurring in textiles, textures, and colours as much as phonetic or written languages. All the artists, in their own manner, use art to facilitate an initiation of conversation with the audience and also ask for a response.

Art here is not treated as a monologue but as a collective construction of meaning, essentially a conversation amongst the artist and viewer, artwork, and audience. This shared imagining aligns with Freire's (1970) definition of dialogue as a process of becoming, where the transformation is both personal and collective. It also aligns with Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) characterization of relational aesthetics, wherein the artwork is a site of interaction and human exchange rather than as a closed spectacle. The dialogic finding of these artists' practices explore how contemporary art can be situated as a facilitator of empathetic connection. Through the use of dialogue, the art relaxes the distinctions between self and other to initiate a kind of understanding that is in action, and in transformation. In an age of divisiveness, this artistic commitment to dialogue is a testament to the power of creative practice to create connection and recognition.

4.4.2 Materiality as Meaning

Each artist uses materials not only for their aesthetic value, but also for their symbolic and concept-based implication. Vatanajyankur values the "materiality of things - their weight, textural weight" as meaning. She uses everyday tools of domesticity as tools of critique: a mop represents identified but undervalued domestic labour; a scale represents social imbalance.

Through this, she proclaims that the materials have voice - the broom and bucket "speak" of exploitation when used within her performative practices.

Zaatari, as well, speaks about how "photographs are material - creasing, aging, placement all matter" which refers to the politics of preservation and the tangibility of memory. Within his archival installations, the state and context of a photograph, "the curled corner, the handwritten note on the back, the way it is pinned on the wall" becomes part of the meaning. He makes the distinction that material form can never be neutral. For Zaatari, the photograph is an image and an object - it carries with it layers of cultural, political, and temporal. Engaging with a photographic print of Lebanon from 1975, for example, allows the to think about the meaning of not just what the image represents but the history of that object, who held it, who carefully hid it, how it survived.

Alia Ali, who uses fabric in a deeply linguistic way, she says "the fabric is not decoration it's concept, language, identity." Her use of textiles are sensory and semiotic, cultural bridges, and thus decolonial interventions. The patterns and textures she uses contain specific geographic and cultural implications, a motif from Yemen versus a textile technique from Eastern Europe, and by layering, mixing, and piecing them together, we can forge a material dialogue about cultural identity. Here, in every instance, the materiality is entwined with the message; the artwork speaks because of its materiality.

The coming together of all three of these themes demonstrates a larger claim about embodiment and agency of materials in contemporary art. The materiality emphasized by each of these artists reinforces that what materials are used in the work is just as important as what is illustrated. The materials for e.g., body, archive, textile is cognitive and thus form the work's narratives and its possibilities to mobilize. By revaluing particular materials, they are, each in their own way, making arguments: Vatanajyankur is claiming that domestic tools and the performing body are worthy of attention, Zaatari is claiming that both personal and local archives are meaningful in history, and Ali is claiming that indigenous textiles and patterns contain as much knowledge as any other art. In a nutshell, for all three, materials do not get treated as afterthoughts, but rather important conveyors of meaning.

4.4.3 Personal Experience as an Anchor

All three artists highlighted the importance of lived experiences in their work. For example, Vatanajyankur stated that, "my performances come from my own feelings of struggles of being a woman," thus rendering her performance work, which is predicated on physicality with

themes of labour, struggle, and repetition, an act of both personal and political significance. Zaatari stated that, "I start from memories, my context - that's where the truth is," which implicitly relates his archival intervention to his own lived experiences during a time of war in Lebanon, thus intertwining deeply with histories of war and its aftermath. Alia Ali, too, described her art as "autobiographical, even if it's abstract - it comes from my life story." Perhaps due to the varied relations and the nature of their work, there is a commonality in that all three artists continue to connect their work to their own life narratives and experiences.

The contextual anchor of personal experience complicates the distinction between singular and collective narratives; not only does each artist have a biography, but they all evoke biography as an entry point to larger concerns regarding society, history, and politics. Vatanajyankur's personal experience of female struggle informs that this is also a collective condition under patriarchy; Zaatari's memory as a lived experience became a vessel to introduce contested histories within Lebanon; Ali's experience of coming from a multi-cultural perspective provides a critique of colonial disposition and an opportunity to celebrate diversity that includes the many comprising hybrid identities. When bringing personal experience to foreground the narratives and relationships between them are not just anecdotes; they resonate with communal experiences, similarly, conditioned by displacement, conflict, gendered labour, and the negotiation of new cultural and gendered practices.

This has a resonance with feminist epistemologies that legitimize the personal as knowledge (Harding, 1987; Haraway 1988). It also positions an ethic of storytelling, where vulnerability operates as a site of connection and not just exposure. In their practice, the personal certainly becomes political, as a space where systemic conditions can be seen and felt through individual storytelling. This phrase, first articulated in second-wave feminism, is alive in their work: by placing personal voices, their own and others they include first, they contradict the supposed objectivity in dominant narratives, and lay claim to the truth value of subjectivity.

This theme also indicates the ways all three deal with identity in their work. They do not obscure themselves or separate themselves from their art; they use their positionality. Vatanajyankur performs herself, her body and identity are present, and Zaatari's work has a first-person point of view and voice at specific times in the videos or texts, and Ali uses a multicultural perspective as reflected in every composite with fabrics. In doing this, they exemplify a type of practice where self-reflection and self-disclosure become assets rather than detriments. This challenges the older paradigm of art, which once stated that the artist needed

to be a neutral observer or seek out "universal" themes detached from self. In this case, the specifics of self become the springboard to universality. Their willingness to reach from personal wells so openly also encourages audiences to explore how their lived experience aligns with the art in front of them. It is an invitation for audiences to share in the experience that starts with the artist: the artwork invites us to consider, "This came from me, what does it provoke in you?"

4.4.4 Resistance and Power

Resistance in the practices of these artists is nuanced and layered and mostly understood as persistent. Vatanajyankur described her expanded practice as demonstrating resistance so "as not to be silent". With her amplified physical performances, she makes visible the invisible labour as constitutive of domestic and consumerist structures which are so ubiquitous to not be seen or considered. In this way, she formally resists the social understanding that there no domestic or consumer labour that has to be seen. Zaatari considers his archiving practice a "political act," resisting erasure of histories typically not represented as they erased from the official entry point. The act of collecting and reframing images is, intrinsically, a strike against forgetting as well as against the dominant historical retellings of historical events. Ali describes her work as "protest, but it’s soft, visual, and persistent," wherein beauty and tactile qualities are used as ways to destabilize notions of colonial and patriarchal assumptions, as we discussed above.

What they all share is an understanding of resistance that is not a one-time act and an act that is not simple. Instead, it is interwoven into their practice - unending and ever-changing. Vatanajyankur's resistance is one of endurance and repetition - it endures as long as she can stay in a pose, and in a looping video, it endures perhaps forever. Zaatari's resistance is one of care, like that of an archivist or storyteller - quiet refusal of stories to die out. Ali's resistance is one of choosing a non-dominant form sensuous beauty and blend of cultures to resist the dominant power.

These acts of resistance fit well within James C. Scott's (1990) "everyday forms of resistance" as well as the term "soft power" in cultural theory (Nye, 2004) - a current of influence exercised not by coercion but by a persistent presence that relentlessly persuades. By embedding resistance in their art, they each claim power: Vatanajyankur reclaims how her labour of her body is used and seen "for protest and not for exploitation", Zaatari reclaims the historical

narrative "who gets to tell their story", Ali reclaims representation "If the work doesn't open dialogue, it hasn't done enough,"

In addition, the work of the artists also reclaim power through authorship. By re-framing images, performing gendered tasks, or constructively making multi-lingual visual experiences, they claim their right to narrate, and frame, and question. Their art, therefore, is not just an act of expression, but also an act of defiance. They have each identified parts of the world that need changing, for Vatanajyankur it is the invisibility of female labour and complacency to consumerism, for Zaatari, the fragility memory and bias of representation, and for Ali, the binaries of culture and colonial narratives. They are practiced to resist those conditions.

4.4.5 Audience Engagement

The viewer is active participant in the artist's idea of meaning. I have witnessed how central dialogue is to their purpose. As Vatanajyankur said, "the viewer has to feel how I feel - that's how empathy gets established." Her demanding performances elicit visceral responses and invite the viewer to sit with the discomfort, exhaustion, and tenacity in doing so. Zaatari said it well, "meaning happens through viewing - it's a communal act," implying an interpretive space that exists between image and audience; he regularly provides historical opinions for the audience to pick apart and help complete their knowledge of a piece equally as a part of the work. Ali noted, "the audience activates the piece - it doesn't go through unless they are there," reinforcing her understanding of participatory and multi-sensory as described.

This suggestion of audience agency illustrates a more expansive understanding of the work as process rather than product. Moving away from an object-based notion of art the artwork as an object with set meaning and towards relational approaches of practice the artwork as a site of relations and meaning and potential emerge through engagement. It is also a recognition of the multiplicity of interpretations and instability of meaning depending on audience contexts, backgrounds, and cultural literacies. These artists certainly do not expect singular appropriations of their work, in fact, would welcome varying responses. As they construct the art to embrace open-ended or participatory formats, they are fortifying the role of the audience's subjectivity therein.

These processes mirror Claire Bishop's (2006) analysis of participatory art, where the viewer is no longer a passive recipient, but instead, a co-constructor of meaning. In performances by Vatanajyankur, for example, the work is not really finished until someone sees it or actually feels something about it - the empathy loop is closed. In Zaatari's films and photographs, the

narratives are not closed, like conversations waiting for a respondent; the viewers' identities, for example, Lebanese viewers are likely to deeply connect more to some of the references than others will fill in blanks, or question claims, and continue the narrative beyond the artist's articulation. For Ali, rather, an installation space may literally require bodies moving through a space to activate sound or contrast with hanging textiles; in this case, and in a sense here the viewer's bodily presence finishes the composition.

All three enact a democratic practice of art-making that privileges accessibility, subjectivity, and emotional truth. Through a reliance on empathy, memory, and personal connection, they make art that can resonate with a viewer. For them, audience engagement is not an afterthought; it is purposefully designed. The democratic impulse shows up in how they refer to viewers as collaborators or interlocutors, rather than as undifferentiated viewers. This is a very different conception from the more authoritative ways of art that deliver the artist's vision to a viewer who receives it as presented. In contrast, these artists often speak of the learning that takes place in regard to their audience. For example, Vatanajyankur has observed that audience members relaying their emotional responses allow her to better understand where her work may resonate within a broader spectrum of possibility; Zaatari routinely, observes how people interpret his pieces and whether questions about history are being engaged with or taken up, Ali sometimes changes aspects of her installations in response to how audiences navigated them in defined instances, they utilize a feedback loop.

4.4.6 Multiplicity of Meaning

All three artists embrace multiplicity and ambiguity as strength not weakness. Vatanajyankur said, "Some see pain, others see beauty and that’s okay," when talking about the different ways people respond to her highly emotional pieces. Zaatari agreed that "ambiguity is necessary – that's life," and inevitably acknowledged that his practice does not offer definitive conclusions because, as he noted, "There is no clear experience." Ali stated, "I am not interested in a singular interpretation." This commitment to multiplicity is not a retreat from meaning; it is an acknowledgment of complexity. By permitting their works, curated out of difference, to speak, and allowing for complex responses, they deny reductive readings or singular narratives.

In a globalized pluralistic world, multiplicity is critical; it honors different opinions while disrupting singular narratives. For example, the performative metaphors of Vatanajyankur can be viewed through feminist, labour rights, Buddhist meditation practices are related to her endurance, or pure personal empathy – all of which are legitimate and can co-exist. Similarly,

Zaatari's archival pieces could place images in relation to one another in multiple ways; he does not often tell you "the point," because he would prefer the viewer to struggle over this, and perhaps realize that history is not one story, but innumerable threads for example, personal versus official, remembered versus forgotten. Alia Ali's intentionally layered cultural symbols demand multiple interpretations – one photograph may overtly invoke a colonial orientalism trope and its subversion, depending on how you look at it.

Furthermore, their acceptance of multi-meaning points to their poststructuralist framing of language and representation in which signification is always deferred, relational, and ultimately dependent on context (Derrida, 1978). They appear to be satisfied with the premise that an artwork's meaning is never fixed and predetermined. Rather, they create their artworks to be different things to different people, or potentially different things to the same person at different time. They are not troubled by ambiguity, treating it as an attribute, not an issue. This viewpoint also implies a trust in the audience's interpretive abilities - an invitation, rather than a directive. Leaving open to interpretation treats viewers as not students to teach a lesson to, but as capable participants who can grapple with complexity and paradox.

By allowing for multiple meanings, these artists are also refusing to define or limit their work in narrow terms. It is a political act against fixity, dogma, and essentialism. For example, attempts to label Vatanajyankur as a "Southeast Asian female artist about labor" cannot reckon with the universality and multiplicity of her work's significance, and she avoids this categorization by keeping her subject matter broad and human. Zaatari's work resists being contained to a single political message; it keeps raising questions rather than offering answers, thus avoiding the terrain of propaganda, and remaining in the state of inquiry. Ali's work challenges being labeled as just "feminist" or just "postcolonial" or just "aesthetic". it is all of these things and more, and it explicitly is, which in itself preempts the inclination to simplify identity and art.

This multiplicity parallels their lived realities - identities that are hybrid, multilingual, interdisciplinary. If they cannot, in a sense, be reduced to one thing, their work cannot either. In some ways, the theme of multiplicity of meaning connects together all of the previous themes: conversation, materiality, personal narrative, resistance, and audience participation are all better facilitated in a state of openness and possibility than closure.

5. Discussion

By connecting the artists' voices with theories of dialogic pedagogy, relational aesthetics, feminist art, archival politics, queer theories, and decolonialism, this discussion emphasizes the significance of their practices beyond the individual artworks. This chapter contemplates the ways the artistic practices of each artist reflect larger collective issues of our time, from gendered labour and consumerism to memory, identity, and legacies of colonialism, and what this means for the discourse of contemporary art and for social change.

5.1 Artistic Dialogue

An overarching finding is that all three artists see art as dialogue - an active encounter between artist, audience, and society. This resonates with Paulo Freire's idea of dialogic pedagogy, where education and any activity that produces knowledge entails an act of collaborative learning and critical reflection rather than simply being an act of reproduction. Freire (1970) noted that "dialogue is the encounter between people, mediated by the world, in order to name the world." In other words, real dialogue is about individuals coming together to critically reflect on reality and through that process name and change the world. In this case, with the artists, their work seeks to invite viewers to encounter societal issues, opaque labour practices, oppressive historical narratives, and cultural prejudices, and then talk about those issues. Whereas they could understand the audience as passive art consumers, Vatanajyankur, Zaatari, and Ali each understand the audience as active interlocutors, echoing Freire's assertion that in real dialogue no one speaks for another, but rather co-create with them. This pedagogical stance creates an educational and liberatory aspect to their art. Through opening up questions and reflections, their art can help the viewer to develop critical consciousness.

Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics offers another lens to understand the dialogic nature of their practices. Bourriaud argues that in late 20th century art, artistic creation the material and medium of creation was the realm of human interactions and social circumstance. He describes artworks as "a state of encounter," rather than isolated objects. In relational art, meaning is produced in the interaction between viewers and in the interaction between the viewer and the artwork and often collapses the distinction between artist and audience. Although the artists in this study each operate with different modes (performance video, archival installation, textile-based photography), all of the artists' works similarly facilitate encounters that go beyond the artist's intent.

Vatanajyankur's performance, where she captures herself performing menial and physically taxing tasks with her own body, produces a provocative uncomfortable encounter for viewers to contend with the reality of invisible labor. Viewers are confronted by questions about who actually performed the task in creating the products they engage with, leading to an internal conversation for the viewer about their own consumer responsibility, and the empathy involved. Similarly, we see Zaatari creating installations using still photographs and film fragments from the Lebanese archive that require viewer participation as the narrative is left unfinished. In his words, "each image serves as a micro-history, an entry point into a conversation about identity, absence and recollection." The archival fragments do not produce only one story, but rather, Zaatari offers a choice for the viewer to include their own memories or questions that produce the kind of sense making Bourriaud thought was possible through the creation of art. Alia Ali's immersive contexts turn art into dialogical spaces: by completely immersing the viewer in gestural textiles and multilingual whispering, her installations create an environment where the viewer can physically engage with the cultural symbols and languages. This usually encourages different viewers to engage in conversations about language, cultural translation, and the types of feelings felt through sensory overloading. In all three instances, the artwork is not a finished word, but a conversation starter, as the viewer responds and participates in the work of art, which Bourriaud (2002) claims is relational by nature.

Furthermore, the artists are purposely using their art to provoke and motivate conversations, in a similar way to Freire's (2000) emphasis on problem-posing education and inquiry where questions are more important than answers. Vatanajyankur (2012) explained, by bodily putting herself into the physically laborious and arduous chores of daily housework or a factory on film, she is looking to "expose normalcy and the exercise of repetition and hardship through labor" in an effort to get people to stop and dialogue about what is often an unrecognized labour. The shock and empathy that her performances elicit are meant to induce dialogue about notions of gender and worker's rights in effect, her videos are offering an open-ended question to society to consider: "how do we value or devalue the bodies of workers and more notably women in our every day consumption"?. Zaatari is employing the method of the archive to open up dialogue around history and memory. By providing photographs and testimonies from multiple framings and from marginalized voices, he creates a visual dialogue with history, but impacted by the current social context. His words: "the archive is never neutral. It is curated, shaped and political." In this way, we understand that regardless of what archival presentation

even his own art happens, it is in relation to the power structures already in place. His art encourages viewers to evaluate where history comes from. In Ali's installations, the dialogue happens through experience as well; she often puts you in multilingual, multicultural, virtual spaces where you must negotiate meaning with the art. For example, in encountering text in Arabic next to English in her work, someone may ask another audience member or the artist, "What does this mean?" This creates a dialogue across cultures, using the art as a starting point. Ali's configuration is what Bourriaud (2002 p. 40) describes as creating "micro-utopias", temporary spaces of community formed through the art encounter. As Bourriaud, says in these micro-communities, evidently unrelated folks come together as "witnessing publics": collective audiences experiencing an issue and talking about it. The three artists discussed here, all successfully transform exhibits into such dialogic spaces, transforming passive art spectatorship to participation in a forum, or workshop.

In conclusion, art as dialogue is a shared principle in the practice of Vatanajyankur, Zaatari, and Ali. Pursuant to Freire's and Bourriaud's pedagogical perspectives, I can understand how they function pedagogically and relationally: presenting critical problems, calling for responses, and forming human links. The provocations and participatory elements in the art they create encourage dialogue, whether that be in the form of internal dialogue with self-meaning or in the form of outward facing dialogue as the viewer engages with others, and this is a critical step in the process of social transformation. Art as opportunity in their hands, does not represent a monologue of the artist's voice. Rather, they offer a dialogic exchange that can provide a starting point or seed for increased awareness, empathy, and social change in our cultural context.

5.2 Feminism and Embodied Knowledge – Kawita Vatanajyankur

Kawita Vatanajyankur’s body of work stands as an exemplary case study of embodied knowledge production through a feminist framework. By performing domestic and menial labour with her own body, Vatanajyankur’s feminist art practice is intimately connected to dominant strategies of feminist art that take the bodily lived experience of women and men as a source of knowledge and critique. For artist/scholar Hilary Robinson (2015), feminist art, as a genre, relies on the female body and personal experience as sites of critique that interrupt dominant male narratives of art and society. In using her body as the primary medium, Vatanajyankur is embodying what feminist performance artists have always attempted: to insist the personal is political and that a woman’s seemingly private bodily struggles with housework, with standards of beauty and physical limitations are symptomatic of larger social structures of

power. Vatanajyankur argued in her interview, "I use my body as a tool, becoming part of the machine to highlight the repetition and burden of labour." This provocative metaphor of becoming "part of the machine" stresses how she inserts her body into the processes of cleaning, lifting, and producing that highlight how women's bodies can be instrumentalized in society. Tal Dekel's opinions on feminist art activism provides some insight into the first contribution of this sort of artwork in the contemporary moment: to 'bring presence to bodily experiences' that are gendered and value-laden, and often made invisible in a patriarchal society. The work of Vatanajyankur demonstrates this: she takes actions framed as "women's work" – scrubbing the floors, doing the laundry, carrying things – and puts them center stage of an artistic event. In doing so, she is inviting the audience to see and feel the materiality of women's labor, and have that materiality be salient, rather than remain an unnoticed thing. This also resonates with Dekel's comment that feminist art often operates in and between and outside the mainstream art world to disrupt social and economic hierarchies, since Vatanajyankur's work sits in the space of fine art and daily work creating a bridge between two potentially parallel worlds in a way that embodies subversive potential.

Embodiment in Vatanajyankur's work is not only a kind of practice, but a kind of knowledge. During our interview, she remarked on the kind of knowledge of experience based on labor: "When I am working and performing it physically, I am also feeling the tiredness, this connects me to the people living this reality every day." This comment is important from a feminist perspective. It assumes that by doing the work and feeling the labour in her own muscles and bones, that the artist understands female workers better than by simply thinking about it abstractly. The scholar Judith Butler's notion of performativity, that identities and social roles are constitutive through repetitions amount of actions (Butler, 1993). Vatanajyankur's repeated, endurance-based, actions of scrubbing the floor or carrying, are a literal performative reenactment of "women's work" that expose how gender roles are solidified through repetition. However, in framing her work as art, she also subverts those roles: the act itself of repetition becomes a vehicle of critique rather than compliance. Butler's theory is helpful for recognizing that Kawita's performances both express how the identity of "domestic woman" is performed through endless cycles of domestic labour and by doing so, makes the cycle visible and strange, begins to erode its inevitability. The pain and exhaustion she imposes upon herself also become a form of testimony.

From feminist art theory, Vatanajyankur's work can be put into the context alongside artists that have investigated the paired concepts of gendered labour and the female body. Hilary Robinson

and others have proposed that women artists' use of domestic materials or tasks in their work is a way of valuing that which traditional male art history has deemed unimportant or craft (Robinson, 2015). Vatanajyankur's images of herself functioning as a human mop, a scale, or the conveyor of a factory draw on the "maintenance art" theory put forth by Mierle Laderman Ukeles (1969) that socially necessary maintenance work for e.g., cleaning, mothering, servicing that underpins society is also artwork. Although Vatanajyankur's context is different (from a Thai-Australian millennial experience of global consumerism), the feminist idea is explicit: in making the act of cleaning or carrying a spectacle, she is critically engaging with the culturally devalued labour of cleaning or carrying for the sustained lives of others, and asking why the burden of this labour is assigned to specific bodies. The notion of the hidden costs of consumerism also overlaps with feminist modes of critique about capitalism. Vatanajyankur claims, "We consume so easily. We consume without seeing the hands behind every object. This rings true with Marxist-feminist critiques that the global consumer economy disproportionately relies on the exploited labour of women and other marginalizations in both factories and the home." By making her body literally the hands and arms, shoulders, legs that do the labour of consumer products in her performances, Vatanajyankur is accomplishing what Lucy Lippard(1968) described as key to feminist art: combining social critique with art practice through action, relating to the real world, and creating a demand for change.

Ultimately, Kawita Vatanajyankur's practice offers an example of feminist and embodied knowledge manifesting through art. Her work also maps on to Tal Dekel's statement that feminist artists deploy subversive strategies to draw attention to women's embodied experiences in hostile space, and it lends support to Hilary Robinson's claim about personal experience being a key part of feminist art theory. Vatanajyankur's performances make personal, embodied struggle an public conversation about gender, labour, and power. The outcome is art that educates and agitates, making the viewer feel physically the injustice of gendered labour through empathic discomfort, as well as thinking critically about the mundane actions that we perform far too easily in everyday lives. In this way, her work operates as a model of practice and theory in action – demonstrating how a feminist lens can take a boring, mundane activity like cleaning and turn it into important critique of social structures.

5.3 Archival Politics and Queer Memory – Akram Zaatari

Akram Zaatari's artistic practice has influences of archival politics and queer memory, drawing on the implications of collective images, videos, and documents to interrogate the mechanisms of history production and, more importantly, who gets remembered. Michel Foucault's work

on archives and power is helpful in considering the political dimensions of Zaatari's work. Foucault posited the archive not as a neutral archive of facts, but as a "system of statements" that adheres to rules on what to say, what to remember, and what gets silenced (Foucault, 1972). The archive can, therefore, be charged with power: the archive reflects the processes of who captures and organizes knowledge, while also reproducing dominant histories, while silencing other narratives.

Through his work within the Arab Image Foundation and his art-based projects, Zaatari engages in what could be described as an archive intervention. He is involved in the collecting and re-presentation of photographs family portraits, studio photographs, personal letters, videos that represent Lebanon and the Middle East in unspecified time periods in those regions, especially memories that official histories tend to overlook. In doing this, he does not simply restore suppressed histories, he also challenges the authority of official histories of those who produce historical narratives as understood. Each decision about selection and presentation in his works asks two questions: Who gets to determine which stories are told? How does the way we archive memories shape how we understand the past?

Zaatari’s works, such as "Objects of Study (2010)" and "Her + Him (2001)," are both examples of how he renders the archive as what is a "battleground of narratives." The personal often get in the way of the political; for instance, a studio photo of a young couple in Beirut, and the simple, universal act of love and hope, may disrupt larger narratives of war. This thinking is a little like what Saidiya Hartman is referring to when she discusses "critical fabulation" (Hartman, 2008). Here, a researcher or artist reconstructs lost histories by imaginatively adding to the gaps of the archive, empathy in mind. Hartman also refers to the "violence of the archive", where the silence of the archive is the violence, as the silence erases existence in the case of people who are enslaved or marginalized. Zaatari's work can be viewed as a response to this type of violence. In collecting ephemera and accounts from regular people (letters, photos, memories), he engages with the archival silence or muted presence that accompanies the archive surrounding experience in the Lebanese Civil War and queer in the Arab world. In one interview passage, he said: "I'm interested in how images tell stories that go beyond the frame. It shows an understanding that the meaning of a photograph is not only found in the concrete image, but also in the bigger personal and historical context the beyond that is often lost in official archives. Zaatari's installations often provide that context or cues for it and push the audience to construct the story.

An important component of Zaatari's archival art includes the notion of queer memory. The idea of queer temporality and futurity elaborated by José Muñoz is helpful in this case: as Muñoz points out (2009), there are a number of queer experiences that linger in the horizon of the not yet to not be fully captured by the normative future of the present, and to need imaginative transitions to envision and remember. Zaatari's engagements with queer themes in his work are often subtle; what he suggested in his own words are "forms of intimacy that challenge normative narratives" and instead of telling us exactly what a queer relationships is, he might offer something like a photograph of a tender gaze between two male friends or a diary entry suggesting same-sex longing.

These forms of narratives are "quiet, coded, and poetic" as he describes it, indicating the fact that throughout the entirety of history (either in conservative or wartime contexts), queer love was forced to be coded, and exists only indirectly in the archive. In pieces like "This Day" (2003) or "Red Chewing Gum" (2000) he frames scenes of male intimacy that Avoid voyeurism while gently challenging traditional ideas of gender and sexuality. The implication of this is two-fold; on one hand, he is preserving a memory of queer affection for generations to come, consistent with Muñoz's argument that glimpses of a queer past helps us to imagine queer futures, and, on another hand, he is pushing the audience in the present to expand what they think about when they think about Middle Eastern history to include queer elements. Zaatari's artwork often collapses time, bringing both past and present into simultaneous view in a non-linear fashion (e.g. showing a photograph from the 1950s next to video performance from the 2000s in the same installation), which is an example of a queer temporal strategy that intervenes in the straight line of official history.

Similarly, Zaatari's work's notion of memory is also intimately tied to war and trauma, which can be traced back to his youth that was spent growing up during the Lebanese Civil War. He reflected, "My generation lived through war, it shaped how we remember and forget." This brief yet poignant comment illustrates that memory for him is not only a conduit for preserving the past but yet another battle of trauma that has left a collective amnesia. The archive evolves into a site of therapy or processing – "We have collective trauma and the archive is a way to process it," Zaatari explains. We see the archive as a means to work through places of painful histories, like anguishing collective memory that holds shards of trauma that can be excavated and thereby made meaningful. Foucault's comment about the archive working largely on that which can be said actually takes on a whole new meaning in the post-insurgency context – when so much is left unspoken or unsayable, Zaatari's work is expanding the archive to include

traces of the unsaid, a photo of a bombed building, a personal letter never sent, a veteran's anecdote.

In his work "Letter to a Refusing Pilot" (2013) – that tells the story of an Israeli pilot who refused to bomb a school – Zaatari is engaged in what could be called archival activism. His art archives an act of ethics that would not otherwise be noted in the official histories of the pilot's country of origin, while containing a narrative of a moral consciousness in a context of conflict. This part of his work also links with Hartman's notion of seeking out still "lost voices" and stories that are missing from our conventional archives. In Zaatari's claim about documenting "the faith and the ordinary that resist the history of exploitation" he is effectively arguing: the state archives may document battles and treaties, but we must maintain the people's archives of the stories of human empathy, human desire, and human suffering that creates the history.

In the end, Akram Zaatari's practice shows how an artist can grapple with archival politics as a way to recover and reinterpret the past from within, while producing queer memory as a counter narrative to sanctioned history and power. If I apply Foucault's critical framework to Zaatari's work, I see his archive derived art as a proactive act against power: reconstituting historical record in the way we can only do so by archiving what gets rejected from the archives officially. His work reminds us that the archive is not just preservation, but transformation, that archives can transform our notions of history and our identity by approaching them through a critical, inclusive, and imaginative lens. In Zaatari's work, the archive is a living, contested space that creates alternative futures of memory from the trace of the past.

5.4 Textiles, Translation and Decoloniality – Alia Ali

Alia Ali’s interdisciplinary art practice, which incorporates photography, textile, language, and installation, can be viewed through the perspectives of decolonial aesthetics and postcolonial theory, especially with a focus on materiality and translation as forms of resistance. A key aspect of Ali’s art is using textiles – beautiful fabrics in colourful, complex patterns from diverse spots around the world (Yemen, Bosnia, Morocco, etc.) – as material and language. Ali says, "Textile is a language in itself - it speaks of origin, belonging, history." This statement is important in conveying a decolonial stance: Ali elevates material culture, the cloth, the pattern, the dye to the realm of language, rather than privileging only written or spoken language usually, the language of the colonizer as the primary vector of culture. As Madina Tlostanova (2009) describes decolonial art as a practice that "is to engage with forgotten native sounds,

tastes and odours," and to recover "geo-body storytelling and disqualified ideals of beauty," Ali's work offers their illustration. The textiles she uses have the "sounds and odours" incorporated within them from their place of origin, one can consider the local marketplaces, the specific dyes and the spices, the touch space of a hand woven cloth. Ali's art openly affirms these patterns, claiming their beauty and significance equal to a say, Western oil painting. In making that claim, Ali is engaging in a decolonial act: dismantling the hierarchy that places European fine art above global fabric traditions. Each piece of cloth becomes, as she describes, "a vessel of stories untold, its patterns, textures, and dyes carry genealogies of belonging and exile." This process is fabric as an archive of movement and diaspora. It is a non written, non-colonial archive comprised of color and fiber.

Ali's emphasis on translation and hybridity also deepens the decolonial and diasporic framework of her art practice. As a Yemeni-Bosnian-American who grew up moving between at least five different languages and several different cultural contexts, Ali embodies a diasporic subjectivity navigating between cultures and worlds. She writes, "I work across languages, across geographies, and my hybridity comes through in my work." Although this suggests an acceptance of a multiplicity of influences, she is also taking up Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, which is a notion of positionality. It is a space of enunciation through which the hybridization of different influences produce new identities and meanings (Bhabha, 1994). In Ali's work, the third space is both literal and metaphorical: literal in that her installations combine visual languages, and metaphorical in terms of the viewer coming into her installation and experiencing a space that is not entirely one culture or the other, but a threshold of many. Bhabha has described cultural translation, as, the processes by which the migrant or postcolonial subject intervenes on components of different cultures that are adapt to create something new. Ali's multilayered works are visualizing this translation. As an example, she might use an Arabic script in a work intended for an English-speaking audience without translating, or the other way around. This practice requires a conversation and suggests equality between those languages – that one is not subordinate to the other through explanation. It questions viewers: an English speaker confronted with an Arabic phrase in her work might have to find out what it means or accept the ambiguity, giving them a moment of experience outside of the dominant language. Ali explained, 'I intentionally create multilingual works, resisting that there is a single interpretation. This resistance to being one story is characteristic of decolonial and postcolonial art. It resists colonizing one is cultural we simplify and categorize very often from a Western perspective by requiring complexity. By being made of

many languages and symbols, Ali represents the reality of diasporic identity; not one thing or another, but many things at once. This is inherently political – it counteracts the expectation for artists of color to fully explain or translate themselves to the dominant audience. Instead, where Bhabha might notice this, she actually produces meaning in the in-between, where the uncertainty of an encounter of cultures produces richness. Another aspect of Ali's work is how it embodies a sensory experience in ways that connect with both decolonial aesthetics and feminist aesthetics. Carolyn Korsmeyer (2004) and many feminist aestheticians have argued for the importance of embodied, sensory experiences with art, each critiquing the lineage of Western philosophy that claims aesthetic experience is disinterested and solely visual/intellectual. Tlostanova's framing of "geo-body storytelling" comes to mind because Ali creates storytelling with bodies instead of a linear account of written history. The outcome is a sensory and affective transmission of knowledge.

In Ali's "Borderland" or "Flux" series installations for example, standing in one of these fragmented installations a viewer may feel a sensation of disorientation due to the multi-layered forms and the patterns of whispered audios in multiple tongues – a sensation of being unmoored. That emotional bodily reaction is intentional and reflects the sensations of being between cultures, having an identity that is not easily categorized. It is a materially and emotionally resisting idea that things can only be clear and classified. Academically speaking, Ali's art can be thought of as performing the uncertain and rich dimensions of transnational identity, while also inviting the audience to perform that with their own senses and subjectivity. Alia Ali's artwork engages the viewer through the combined mediation of textile embodied, language, and sensory experience, resembling what decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo has defined as "decolonial aesthesis"; a shift in sensing and perceiving that exposes colonial/modern assumptions about knowledge and art and whose knowledges and whose art matters. By sourcing her textiles from sites of colonialism and conflict, she deliberately invokes trade, diaspora, and imperial histories, but she does so on her own terms. The viewer has to work through multiple layers of meaning, as does anyone who moves between different diasporic lives and layers of identity. Lee's art thus refutes any singular colonial source of meaning; its meanings are a multiplicity of tongues and textures. A viewer may not have understood everything in the conventional way, but they most certainly have felt a narrative about displacement, resilience, and the sensuous continuation of culture through cloth and story after experiences with her installation.

In conclusion, Alia Ali's practice shows us how textile, translation and decoloniality can converge in contemporary art. She uses fabric as language and decolonially engages with her audience querying colonial ideologies of art and communication while embracing hybridity and sensory engagement. Ali's work embodies such thinkers as Tlostanova and Bhabha, as she practices decolonial ideas of valuing art of the other, creating third spaces, and indirectly aligns with feminist aesthetic theories by valuing emotion and touch as understanding. Her art is resistance that is beautiful and seductive while politically charged; it draws viewers into a multilayered experience of meaning that guarantees the conversation around diaspora and identity occurs not just in books, but in the gut feeling and visual enjoyment of its audience. In this way, she expands how we imagine communication and history; sometimes a textile is louder than a text, and sometimes what we feel as knowing matters more.

5.5 Thematic Intersection

In considering thematic intersections and shared motivations, while Kawita Vatanajyankur, Akram Zaatari, and Alia Ali have their own cultural contexts and unique media, the previous discussion has demonstrated some of the themes and commitments that exist across their practices. For instance, these thematic intersections point towards a greater ethos of contemporary art that is socially situated, materially accountable, and collectively interpreted. Their shared themes include:

5.5.1 Materiality and the Body: Each of the artists uses the material or bodily aspects of their practices as alluding in some way to meaning. Vatanajyankur's material is her own body completing labor; Zaatari's materials are archival photographs and material objects; Ali's materials are textiles and multisensory installations. In every instance, the material of the artwork (flesh, paper, textile, etc.) is not incidental, it is fore fronted. In some respect both of these artists are engaged with the agency of materiality, the body can "speak" (as Kawita's body does in resistance to movement), the photograph can recall an entire world (as Zaatari's archives do), and the textile can tell a history without language. Materiality emerges or exists in relation to the world through art, by using materials such as the human body, historical documentation, or cultural textiles, the artists connecting the object of art and artist back to lived social conditions.

5.5.2 Resistance and Critique: Each of the artists uses the practice of art as resistance to challenge dominant structures or narratives. There is a clear shared commitment to resistance with social or political objectives. Vatanajyankur engages with patriarchal and capitalist

exploitation by revealing and tolerating the consequences of such exploitation on her body, successfully critiquing consumer culture and gender roles from within the spectacle. Zaatari's work resists authoritative histories and censorship – from the state sanctioned version of the civil war, or erasure of queer stories through heteronormative narratives and thus contributes archival activism, demanding historical narrative, and agency. Ali's practice resists colonial and homogenizing boundaries, she is continually seeking to be multilingual and refusing single interpretations, challenging a contextualization of culture or people with singular identities or meanings. In all three, art becomes a site of resistance; they all confront the viewer with different uncomfortable realities, whether that be the pain behind consuming daily products, the tragic fragility of memory and the power of silences, or that cultural identity cannot simply be replaced or represented. Importantly they do not resist overtly, didactically, but rather through embodied and symbolic engagement, which can often speak more powerfully to the body, and the imagination.

5.5.3 Identity and Multiplicity: Issues of identity: be it gender, sexual, cultural, or national identity are situated within their works, and none of these artists understand this identity as fixed or singular, but instead embrace the notion of multiplicity, and fluidity. Kawita Vatanajyankur brings together identities of artist/performer and labourer, blurring the lines between subject and object. Her dual identity reflects the complexity of being a woman in a globalised economy – simultaneously a person and representative for others. Akram Zaatari’s work operates in multiple identities: he is an archivist, an artist, a witness of war, and so through his multi-faceted assemblages we see multi-faceted identities of his subjects e.g., a photograph might reveal someone as a lover, a fighter, a citizen. His embracing of queer identities implies that identity is not a uniform identity, there are Lebanese histories that are straight and there are Lebanese histories are queer and they exist together, even if one is suppressed. Alia Ali, perhaps most clearly, embodies multiplicity: as a diasporic artist, she is Yemeni, Bosnian, and American and her art thrives in hybridity. By layering visual and linguistic elements from multiple cultures, she claims that identity can be a mosaic and not a single picture. In all three, there is an intent to contest the simplistic representation of complicated identities.

5.5.4 Audience Engagement and Co-Creation: One striking similarity is how each artist treats the audience, as active participant in making meaning, a shared ethos of co-creation. They clearly do not deliver consumable messages, instead they develop scenarios where the viewer's engagement, emotional response, and in some cases physical interaction, become part of the completed artworks. While Vatanajyankur’s videos invite the audience to feel empathy for her

bodily struggle, and reflect on their own part in the structures she is critiquing, the meaning is evoked in that reflective space. Zaatari's installations can feel like investigative sites where audiences instead put pieces together, in effect, the audience helps piece together the narratives, like a researcher in their own trip through the archive. Ali often creates immersive installations that can surround the viewer, or facilitate a potentially confusing walk through spaces of fabric or textiles in a way that the audience's movement and sensory experiences are an integral part of the work. In all the cases mentioned here, the artists have resisted linear authorship or ownership of meaning. Meaning is unequally constructed: the artist proposes a framework or provocation and the audience participates to activate the discourse. By resisting a linear author to audience model, they also resist the power relationship that exists between artists/genius and an ignorant public. The audience is respected as co-creators with their own context to the art and work.

5.5.5 Refusal of Closure: Another shared subtler commitment is a resistance to closure or definitive endings. Each of these artists elicits their work to contain open-ended questions. For example, Vatanajyankur often concludes her performance videos not with a tidy ending but with an image of continuing labour or exhaustion, suggesting the issue continues outside the frame. Zaatari's archive works do not close the chapter with a formulated narrative and often reveal uncertainties and pieces are missing, and he invites others to continue exploring where he leaves them, for instance, his work with the Arab Image Foundation is never over, it is always an ongoing project of collecting or interpreting. As noted earlier, Ali's work resists singularity as there always feels to be a second layer of the root of culture or meaning. This openness could be read as nothing, or as subversion: it mimics a complexity of social transformations that are ongoing and never linear. It also means that their art remains ongoing and relevant, as contexts and conversations continue to be generated.

5.5.6 Summary:

In summary, while there are distinctions in medium and issues addressed, Vatanajyankur, Zaatari and Ali each collectively demonstrate an underlying philosophy of art making. They all use material means to address immaterial issues (ideas, memories, identities), they resist through making practice, and they include their public as partners in thought and feeling. Collectively, their works counteract simplified narratives and work towards interrelations and complexities. By resisting single meanings and linear authorial significance, they also reflect a contemporary notion that truth and transformations can exist from multiplicity and collaboration. The shared commitments established in their practices, to justice, to memory, to

embodied knowledge, and to dialogue are evidence of how contemporary art can be a form of praxis; theory, action, and reflection as a collective. These common threads also suggest a shared turn in contemporary art and away from art for art's sake and instead towards art as an engaged activism, where the gallery can be a place for learning, empathy, and community.

5.7 Research Position

This research situates itself at the intersection of feminist theory, colonial discourse , and socially engaged art, offering original contributions by considering artists themselves in analyzing the works. By introducing the opinion of Kawita Vatanajyankur, Akram Zaatari, and Alia Ali into the discussion through first hand interviews and theoretical critique, this study captures a few different original contributions to scholarship. Firstly, it contributes to feminist art and theory by extending it beyond the Euro-American context, taking in Southeast Asia and the Middle East as distinct practices. There are opinions of feminist art histories, such as that by Hilary Robinson, largely on the Euro-American feminist art practices and histories, etc. However, Vatanajyankur's practice offers a transnational feminist connection, linking gendered labour in Thailand to global capitalist systems. The research accounts for how feminist theories of embodiment and labour are expressed in the work of a non-Western artist thereby broadening the feminist art discourse with even more diversely plural case studies. Alia Ali's example raises decolonial feminist aesthetics, showing how women of color artists use beauty and sensory experience to engage with oppression as a resistance tactic. The analysis demonstrates that feminist art activism is not homogenous: it takes many different frameworks in different cultural landscapes, and by making comparisons it broadens feminist art discourses. Secondly, the research contributes to decolonial aesthetics and postcolonial theory by presenting concrete examples of how artists negotiate the legacies of colonial history, diaspora, and cultural translation in their artistic process. The use of theorists like Homi Bhabha and Madina Tlostanova with work by Alia Ali, for instance, demonstrates how the theories can be applied to representation in contemporary art practice, showing how Ali is original in applying decolonial ideas and presenting them in a concrete, visual way. Similarly, the use of theorists Foucault, Hartman, and Muñoz with Zaatari's art provides a link between art criticism and gender theory, demonstrating how archival art can be analyzed through concepts such as power, race, sexuality, etc. Zaatari's art is elucidated as a form of postcolonial historical inquiry which is original and connects art history and memory studies.

Thirdly, my thesis contributes to the field of socially engaged art by examining how dialogue and engagement are performed in art practices that are not explicitly community based. The

three artists in this study, engage with a social aspect through their content and presentation rather than through direct engagement or collaboration, expanding the scope of socially engaged art. Through Freire's dialogic model and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics as analytical frameworks, this research shows that artworks can be "socially engaged" even when the engagement is at the level of provocation and reflection in the space of the gallery. This expands narrower definitions of socially engaged art and represents a continuation of engagement from artworks that create a reflective dialogue. The thesis offers the idea that creating critical dialogue is also understood as a form of social engagement in the context of art. This positions the work in conversation with contemporary scholarship that seeks to collapse the distinctions between art and activism to demonstrate that aesthetic experience and activist outcome do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Perhaps one of the more original factors of this research is its methodological approach. We have used artist interviews as both method and material. In art history and theory, artists' voices have sometimes been relegated to anecdote or utilized selectively. The study treats the interviews and the artists' voices as a valid text for thematic analysis that allows the artists authority in explaining their own intentions and context. In this way, the research locates itself, at least somewhat, at an intersection of art criticism and qualitative research. The quotations and narratives from Vatanajyankur, Zaatari, and Ali provide interpretations and insights that would have been lost if I undertook a more theoretical framing. It contributes to the growing collection of scholarship for work that is artist-centered and artist-driven, artist as collaborator and as knowledge producer, not simply the object of our analysis. It also adds transparency into the methodology that informed the research, as the reader can connect how the interpretations are based on the words of the creators, and thus add some degree of credibility and nuance to the critical analysis we discuss. This research approach seems to provide avenues to understanding more deeply – for instance, understanding the Zaatari's own appreciation of the philosophy of the archive, or the Ali's enact and display the aims she put into action – and suggests that there may be research relevance for using artist interviews in a wider scope of art theory research, particularly with living artists dealing with contemporary concerns.

The research ultimately connects these three artists under the banner of art as a means of dialogue and an agent of transformation, while also establishing a niche within academia examining feminist theory, gender studies, and decolonial cultural studies in the form of art. Therefore, it worked as a comparative model that is not limited by cultural and disciplinary boundaries, claiming the relevance of contemporary art practice as a site of theoretical inquiry

in and by itself. In a fundamental sense, the research aligns the academic context with non and multi- disciplinary trajectories that frame art as a mode of intellectual inquiry – like literature or philosophy – that can produce theory about society. Therefore, the thesis engages not simply with the artworks within it, but uses them alongside the intentions of the artists in discussions of theory around art and social change.

5.8 Limitations

It is essential to acknowledge the limits of this research, as deeply contingent our findings and interpretations, and shape how they are arrived at and understood. One limitation is the scope and number of cases in the study. By focusing on three artists, we obtained in-depth qualitative insights, but at the cost of broad generalizability. The possible breadth of contemporary art practices is vast; the artists selected, each with particular cultural backgrounds (Thai-Australian, Lebanese, Yemeni-Bosnian-American), represent a slice of the global contemporary art world. A wider study could add to the number of artists or regions to see if the themes we identified held or if dissimilar strategies emerged. Also, it was culturally and geographically limited (Asia and MENA, with diaspora ties) and excluded many other continents and contexts (e.g., Latin American, or sub-Saharan African artists, for example, who are dealing with similar issues). Therefore, one must be careful to not over generalize, not all feminist art will take a similar embodiment strategy to Vatanajyankur's, not all archival art will take Zaatari's form. Here, I have sought depth, rather than width. This has its benefits, but it also means many similar questions are left unanswered beyond this thesis.

Another limitation was the reliance on interviews and self-reporting from the artists. The interview part is a strength, but it is also a weakness, because it is subjective.

Artists are narrating their own practice and may frame their intentions and reflections a certain way, aware of how they and their work are going to be perceived. Artists potentially have a bias as they may provide an idealized or 'strategic' narrative about their work when we are interviewing them or may purposely lean into a certain theoretical alignment, given the context of our research. I attempted to balance the interpretive approach – to take seriously the artist's voice while still being able to employ critical analysis. This could often be subjective, and another researcher may balance things differently, which reflects limitations of qualitative interpretations.

Language and translation presented additional challenges. All interviews were conducted in English (not a first language for at least two of the artists, Zaatari and Kawita, although they

are fluent multilingual speakers). There is a small limitation in the sense that perhaps subtle nuances or concepts from their cultural context may not have a definitive matching in English phrasing. Moreover, when analyzing Alia Ali's multilingual content, I (the researcher, an English/Urdu speaker with limited Arabic) had to resort to the translations or explanations for certain words/texts featured in the artworks. Something of the richness of those languages might have been lost with this and detracted from the interpretations. Recognizing this, the I attempted to be careful with making conclusions about linguistic elements and focused instead on broader patterns unless I was confident with the translation. Culturally, my own positionality, it must be stated for reflection, An immigrant student in western academic impacted my viewpoint. For example, when determining a sensitivity to the respective cultural contexts of a Thai feminist performance, an Arab archival installation, and transnational textile project a level of cultural awareness and humility is required. I made efforts to educate myself about the respective cultural contexts, reading about Thai gender norms, Lebanese war histories, Yemeni textiles. However, I am aware of my potential for misinterpretation when working across cultures.

5.9 Researcher Bias

As a reflexive note, it is important to note that my interest in dialogue and social change through art is not neutral. My interest is based on my belief in the potential for art to work positively within society, which hopefully results in some bias towards looking for meaning and impact in the artwork studied. In this research, I am clearly committed to recognizing where art may have a diminished or unclear influence. For example, I became aware of the need to avoid romanticizing the impact of artwork, recognizing that a compelling video piece does not change working conditions; nor does an archival artwork alone mitigate trauma. Change, as the literature suggests, is generally more imperceptible and works at the level of discourse.

I deliberated over some skepticism during my research in relation to wondering if viewers were engaging in the dialogue intended by artists, or if the institutional context was dulling political messaging. One limit with this work was the potential for audience inclusion. I needed to infer audience reaction and usually used my responses as a stand-in. To arrive at a response, my emotional and intellectual response for e.g. inspiration, admiration, and discomfort have influenced my responses as well. For instance, my emotional connection to the themes of diaspora in Ali's work likely created a bias towards a critical interpretation of the work.

Embracing these and other limitations, I maintain an open frame of research even while I adapted to not uncontested assumptions about art and social change. The process of learning from the artists was especially instrumental. For example, Zaatari's ability to address nuanced but clear political discourse challenged my first thoughts about art necessarily being overtly political. Also, Ali's reiteration of purpose to use work for emotional engagement not analytical consideration pushed directly into my being as an academic in reflecting and contemplating those lived moments, it became easy for them to be integrated into my analysis and broaden my understanding of the layered engagement of art.

I acknowledge that this thesis is done for my master’s degree, however for me it is a dialogue between myself and the artists. By openly addressing these limitations and reflections, I strive to maintain intellectual honesty and hope to encourage future research to engage with these insights both appreciatively and critically.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to understand how contemporary artists use their work to start conversations that matter. I was struck by how art today can do more than hang on museum walls, it can bring people together, challenge old stories, and give voice to those who are often overlooked. I wanted to explore this power of art because I believe that at a time of growing social divides, creative dialogue can help us find common ground and imagine fairer futures.

My central question was simple**: How do contemporary artists conceptualize and implement their practices to catalyze dialogue?** To explore this, I had two goals: first, to uncover the personal and collective motivations that drive artists; second, to examine the methods and materials they use. I chose to focus on three artists, Akram Zaatari from Lebanon, Alia Ali who lives between the Middle East and the West, and Kawita Vatanajyankur from Thailand because each of them uses very different media but shares a commitment to opening up conversation through art.

I grounded my research in four main theoretical lenses. Feminist theory helped me see how art can challenge patriarchal power and bring women's everyday experiences into public view. Gender studies encouraged me to look at how identity can be performed and rewritten through creative acts. Postcolonial theory reminded me to question the legacies of colonialism and to honor voices and histories that have been marginalized. Finally, cultural criticism pushed me to think about how institutions shape which artwork we see and how we interpret them. Together, these frameworks showed me that art is never neutral, it is always entangled with questions of power, identity, and history.

To gather evidence, I used a qualitative, interview-based approach. I spoke with each artist in a free-flowing, semi-structured Zoom interview, inviting them to share their stories, motivations, and challenges. I recorded and transcribed these conversations, then analyzed them in two ways: first, by close reading and manual coding to identify recurring ideas; second, by using digital text-analysis tools (Voyant and Atlas.ti) to track the frequency of key terms like "dialogue," "identity," and "resistance." This combination of human insight and software support helped me spot both explicit themes and more subtle patterns in how the artists talk about their work.

Each artist's practice offered a different path into the question of dialogue:

Kawita Vatanajyankur uses her own body in performance pieces to expose invisible labour and challenge consumer culture. By folding, scrubbing, or carrying household objects as part of her artwork, she makes viewers feel the physical weight of unpaid work. Her performances become a space for audiences to recognize shared experiences of fatigue and resilience, turning private tasks into public conversation.

Alia Ali works across textiles, photography, video, and installation to explore cultural identity and migration. She treats fabric as a living language, wrapping subjects in richly patterned cloth that tells stories of home, displacement, and belonging. Through color, texture, and pattern, she invites viewers to look beyond faces and read the histories woven into material culture. Her work bridges East and West and gently pushes back against colonial boundaries.

Akram Zaatari digs into archives of old photographs, home movies, and periodicals to reclaim forgotten or erased stories from Lebanon and the wider Arab world. He treats the archive itself as a creative medium, re-editing, and re-presenting images to highlight voices that official histories have overlooked—whether queer narratives, wartime memories, or everyday life under reconstruction. His films and exhibitions become acts of cultural healing and collective remembering.

When I compared these three practices, several crosscutting themes emerged. First, all three artists see their work as open ended dialogue, not monologue. They design experiences that invite interpretation, participation, or response, leaving room for multiple perspectives. Second, questions of identity and resistance run through every project: gender norms, colonial legacies, and political silences are named and challenged. Third, materiality and the body play central roles: whether it is the artist's own flesh, colorful textiles, household objects, or archival photographs, physical things carry meaning and memory. Finally, each artist balances personal narrative with the collective impact their individual stories become gateways for broader social conversations.

Taken together, these findings show that art can be a catalyst for social transformation. It can surface hidden histories, build empathy, and create new spaces where people feel invited to speak and listen. Importantly, this process depends not only on the artist's intent but also on institutional support. Museums, galleries, funders, and educators all shape whether dialogic art reaches its audiences and whether it is valued as more than decoration.

Finally, I argue that art's true power lies in its ability to ignite conversation, to break down the barriers between artist and audience, to challenge entrenched ideas, and to imagine alternative ways of living together. By learning from Kawita, Alia, and Akram, I hope we can better support art that refuses to be silent, art that holds space for many voices, and art that helps us move toward a more just and connected world.

Key Insights and Academic Contributions

Although the focused sample of three artists from Asia and the Middle East limits broad generalizability, it enables deep, nuanced case studies that document artists' own reflections in rich, empirical detail rather than relying solely on theoretical abstraction; demonstrate a replicable digital/manual methodology for humanities research that leverages text-analysis tools alongside close interpretive reading; bridge interview data with feminist, decolonial, dialogical, and queer theories to show how concrete art practices foster social engagement; and offer practical guidance for curators and educators to design exhibitions and programs that emphasize critical audience dialogue

Personal Reflections and Future Directions

Approaching this project as a non-artist introduced both challenges and strengths: my outsider's curiosity helped me question assumptions, but I also had to build rapport carefully and remain vigilant against imposing rigid theories on the artists' lived processes. A major depressive episode during the writing phase disrupted my timeline, but it also deepened my empathy, echoing the resilience I observed in my participants and underscored that emotional labour is inseparable from intellectual work.

Looking ahead, I see several avenues to expand and enrich this research. Firstly, I think there should be broader, more diverse sampling including artists from Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Indigenous contexts to test whether the dialogic strategies identified here hold across cultures. Secondly, I think there should be more audience centered methods: surveys, focus groups, or ethnographic observation in exhibition spaces, to capture how viewers actually coconstruct meaning.

Ultimately, this thesis both closes a chapter and opens new ones. While art alone cannot overhaul social systems overnight, it can, piece by piece, nurture empathy and spark conversations that edge us toward collective transformation. I look forward to carrying these insights into future inquiries and to continuing the dialogue between art and society.

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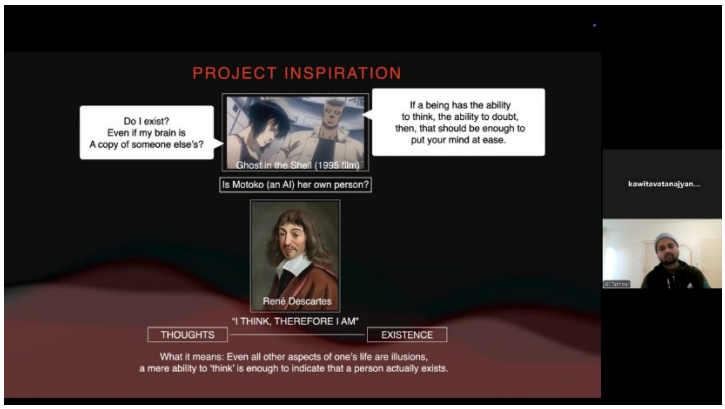
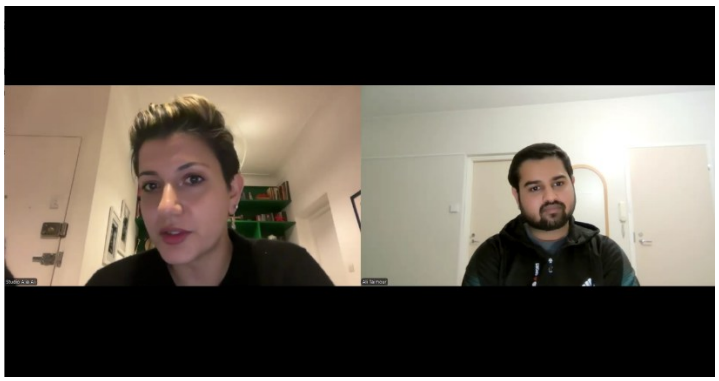
Appendices

Interview With Akram Zaatari

Interview with Kawita Vatanajyankur

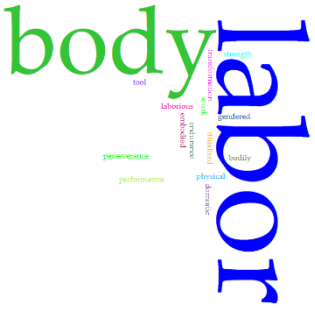


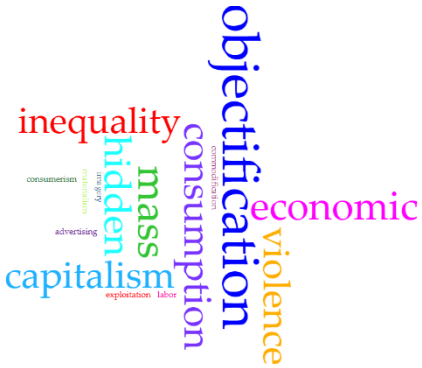
Interview with Alia Ali



Process Pictures

Word frequency through Voyant tools





Thematic Coding using Atlas.ti