

EMBROIDERERS OF ACTUALITY

2013-2018

AGLAIA HARITZ (CH)

ABDELAZIZ ZERROU (MA)

The wide art project «Embroiderers of actuality» is a collaboration between the Swiss artist Aglaia Haritz and the Moroccan artist Abdelaziz Zerrou. The art project «Embroiderers of Actuality» is an exchange between the local population and the artist using texts of art, poetry and literature, written by local women, where art is the tool to trigger a process of questioning the local community and the artist him or herself. This project aims to question the role of art in political and social change and intends to create a situation, where through art, there is a direct link with the population.

It is an action that aims to be a sensible and important provocation, a visual discussion about the position of women in the South. It is also a confrontation between yesterday and today, between politics and religion and between modernity and tradition.

Art is used here as a tool to realize a dialogue between the local population

and the artists. This situation questions contemporary art as such, as a possibility or necessity to bring art into the public sphere. This dialogue will develop, confront and stimulate the research for the artist (conceptual and formal) and will be, at the same time, a medium of communication, working in the intersection between the private sphere and the public one.

This project not only concerns an attitude of attention to location (city/country), but also an awareness of ethics and politics, a direct performative and emotional involvement, and the acquisition of a personal point of view, referring specifically to women and related to each personal history.

The project "Embroiderers of Actuality" aims to stimulate, through practical personal contact, exchange and awareness of the environment, serving as a meeting place between individual and collective sensitivity.

The core issue of the project is the role of art in public space and its interaction in society; it will be discussed and developed with artists and art professionals in art spaces.

The embroidery is conceived as a female folk craftsmanship, speaking of belonging, tradition and participation.

This project will provide an opportunity for women to express their voice and to improve their socio-economic situation, because the embroidery work will be paid, thereby generating an additional source of income.

The aim is to conduct the project in more cities in the south of the Mediterranean, to collect a part of Mediterranean women's memory and knowledge, to create a sort of "artistic documentary" through the website www.embroiderersactuality.wordpress.com, where the whole work is shown: artworks, pictures of the process, sounds, documentation, texts, press cuttings, exhibitions, collaborations, interviews, videos, etc.

We want to carry out the project in the south of the Mediterranean to show it in the north, hence trying to share and discuss the situation of women and the place of the femininity in the contemporary world.

www.embroiderers-of-actuality.com



CAIRO

RABAT

#CASABLANCA

MARRAKECH

BEIRUT

#VALLETTA



Aglaia Haritz

Born in Ticino, Switzerland, Aglaia Haritz graduated with a National Diploma of Fine Arts from ENSA in Limoges, France. She has exhibited in Museums and in Contemporary Art Centres in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, France, Holland and Slovenia. Her works are parts of important Art Collections. Since 1996, parallel to her studies and artistic practice, she has developed a social artistic

research program collaborating in humanitarian projects in India, Central Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, South America and the West Bank. She was selected for the art residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, Dar Al-Ma'mûn Art Residency in Marrakesh, art residencies in Cairo, in Morocco and in Lebanon. She lives and works in Zurich since 2011.

Abdelaziz Zerrou

Born in Casablanca, he lives and works between Locarno and Casablanca. He graduated from the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tétouan. Artistic Director of a graphic design studio «group3» he founded while continuing his research in visual arts.

His artistic resolutely contemporary mostly in the graphic register, with a preference for universal symbolic figures.

He participated at the Triennial in Luanda, Angola, at the Galleria Continua in Paris, at the New Art Exchange Museum of Nottingham, UK, at the Modern and Contemporary Art Museum in Rabat.

From 2009 he was in more art residences as: Cité Internationales des Arts in Paris, Dar Al-Ma'mûn Art Residency in Marrakesh, Studio Rondo Art Residency in Graz, Austria and Dordt Yart Art Residency in Dordrecht, Netherland. Zerrou was also co-creator of a group: Young African Artists, which supports artistic creativity in Africa.

Chapter 1 / Cairo



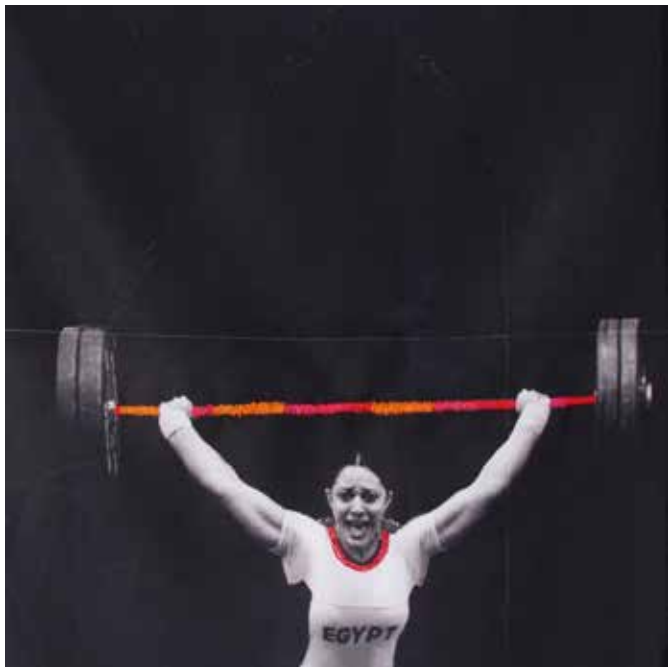
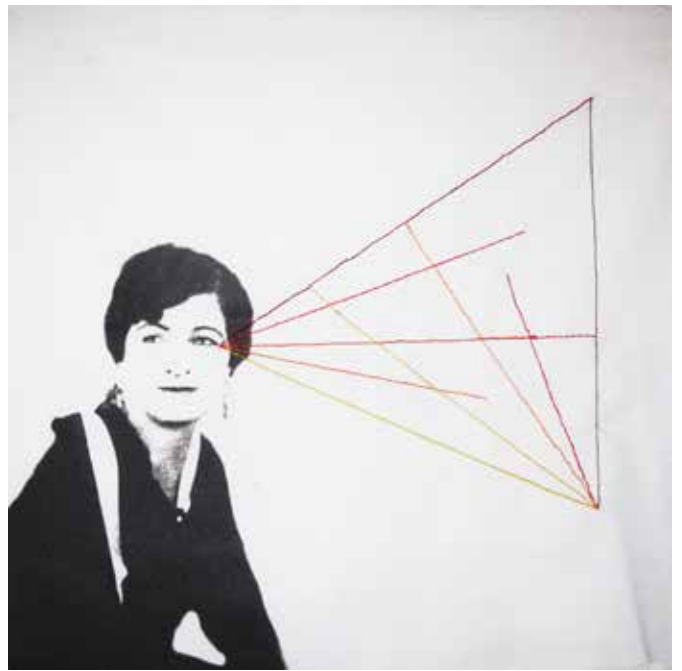
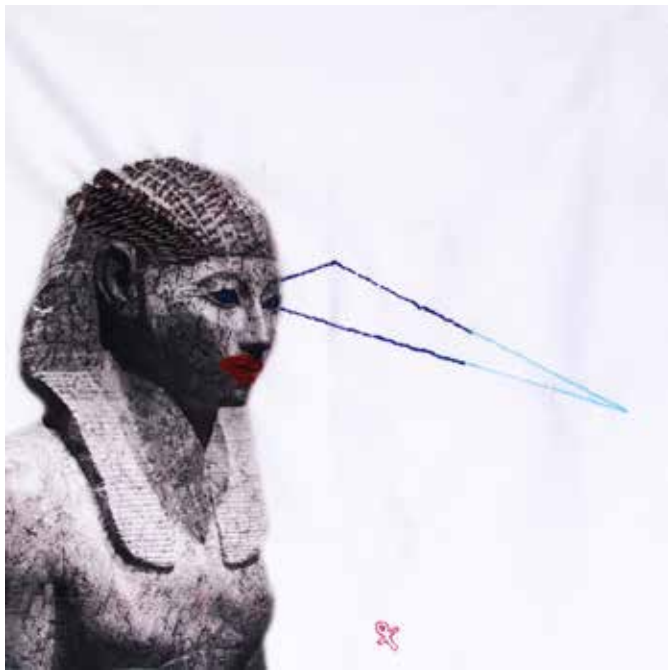
Cairo, Egypt, October - December 2013

This project was first carried out in collaboration with Artellewa Art Residency in Cairo, in Ard El Lewa, one of the capital's most popular and poorest neighbourhoods. We worked with embroiderers from the Association Huda Shaarawi and with young female students.

While we spoke about topics such as «revolution» and «resistance», the women embroidered on printed images of famous women in Egyptian history, the likes of Huda Shaarawi, Om Kaltoum, Cleopatra, Doria Shafik, Isis, Ipazia, Latifa Al Zayyat, Nabawey Moussa, Zaynab Al Ghazali, etc. We read and discussed texts written by Nawal El Saadawi, Huda Shaarawi and Miral Al Tahawi.

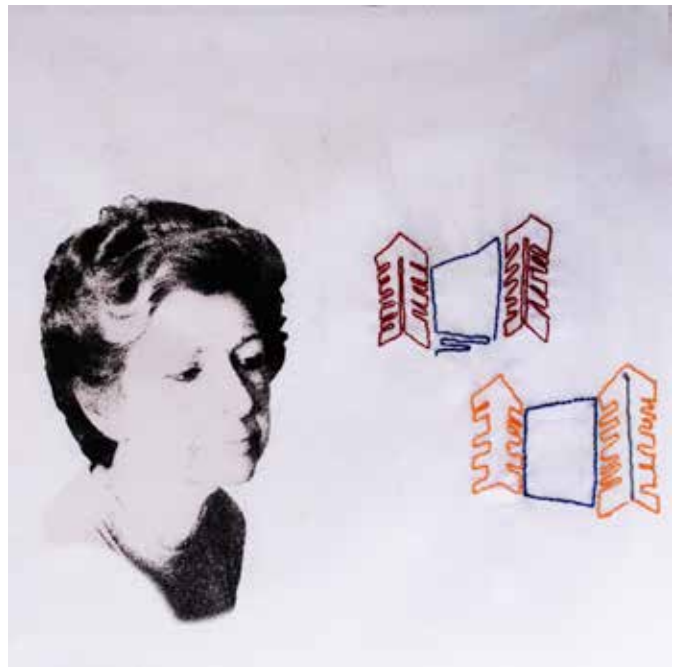
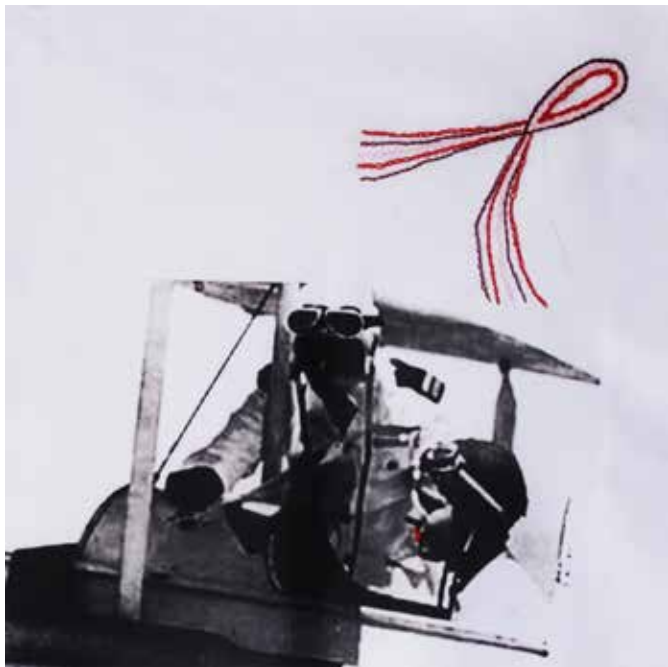
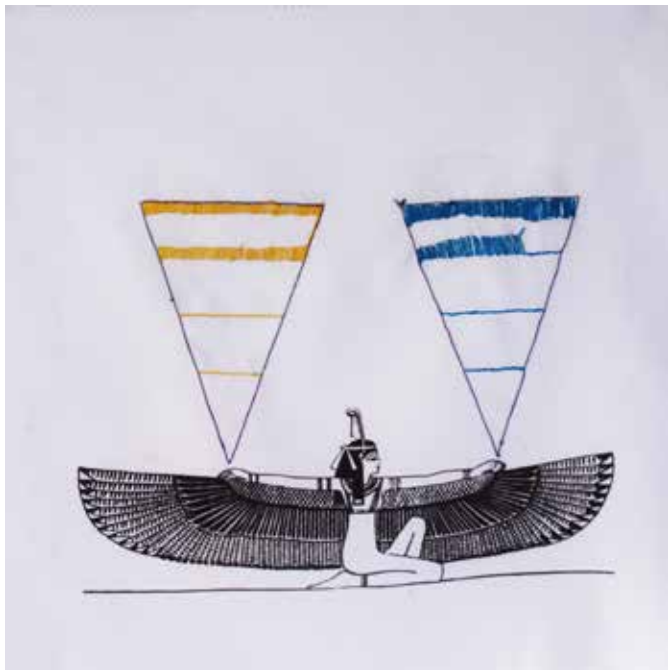
We focused the discussions with the embroiderers on the theme of the “revolution”, which was on the first page of all newspapers all around the world. We wanted most of all to hear and give voice to local people (women) speaking about “their” revolution, how, where and did it really happen?



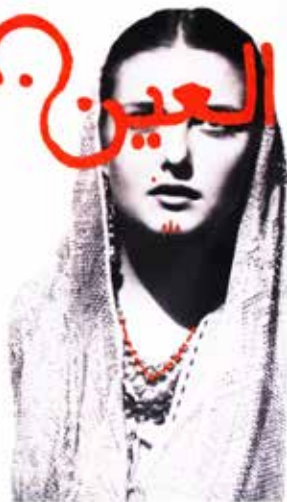








العين المتعمدة











Embroiderers of Actuality

eröffnung #1 kairo

aglaia haritz & abdelaziz zerrou
am donnerstag 20. februar 2014

ab 19h, in lokal-int

raum für kunst, hugustrasse 3, 2502 biel - schweiz

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www.embroiderersactuality.wordpress.com



Chapter 2 / Rabāt



Rabat, Morocco, January 2014

Aglaia Haritz and Abdelaziz Zerrou worked in Rabat in collaboration with Le Cube Art Space and embroiderers from the Foundation Orient-Occident (working with immigrants from the Sub-Saharan region) and from the Moroccan Association for the Education of the Youth (AMEJ).

Discussions with women were rather strained because of the difficulty to speak freely, to break the taboo, but the little exchange we had was very sincere and intimate. The impossibility to discuss freely was imposed by the boss of the workshop, not from the group of embroiderers themselves, because when finally we could speak alone, discussions were very deep and interesting. At AMAJ we asked young girls who did not finish school (or never started) to embroider 12 images of the outlined drawings of all existing unbroken hymen. The discussion was first about their lives and after some days we explained, with reticence also from the translator, what they were embroidering. We read some pages from the book "Au déla de tout pudeur" by Soumaya Naamane-Guessous.

The artwork "Le Serouel" is an embroidered map of Morocco like a bloodstain on a traditional Moroccan bride's underpants. It refers to the traditional Moroccan rite consisting of showing all wedding guests that the husband takes the virginity of the bride. The artwork provokes questions about the virginity of Morocco and its traditions.

With some women who were immigrants from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we spoke about the subject of immigration, while they embroidered the map of the Mediterranean Sea, which has always been a link between the North and the South and is now a real wall, which dramatically separates the two entities.

The word «resistance» was stitched in Arabic on a transparent curtain. This resistance, created by women in the shadow and without voices, is in stark contrast to the cliché of violent resistance, but goes on and perseveres in everyday life, which is the construction of the future.

Four videos express the opinion of two immigrant women from the DRC and two Moroccan talk about the position of women in Morocco: it is a provocative and interesting element that forces us to see the situation from another point of view, because the various opinions are opposite and conflicting.

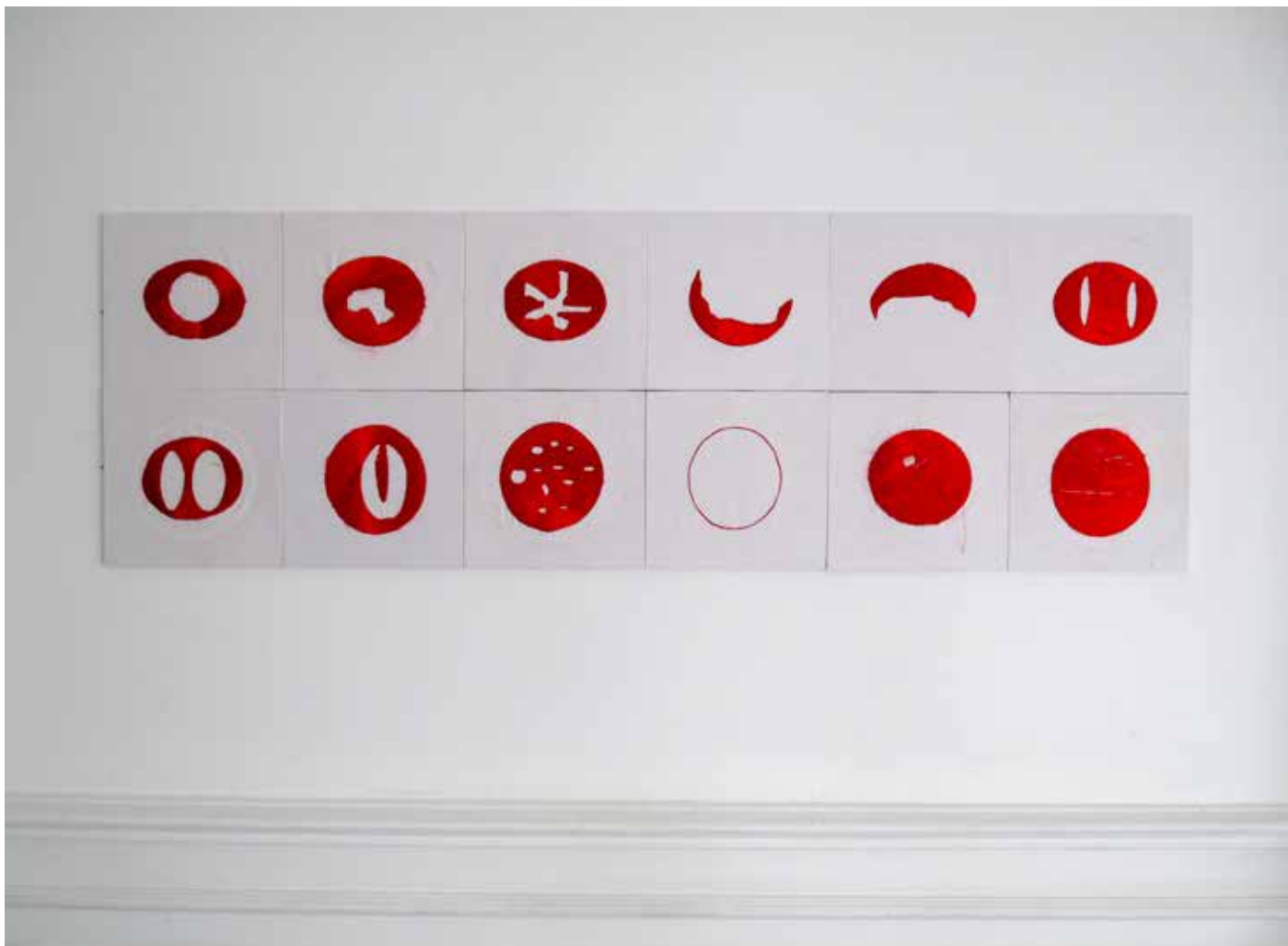


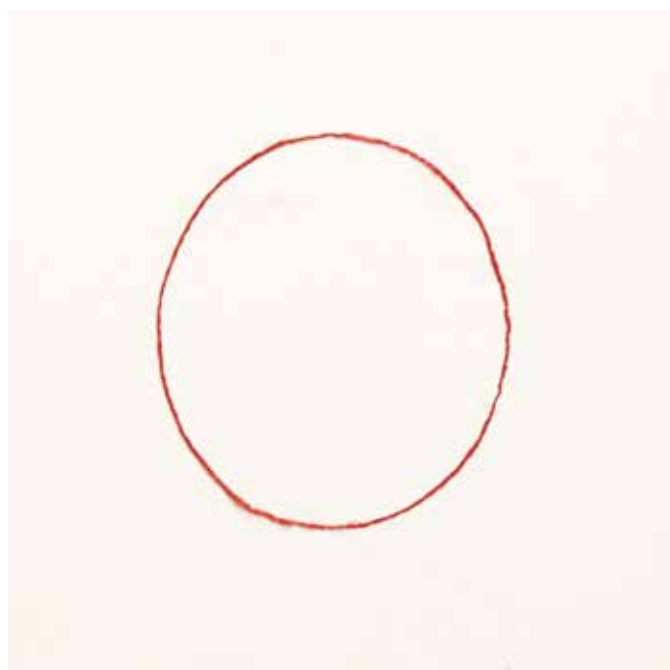
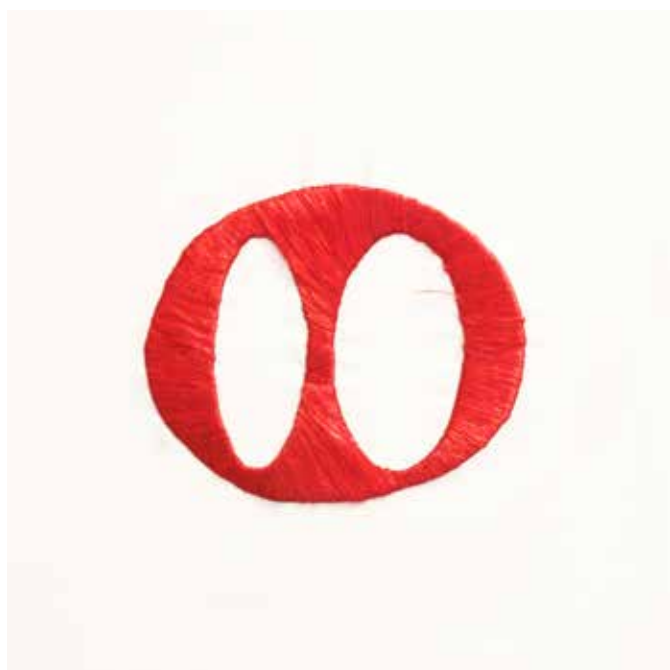
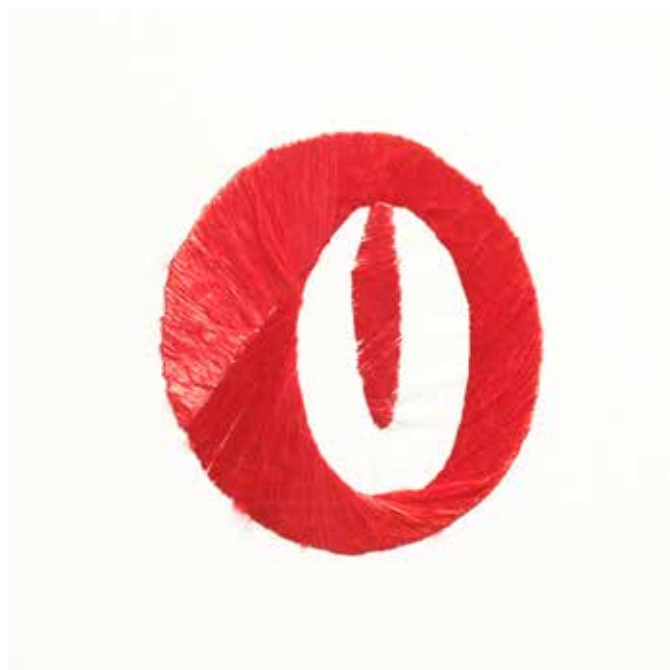
قصة الأوداية
شاطئ الرباط

PLAGE RABAT

الدار البيضاء
عبر الطريق الساحلية
CASABLANCA
VIA ROUTE COTIERE

سلا
عبر نفق الأوداية
SALE
VIA TUNNEL DES OUDAYAS





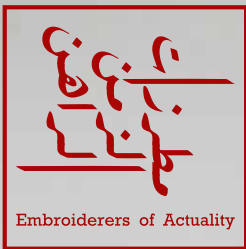












Embroiderers of Actuality

Aglaia Haritz & Abdelaziz Zerrou

28 janvier-18 Mars 2014

Le Cube - independent art room
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tél: +212 6 61 18 64 41
info@lecube-art.com
www.lecube-art.com



Chapter 3 / Casablanca



Casablanca, Morocco, March 2014

This project in Casablanca was conducted in collaboration with the French Institute and four different groups: women from the Oukacha prison in Casablanca, a group from the Cooperative of Hay Mohammady (one of the poorest areas in Casablanca), the Federation of the Democratic League of Women (FLDDF) and the Association of Aicha Chenna: Solidarité Féminine (celibate mothers). With these women, we discussed the topic of the construction and the role of women in building a society.

Thanks to Fathna El Bouih, we worked with a group of women in the Oukacha prison. We asked them to embroider a portrait of two militant women prisoners during the “années de plomb” (Saïda Menebhi and Fathna El Bouih), but the guards decided that we could not embroider in relation to Saïda Menebhi. It was really difficult working with them, because the warden was afraid of what we were doing and finally destroyed the artwork.

At the Cooperative Hay Mohammady and at the FLDDF, groups were free and motivated to tell their lives and to speak about the situation of women. With the extremely interesting group of celibate mothers, we understood that they had something to say: they had an opinion, they were young and had a real point of view founded on the hardness of their life and from the help of Solidarité Féminine. Not all of them really wanted to tell their personal story, because they just wanted to forget and go on in the future with their children, trying to obtain a better life for their offspring than what they had experienced themselves.

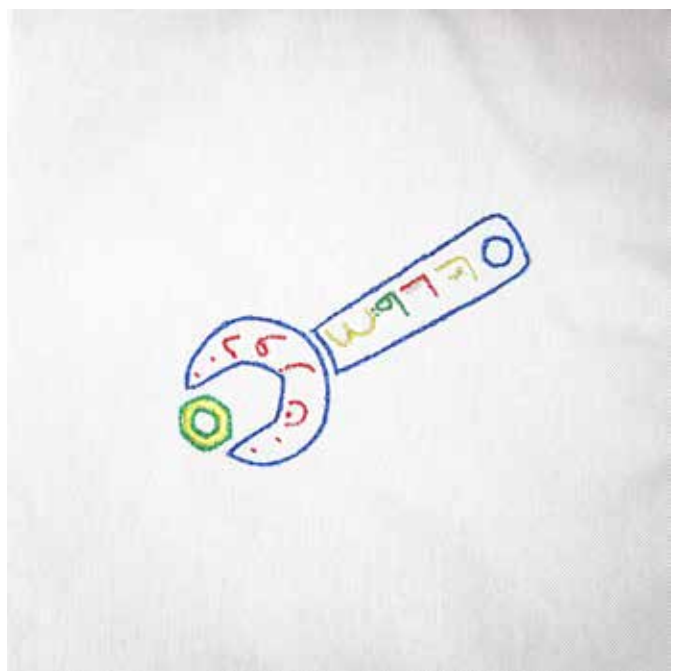
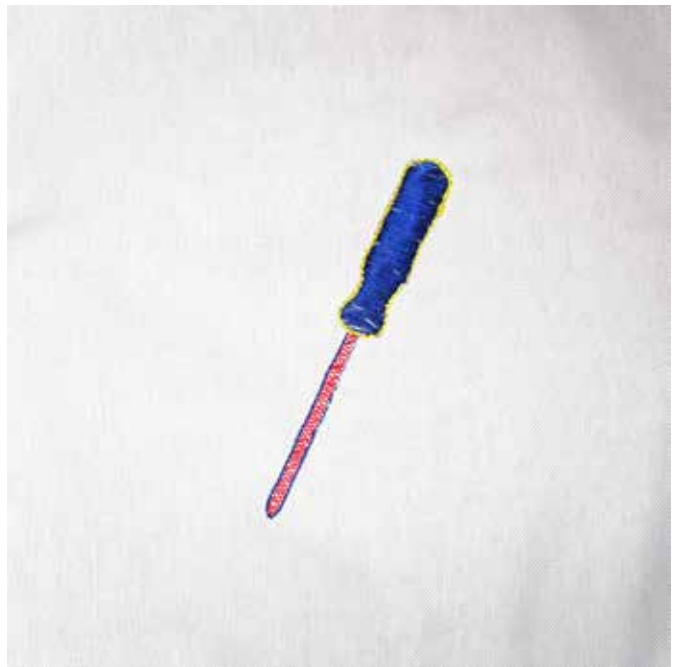
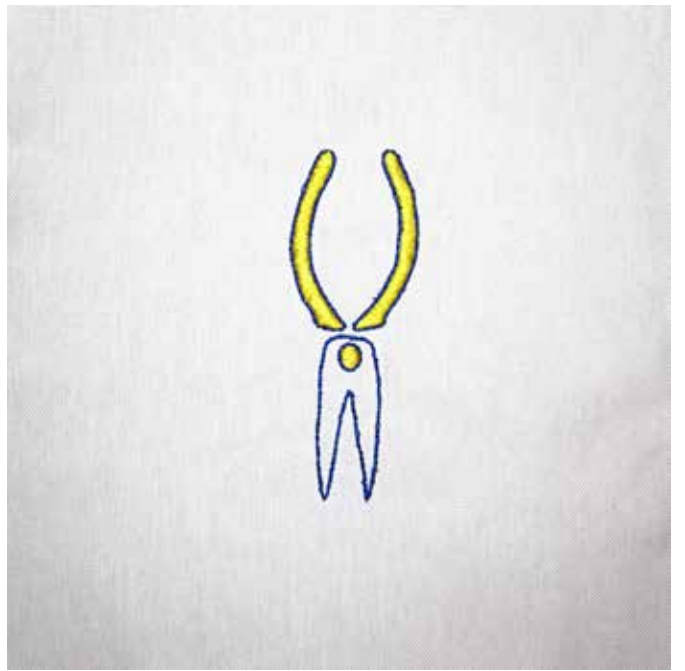
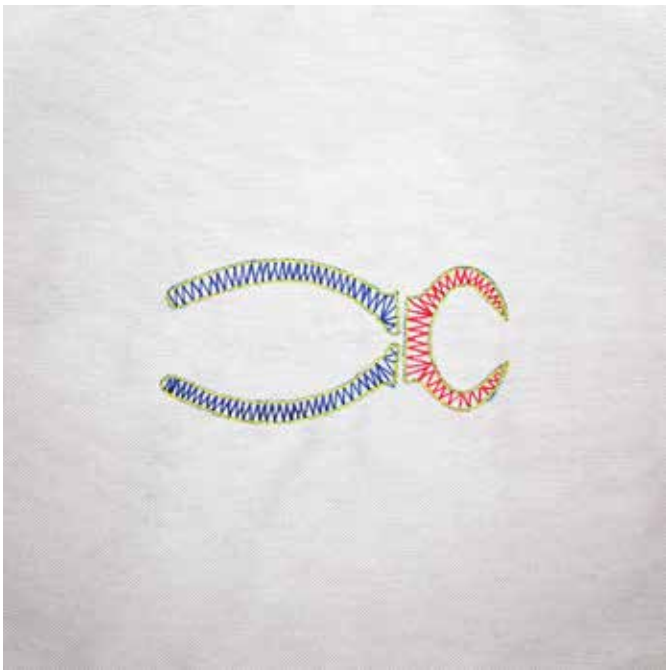


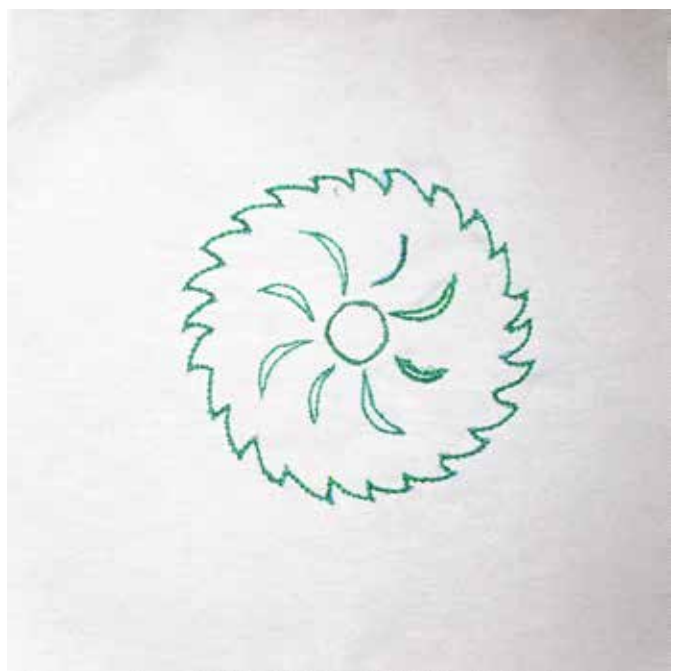
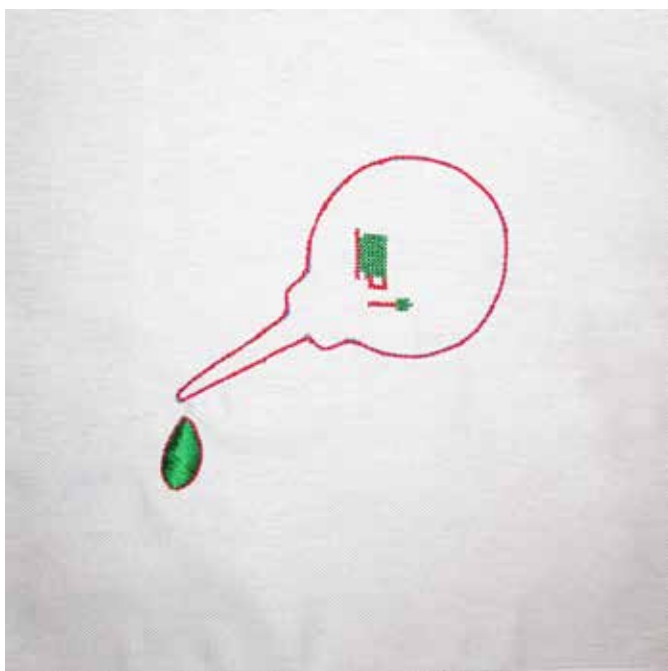
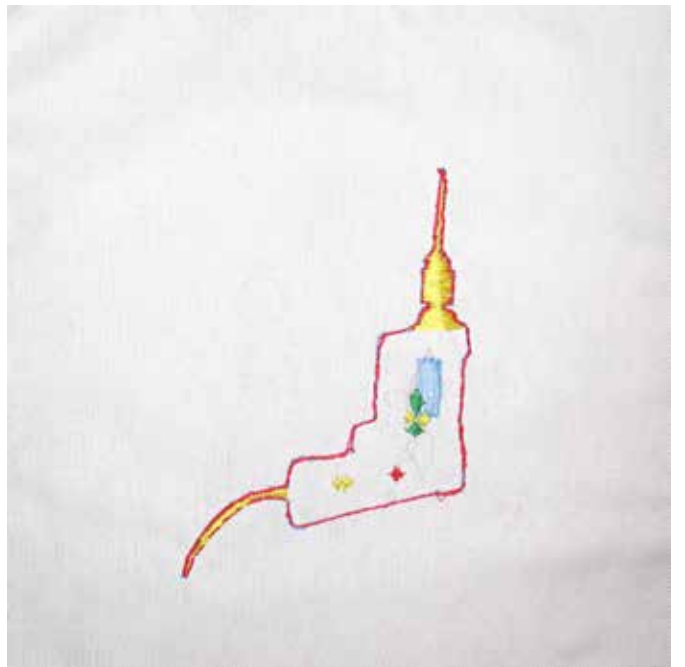
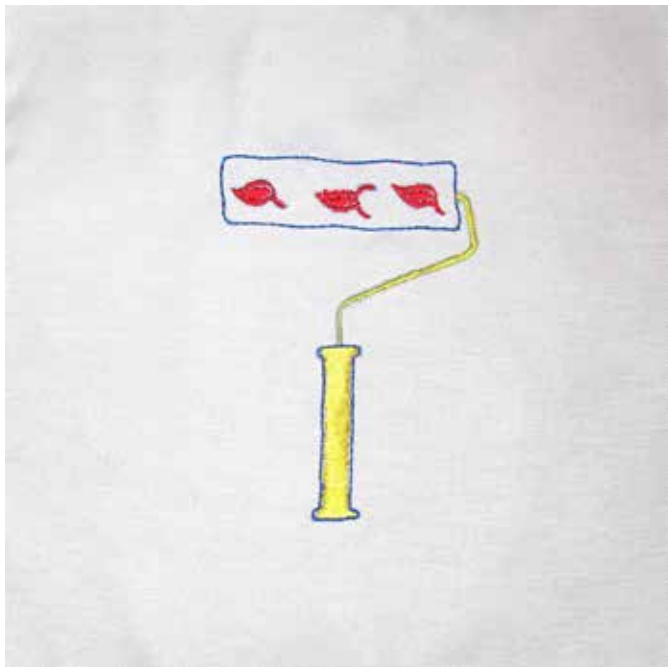
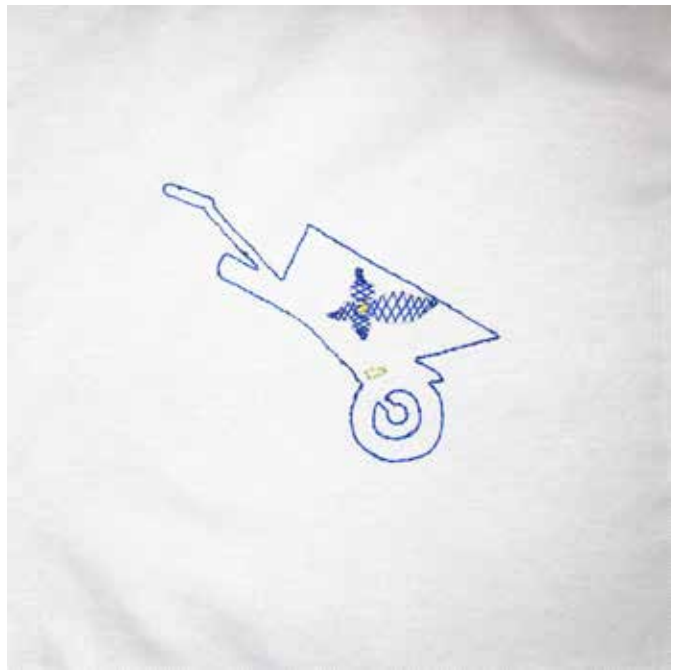


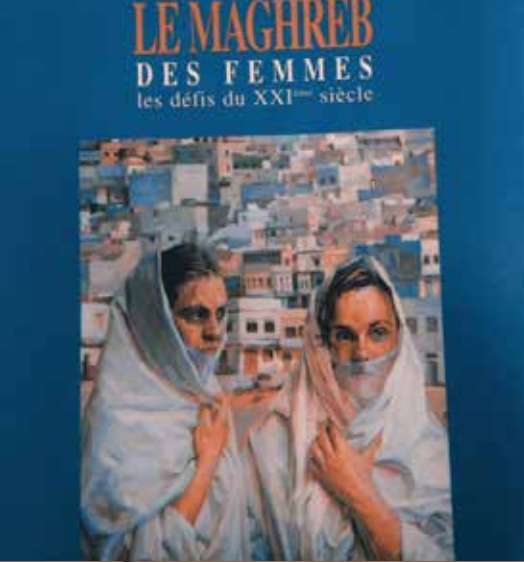






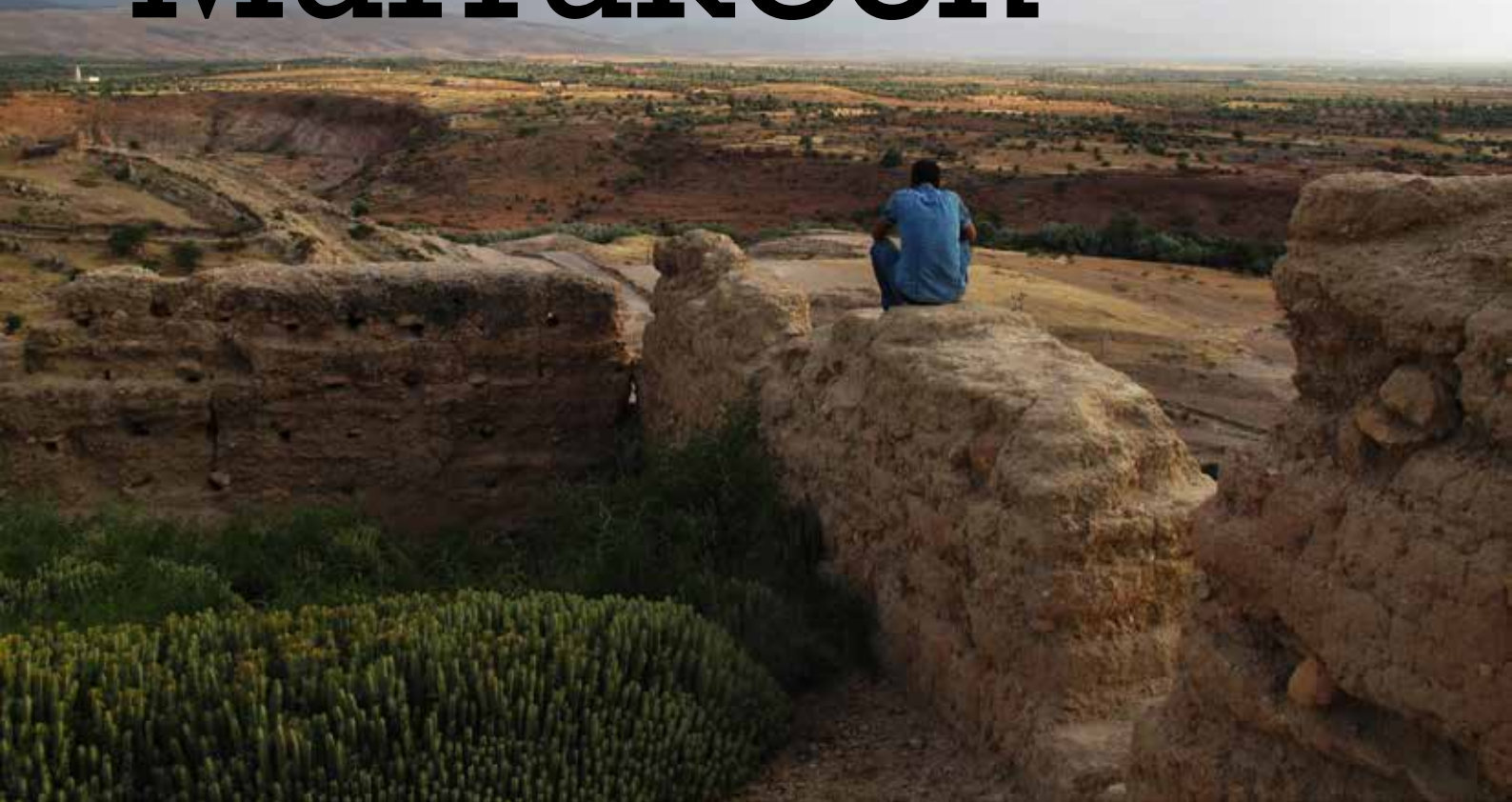








Chapter 4 / Marrakech



Marrakech, Morocco, May-July 2014

Abdelaziz Zerrou and Aglaia Haritz worked in collaboration with Amazigh (Berber) embroiderers in a small village in the region of Marrakech, supported by the Swiss Embassy of Rabat and the Dar Al Ma'Mûn Foundation.

We worked with embroiderers from the Cooperative Yagour in Tighduin (63 km from Marrakech), the Cooperative Tigmi in Aït Ourir (33 km from Marrakech) and the Cooperation for the Freedom of Weaving and Embroidery in Tameslouth (17 km from Marrakech). The theme of discussion was the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Amazigh language and its Tifinagh alphabet.

During the hours that they embroidered and weaved, we spoke about their personal story, about the role of Berber women in everyday life, whether political, religious, social or economic.

We translated in the Tifinagh alphabet three words: Exist, Read, Today; we drew the letters on fabric with henna and we embroidered repetitive, white, Amazigh symbols all over the surface, formally inspired by the traditional decoration of the veil for the wedding ceremony in the Middle Atlas region.

These artworks aimed to express the difficulty for an oral culture to exist in the contemporary world: every Amazigh speaks fluently Berber but very few can read and write it, and the new written language is still strange to them, because it is an oral culture.

Inspired by the work of Slav and Tatar, we asked the women from the Cooperative in Tighdouin to weave three big «Amazigh tongues» using different techniques. Amazing tongue-carpets are ready to speak, but it is the voice of women, who finally give them sound and meaning.

The Article Nr. 5 in the Moroccan Constitution of 2011 defines in a not very clear sentence that Amazigh is an official language, together with Arabic, but there is not any official translation into Amazigh. That is why we let Tameslouth's women embroider the translated sentence into Berber.

The fabric was woven by a man of the Cooperation and women embroidered the letters with silver sequin that emit a thin sound.

We recorded the sound of discussions during the work and we also recorded video interviews of both embroiderers and weavers, telling us about the position of the Amazigh in society and their place in the country.

For these women the linguistic and cultural difference is not a huge problem, because they speak Berber and Arabic in everyday life and they are too involved to have a critical point of view. Some of them are married to an Arab man and they do not speak Amazigh with their children, because the father does not understand it and does not want to learn it.

They are not aware of their Berberness, of the struggle for the recognition of the Amazigh culture and language that some militants are engaged in, they are not interested in the Constitution, and do not feel the need to know their rights or more than is necessary to lead their everyday lives.

Ahmed Skounti, anthropologist

The meeting we had with the famous anthropologist Ahmed Skounti was very poignant to understand the situation about Amazigh throughout North Africa. The main archive of Amazigh, said Skounti, is in the language, which is oral and is the accumulation of the history. Heritage, as the language, it requires a certain distance in order to be aware of it. This distance is easier by those who have access to education, most of all human science: they understand deeply that Amazigh culture has been suffering erosions in a purely geographical sense throughout the 20th century.

That is why Berber activism begins in the big cities like Casablanca and Rabat and not in the valley, where they understand that their language and culture is going to disappear. Ahmed Skounti is convinced that culturally Morocco is Berber and not Arab. Linguistically, there are more differences, but the culture is basically a Berber culture.

Skounti also said that a country should take care of its heritage and language, and support all groups and give them a place because it is the exclusion of the minority, which leads to fundamentalism, not inclusion.



«Exister», 140x140cm, henné et broderies sur toile, 2014.



«Lire», 140x140cm, henné et broderies sur toile, 2014.



«Aujourd'hui», 140x140cm, henné et broderies sur toile, 2014.



« Langue amazigh » 150 x 60 cm
Smatte, 2014



« Langue amazigh » 150 x 60 cm
Okda, 2014



« Langue amazigh » 150 x 60 cm
Boucharouette, 2014



مَرْيَلُ أَنْبُولِ عَزَّ نَبْلُ خَدَانَا .
وَيْدَ أَمْدَقَارِ إِبَانِ عُنُقُنْ .
إِعْزْ كَوِي وَسَيْفِ إِرْزَكِيدَ أَرْغَلَتْ
فَتِي الشُّكَاي .
أَلْغَمِ إِدُوفِ تَيْتْ نَكَمَانِ أَرْزِي
تَيْدُتْسَا .
إَنْتِ وَرْزَانِ أَعْيُولِ إِنْزَرْ
وَمَلْجَسْ .
قَدْ أَلْزَ أَرْدُ نَدَتْ
نَقْرِينْ .





Chapter 5 / Beirut



The 5th Chapter is realized in Beirut in collaboration with Syrian refugee women from the Association Basmehy Zeitooneh in Shatila and Art Residency Aley, supported by the Swiss Embassy of Lebanon. This itinerant project was first carried out in Cairo in 2013, then in 2014 in Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakech.

It is a fragile moment for the Mediterranean and all over the world, socially and politically. The crisis has brought into question the lack of fundamental values and organizations, not to mention art in dialogue with the civil society, particularly with women. It is this context in relation to the question of what 'resistance' means and how we might perform it that is the subjects of our project.

"Embroiderers of Actuality" <http://embroiderers-of-actuality.com/> is an action that aims to be a sensible provocation: a visual discussion about the position of women in the society. As an exchange between local populations and artists, its purpose is to map diversities of (feminine) resistance within the realities of the Global South. The project uses texts of art, poetry and literature, written by local women, and employs embroidery as a form of folk craftsmanship that speaks to notions of belonging, tradition and participation. Through this, the project aims to provide an opportunity for women to express their voice and to improve their socio-economic situation, since the embroidery work is paid, thereby generating an additional source of income.

In this sense, "Embroiderers of Actuality" is also a confrontation and a statement between yesterday and today, between politics and religion, between modernity and tradition. Art is used here as a tool to realize a dialogue between the local population and artists. This situation questions contemporary art as such, as a possibility or necessity to bring art into the public sphere. This dialogue will develop, confront and stimulate the research for the artist (conceptual and formal) and will be, at the same time, a medium of communication, working in the intersection between the private sphere and the public one.











I come from a small village close to Deir. I came here to Beirut because there were clashes: our village was occupied by the Syrian army. At first we heard that problems had erupted in the village nearby, and soon they also arrived in our village. We sought refuge in the next village. Because everyone was there too, we had to hide in a bunker all day, from the morning until the evening. Even when it was Ramadan, we also had to sleep there.

After that we received information that all villages will be destroyed and burned. I didn't want to stay there, because all we had left, each one of us is in another country. Our home was at the entrance of the village, facing another village who fired rockets at us. If we turned on a light, they would send in a rocket, so I can't stay in the village and that's why I came here to Beirut in 2011.

In Beirut, I first lived with my husband's brother, then I moved eight times. First I lived in a room in Saylaka, this guarantee is only for people affiliated with a political movement, and they always harassed us, asking if we were with the free army or with official army, and who our father worked for. They really provoked us and they were going to assume the wrong position about us.

I moved often and the last room I rented was in Bab Hassan. I was pregnant there, but my daughter was stillborn, so I didn't like this room. I couldn't stay there, and I moved again. After that, we rented another room which was a shelter for 100 dollars, my husband earns \$450, so we only had \$150/month left, and that's not enough.

In the beginning when we arrived here, we thought we would stay 2 or 3 months and that we could go back. We thought it would be simple, but it's been three years now and we are still here. At first, we said it will end on the next month, then we said in one year, but now I don't believe it any more. I know still go on for a long time, but we would like to go back as soon as possible. I would like to go back home, today before tomorrow. I want to go back home.



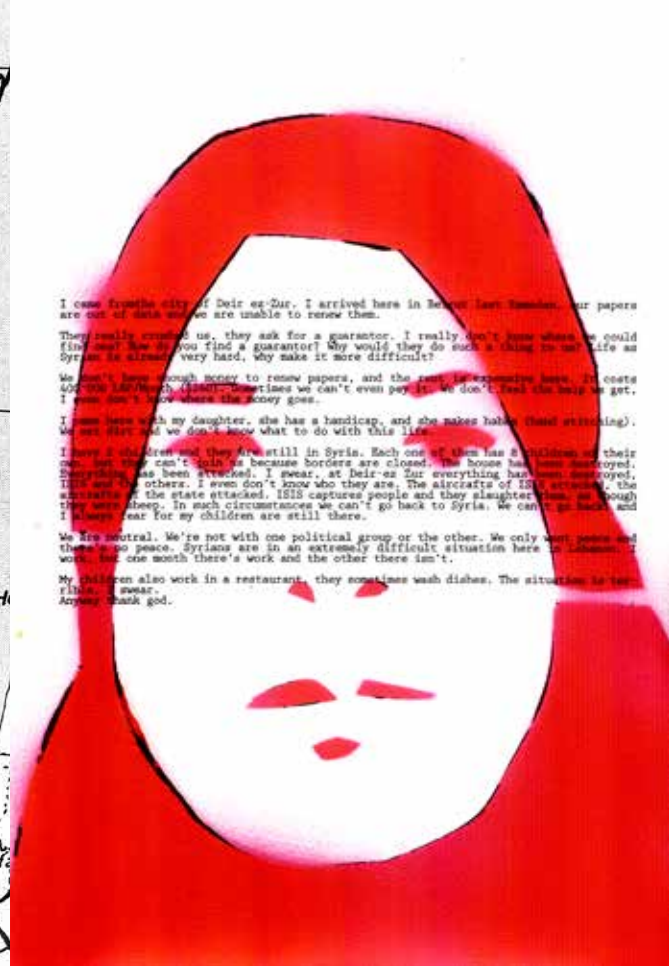
I come from Syria. From Deir ez-Zur, from a quarter called Hawiq. I escaped the war with my husband and my children. Two missiles hit my house. We lived close to the suspension bridge crossing the Euphrates River. It was built during the French colonization of Syria. It's an ancient bridge, a cultural heritage. The Syrian army destroyed the bridge, they attacked it with tanks and it collapsed into the Euphrates. This bridge also connected the city and the Rif.

I have a relationship to this bridge. We were born together, and we looked at it all the time. It's a part of the culture heritage. All students from the university had to pass over this bridge. It was a very important bridge.

The army of the system destroyed it in order to prevent the free army from coming into the city.

We could build it again, if we have the will, we don't need more, but it's impossible that the bridge will be the same as it was before. Everyone in the region painted it, and in every house you'll find that people have it as a souvenir.

I have been in Lebanon since 2011.



I come from the city of Deir ez-Zur. I arrived here in Beirut last Ramadan. Our papers are out of date and we are unable to renew them.

They really counted us, they ask for a guarantor. I really don't know where we could find one. How do you find a guarantor? Why would they do such a thing to us? Life in Syria is already very hard, why make it more difficult?

We don't have enough money to renew papers, and the rent is expensive here. It costs 400-500 LBP/month (which sometimes we can't even pay it. We don't feed the kids we get, I can't live where the money goes).

I come here with my daughter, she has a handicap, and she makes halva (hand stretching). We eat dirt and we don't know what to do with this life.

I have 2 children and they are still in Syria. Each one of them has 2 children of their own, but they can't join us because borders are closed. The house has been destroyed. Everything has been attacked. I swear, at Deir ez-Zur everything has been destroyed, 100% and the others. I even don't know who they are. The aircrafts of ISIS attacked, the aircrafts of the state attacked. ISIS captures people and they slaughter them, as though they were sheep. In such circumstances we can't go back to Syria. We can't go back and I always fear for my children are still there.

We live neutral. We're not with one political group or the other. We only want peace and there's no peace. Syrians are in an extremely difficult situation here in Lebanon. I work for one month there's work and the other there isn't.

My children also work in a restaurant, they sometimes wash dishes. The situation is terrible. I swear. Anyway thank god.



I come from Hama, and I'm originally from Bab El-Sebaa. I came here to escape the war in Syria. They attacked children and we were very afraid. At the beginning I went to Rif Hama and I stayed there for 3 months until we were besieged. Then I escaped from there too and went to a small village named Chort, near Hama. From there, we rented a small flat, but we had to escape soon after because we were besieged again. Some people said it was the official army and some said it was the free army. When we were besieged we had no access to food or essential supplies.

I have a 9-year-old daughter and two sons, who are 3 and 6 years old. We escaped to Lebanon two years and half ago, and thank god I'm now in Beirut with my family, but we suffered a lot.

My house was destroyed. I don't want to go back. I have no home now. One time my husband was at the mosque and I was nursing my youngest child, and the soldiers broke the door down and came into our flat. The children started to cry and scream, they were searching for something and my children were terrified. Three days later I said to my husband, "let's go, we need to leave this place".

My daughter still doesn't speak and she has a lot of skin problems. Every month we have to spend between 10,000 and 20,000 LBP for her medical treatment. I asked people how is possible that she is so sick? They told me that she is angry or in shock. She already missed 3 years of school. She should be in the third grade but she's only in the first grade.

Only my sister remains in Hama, but she has nothing left, because they stole everything. My husband was dressmaker in a very well known fabric store, and also here he works as dressmaker. He earns \$450. We pay \$300 for the rent, but my husband smokes and we need also to pay the transport. Our situation is really very difficult.

We had a better life in Syria, the rent was cheaper and we didn't have any problems living there. I try to help at home but it's difficult. When I come to work at the association, I leave both my 3 and 4-year-old children alone. I close the door and go. What could I do? I have to do it. I can't do anything else.

I love my country and if the war stops I will go back. I love Hama and don't want to live anywhere else. What they did in Syria is harm, it's not good. We lived well, we ate whatever had and we were happy. We didn't think about the future, we lived happily day by day, and that was enough. I would like my children to have a better life than ours. The revolution started in Syria and people made a mistake when they went out.

My father had a three-story house and one day when we were on our way back home they said, "where are you going? Why didn't you fight with us? Now go!", and they took his home.

We want peace, we want a basket without grapes, and they didn't let us live.

I came from Aleppo, from a region called Al-Harb. We left the region because there were problems. My husband worked there, but ISIS threatened him because he's a Syrian Kurdish. He had a simple life and didn't take part in any conflict or join a political group. Three years ago he came to Lebanon and I stayed in Syria with our children.

After he left, people from ISIS always came to me and asked where my husband was. One time they would tell me he's a terrorist with the state. Another time they'd say he was with PKK. In reality he's not with anyone. He's not affiliated with any group.

Every day they would come and ask about him. They threatened to take me hostage until he comes back and I had to leave the country and join my husband in Beirut. I escaped with my children at 11 in the morning and I arrived in Lebanon. Then my husband joined us there and we all went to Beirut together. A few days later I got news that ISIS occupied my home.

I don't know what nationality the ISIS people are. They're not Syrians, they are a weird way. Like Syrians. Now that they occupied my home, it's impossible to return. This happened last year in 2015. And till now they're still in my home.

I came here officially with my children. Everything is regulated, and I am not with any political group. I am only with god.

My situation here is terrible, most of all because my third daughter is a new born (10 days old). Taking children to school is difficult. I have 5 children now, you've visited our home and saw how is the situation. My husband is sick. We live in two rooms. It's hard to pay the rent, and the house belongs to a Palestinian. We are here in Chatila because it's the cheapest place in Beirut, but it's a dangerous place. There is sexual abuse, and there are a lot of drugs and alcoholics causing problems. My children have become aggressive and traumatized here.

I don't want to go back to my country, but if god helps me I would like to go away from here, to another country. I would like to go to Germany or the United States, because for me the most important thing is my children.

I want them to grow up in a better place and you saw how is the situation here. I don't have any family in Syria, they are all wanted from the system and they escaped to Turkey. I just want to travel, it's my dream, and the dream of my children. Can you help me?

My name is Dina Abdou, I come from the city of Aleppo in Syria. I escaped the war when the air campaign started. I came with my 3 children and my husband. 9 months later I was back in Beirut. A friend of mine sent me images of my house, it was bombed, and after some time they sent me images showing that it was bombed.

My mother and my sisters had fled to Turkey. My husband was taller in Syria and I was a housewife. I was afraid for my little daughter's safety and I always encouraged her to follow our home was close to the airport. And there were different political factions. First it was the free army, then Jabhat Ansar (The Supporters of the religious front), after that Al-Tawheed Brigade. I saw that all with my own eyes.

Before coming to Beirut I went to my aunt, at a village on the north of Aleppo. We had to leave (in a school). It was very cold. It was moving, my children were very small, and we left the cold to go back home. We lived in our house for 23 days until it was partially bombed, and after that we decided to come to Beirut.

On January 17th 2016 we arrived in Beirut. During the first two days it was very cold. It was moving and they stopped us. We had to wait all night in the car and they made us wait in the cold until the next day.

We've been illegal here for a year and a half now. When we arrived, I was pregnant and I gave birth to my son. I can't go back to my home because we all have papers and I can't go to the border of Syria to register him, since I only have my birth papers of her birth. I have a lawyer in Lebanon, and we tried to register her in the family book but he couldn't. I can't go back to Syria, because if I go I would be able to come back to Beirut.

I don't think I can go back to Syria again. In the beginning I thought I would only stay here for two months but now I've been here for two years and 4 months. My house was destroyed and I don't think I can go back home. Here in Beirut, my flat is on the second floor, it's a terrible situation. I have one room and a small bathroom. We pray, eat and myself. The bathroom is both my shower and my kitchen. I clean my things in the bathroom. I can't get used to the situation in Beirut, and my husband is sick of the situation here. Earlier we could live, they now we can't. We live day by day and it's hard to find a job.

We were fine in Syria, but here there aren't any schools. My older children stay at home to take care of the youngest, and my trip to work is a long one, but we have to pay the rent.

I have no future.

Maybe, my future is over.

I come from Kobane when I was there, ISIS came to fight us. Women and children had to abandon the city because for ISIS we are infidels and that's why they will kill all of us.

PKK told us: women and young people that can take up arms can stay; everybody else has to leave the territory. For you, for your security, and for your home, you have to leave. Everybody who is married and has children has to leave.

We left Kobane and we went to Jarablos. I have a son, he's 12 years old and he goes to school. On the way back some people from ISIS took him and brought him to a mosque to teach him religion, how to perform prayer, about the faith, how to open, or simply, and take apart a machine gun, and standard weapons. I started to be afraid of what might happen to my child. I have another child and he was sick. I took both my children and my papers, and went to the doctor. I was afraid, I knew that we had to go to Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey. We just had to go away from Jarablos.

I explained very clearly to my son that what they told him is not religion. They say we are infidels and we are infidels. I escaped only with my two sons and my papers. I left everything there behind. ISIS recruits my children. Finally they take children with them for one or two months, and then they will pledge allegiance first and then fight with them. I went with my children to Mehal and after that to Beirut. When we arrived here in Beirut, we didn't find anything at first. After a while we found a small flat and I started to work in embroidery. Thank god.

If you're here in Lebanon you have to pay \$200 if you want to get a residency permit. If you're registered at UNHCR you get \$15 per month per person. Men have to sign that they can't work and you have to provide a lot of papers, 200 papers! \$15 a month, what could you do with \$15 dollar per month? We need medicine, bread, water, education and we have to pay the rent. We need all that! We came here but we are not happy. I don't want to stay here. As soon as bombs and the war stop, I want to go back home. If the war stops in my region, I would directly go home and I wouldn't stay one more minute here. Every woman here will tell you the same thing.

Jarablos is a city at the Turkish border. I lived there for a while and there are a lot of Egyptians, Libanians and Moroccans with ISIS. One time a Moroccan named Abdullah came to preach on religion, but I asked him why he didn't stay in his own country to preach religion, what does he want here? He told me to cover my face, but we wear a headscarf. In Iraq it's not written that women have to cover their faces.

One time I was in the street and I saw a tall Egyptian man stopping a woman with her three daughters. All dressed black. He asked her that she had to cover her daughters and she said: "I want, my daughters are already covered!" but he said, that's not true, that's a lie and then he white spray and coloured all the black women's dress in white. In front of all the people in the street. The women screamed angrily: "What do you want here? Go back to Egypt. You, as an Egyptian, don't know what's happening in your country? Go back there and then tell us what's happening in Egypt. All the doctors, bars, and all that is not correct. We are more Muslim than you Egyptians!"

Sometimes Syrians in miserable conditions need to sell their children to ISIS. We in Syria, we were good Muslims and we were good people but now let their heads grow so that avoid problems with ISIS. They started to dress like Pakistanis, and everywhere you could see the flag of ISIS, which says "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria".

I will tell you a funny story. Once I had no water and no electricity. I looked for water in a street, a little far away from my house. I took some water with two buckets full of water. I covered my face with my hand because if I hide my face I will fall. I brought water home and an ISIS came stopped in front of me. I heard a voice saying, "Decency! Cover your face!" and with my hand I started to cry and screamed, "We don't have water. We don't have bread and all you say is just decency! Why should I cover myself? Don't you see that it's bringing water?" He said, "The voice of a woman is like nakedness! Silence!" I replied asking him to give me his dress, so that I could cover myself because I have no dress. He was angry and the neighbour called the men of ISIS. They said I was angry because I had children and no money and no water and life was hard and that I'll cover myself. But how can I cover myself? I'll fall down!

I came from a small village named Deir al-Fardis in Hama. When I first came here there weren't many checkpoints yet. It was easier. In our village there was no bombing. We came to Lebanon because our village was completely isolated and we had no gas, no bread, no electricity, no water, we had nothing. The official army was responsible for us. People of Houla came to Lebanon and they let them spill into our village.

I came here with my husband and my children and I'm still very afraid because sometimes people disappear at the checkpoints or borders and we don't know where they are. Two years ago we had our papers done and we came here. We're here at the beginning of the third year. For the moment we can't go back to Syria. If the war stops we could go back, but we now have problems here with the Lebanese authorities. Once I'm registered by the UNHCR in Beirut, I can go back to Syria because I could request the permission to come back to Lebanon after that, leave again in my life and my family it's a bit, but for people living here it's very difficult, they can't even go visit their family.

My mother is dead but my father, my sister and my brother are all still in Syria. In Beirut there are many people with their lives. The only contacts we have with the family in Syria are through the UNHCR. Every person who is here tells us to stay in Lebanon, because the situation is absolutely unstable.

We went from Hama to Damascus, and then came here by taxi (service). The road was very difficult because it took 18 hours of travel. Normally you can do the same journey in 4 hours. It was very exhausting, a lot of checkpoints, and we were often fringed.

The truth is that we created the problem. We, the Syrian people, because before you do anything you have to think about the result, and we never thought that this result could be possible. When there's a region in peace, the Syrian people don't leave their place. For example, the neighbouring village of Houla didn't leave our village in peace. Instead they attacked Hama and on the way back they allowed people to hide in our village, so the enemy thought that our village was a safe place. We were worse than the official army. The road to Hama was very easy before; we made it difficult and more complicated. We were in peace, Aleppo and Hama, but the people of our village killed an Alawite and that's why they blocked the entry of food and essential supplies, and they isolated us.

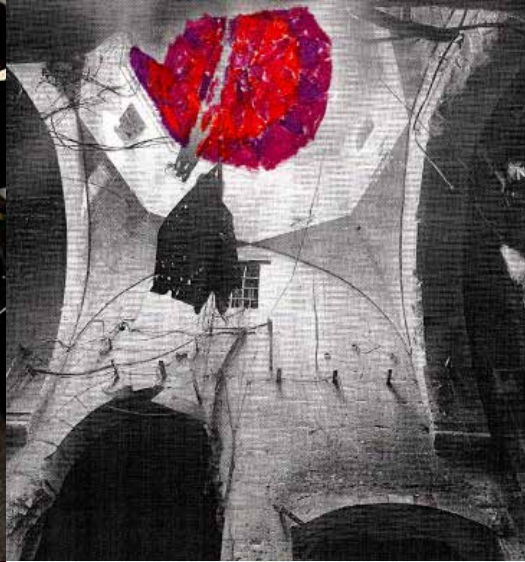
The people of Houla did all of this so that they can control the price of essential supplies. Obviously we bought a gas bottle for 4'000 SYP and now they ask for 4'000 SYP. It's a business strategy.

We are one in my family has died, but my brother who is a baker, was accused of killing someone. They killed a person and asked my brother was the one who did it. So now he's held in the village and can't go out.

That's my story.







Embroiders of Actuality
Syrian refugee women in Beirut





Chapter 7 / Valletta European Capital Of Culture MALTA 2018



BORDERS

There is a moment in everyone's life that is impossible to forget. That very instant when a child grasps a pencil for the first time and starts drawing his certainty of being born, within a line. Black appears on white, strong and determined, as the first voice you hear coming to break a very long silence. Lines mark paper, tracing the initial border.

We like to imagine women doing the same with the art of embroidery. We fancy embroidering women imitating children who impress on sheets, for the first time, their certainty of being alive. In fact embroidery is the starting point of Aglaia Haritz and Abdelziz Zerrou's project "Embroiderers of actuality", launched in 2013. Conscious of the role played by this ancient art in the Mediterranean, Aglaia and Aziz have undertaken their artistic exploration with the aim of shedding light on grey areas: pockets of shame, still hidden somewhere around the Mare Nostrum. Almost all women from the countries that border the Mediterranean are acquainted with their local embroidery traditions. It is likely that these women learnt to embroider long before they had the chance to pick up a pen. Thus, while waiting for somebody to return, or intent on rebuilding their past, female embroiderers design marvelous geometric patterns. Their hands are capable of laying out boundaries underneath perfect geometries. Stitch by stitch, women define their spaces for reflection, as places they could never share with anybody else.

Keeping these boundaries in mind, Aglaia and Aziz cleverly address the concept of the border with their provocative art. Today, we are constantly talking about boundaries and borders, especially geographical ones: be they confines that people have been forced to infringe in recent years or impassable frontiers, from which you may never return. Above all, there exist boundaries of which nobody speaks: they are the barriers of silence, walls built to defend oneself from delirium. Borders created to mark territories easily turn into barriers, built to safeguard against those who were strangers yesterday, but have become enemies today. Similarly, the Mediterranean Sea no longer unites but divides: that sea which once brought forth treasures, now is squeezed by silence, spoiled by the bitter taste of shame. That sea you can look at upside down, like a salty carpet of dreams and hopes, or a heavy hat that makes us hunch over under its weight.

The Mediterranean Sea, that we can observe from above and from below, like a salty carpet full of dreams and hope, or a top hat that weighs too much and sags. And it was by crossing this sea that the tale described in these pages first saw the light of day. Aglaia Haritz and Abdelaziz Zerrou come from two separate areas of this terribly salty sea. Aglaia is from Switzerland, and after graduating in plastic art at the Higher Institute for Art in Limoges, she took part in numerous residencies in Europe and in the South Mediterranean. Abdelaziz was born in Casablanca and graduated at the Tétouan School of Fine Arts, for then becoming a multidisciplinary artist while remaining particularly attracted to graphic design.

The two artists gave life to their «Embroiderers of actuality» project in 2013, a project which is widely discussed in this book. The project is made up of seven chapters, all of which are set in different areas of the Mediterranean. The

first chapter was written in Cairo in 2013. This was a period in which the two artists were looking for a space in which they could create what were then only ideas: embroidery and history, the tale of women and of the areas covered in shadows, the South forgotten by a North that crafts its political beliefs based on exclusion. While in Cairo, the two artists collaborated with the Artellewa Art Residency. Each day, the women from the Huda Shaarawi Association would meet up with Aglaia and Aziz and together they would embroider cloth on which portraits of revolutionary women from Egyptian history, such as Ipazia, Latifa Al Zayyat, Nabawey Moussa, Zaynab Al Ghazali and others, were depicted. And while the women embroidered, they spoke about the history of these other women who, even while living in another era, enjoyed the freedom of thought, a freedom which today, for various reasons, appears to have been lost. A lot of these women were forbidden from taking part in this project by their husbands, while their absence is, in itself, a topic of discussion, while the others embroidered faultless contours on these faces sculpted by a past that is far too often forgotten.

While we get to know the works of Aglaia and Aziz, we could ask ourselves whether art is essentially this; bringing to light what would otherwise run the risk of remaining buried and perhaps, in this delicate rescue operation, only art can succeed in recovering what would inevitably lose its strength in the shadows, by throwing light onto what remains in the dark, and by envisioning how difficult it is to be seen. This project, born with a precise artistic connotation, is driven by a strong historic significance along with social, political and documentative overtones and, with this in mind, it aims to establish a new form of memory, one that is founded on the tales of these women who, while embroidering, recount or listen to tales that bring to light a more authentic image of themselves.

After Cairo, Aglaia and Aziz took their project to Rabat, in collaboration with Cube Art Space and the embroiders of the Foundation Orient-Occident organisation, with migrant women from the sub-Saharan region, and other embroiders from the Association for the Education of the Youth (AMEJ). While in Rabat, the two artists attempted to shake up the wall of silence by encouraging debates on sexuality and its taboos. The girls from the AMEJ were encouraged to embroider images depicting hymen breakage. Along with the migrant women from the sub-Saharan continent, however, a work called "Le Serouel" was accomplished, a work in bright red that depicts a map of Morocco on white underpants. This work, which was clearly of a provocative nature, portrays the commonplace ritual of when the bride's underpants are displayed in front of the guests after the first encounter between the two lovers who are now united in matrimony.

Sexuality was not the only topic discussed with these women from the sub-Sahara. The natural, historical and legitimate ambitions that lead a woman to leave her country of origin for attempting to find her real self elsewhere were also spoken about. They talked about their dreams, their lives, what they were like before and what they are like now, what is left of their dreams now that these women are confined within the borders of Morocco, the final frontier for migrants arriving from the deep South. The borders in Morocco are closed and these women are forced to remain within its boundaries, clinging to the cold and insuperable wall that was erected in the name of

international law. From behind these bars, these women embroider their past and their present in silence, on that transparent curtain and where these women have engraved the word Resistance.

After Rabat, in 2014 Aglaia and Aziz move on to Casablanca where the walls of silence are evermore sour and pungent, like copper left out to rust in the dust condensed between the pages of justice. Subsequently, the «Embroiderers of actuality» project moves inland, to where the conflict is even more severe. While they were in Casablanca, the two artists collaborated with four different groups. The women from the Oukacha prison, a group from the Cooperative of Hay Mohammady, the Federation of the Democratic League of Women (FLDDF), and the Association of Aicha Chenna: Solidarité Féminine (unmarried women). In Morocco you can be imprisoned for a variety of more or less familiar reasons. Women can be arrested for adultery and they can be marginalised from the social fabric if they are unmarried mothers, as happened with the women from Solidarité Féminine. It was with these women and the embroiders from the Federation of the Democratic League of Women (FLDDF) that Aglaia and Aziz created works of embroidery that were designed to be applied as tools used mainly by men, such as hammers and screwdrivers, while the other women were invited to embroider these same utensils typically used at work by men. The aim was that of provoking reflection on their role of building a new culture where women are no longer marginalised, rejected or punished, but a culture in which they are followed, admired and appreciated. The women from the Oukacha prison, however, were asked to embroider the profiles of two women activists from the years of turmoil: Saïda Menebhi and Fathna El Bouih. The prison warden, however, looked on with suspicion at the work being done by the two artists with the Oukacha inmates. Tension mounted day by day and it became increasingly difficult to work. In the end, the work created by the women unexplainably went missing and Aglaia and Aziz had no way of retrieving the portraits of the two women from the Moroccan Marxist movement. Their social and political demands were buried behind those small walls in Casablanca. But what is confined to silence will never die.

Later in 2014 Aglaia and Aziz head to Marrakech, where they find themselves having to break through a less bitter cloud of silence: the women of Amazigh, or the Berber women. Their venture in cooperation with the Dar Al Ma'Mûn Foundation was endorsed by the Swiss Embassy which was intrigued by the topic of linguistic minorities, which is also a heartfelt subject back in Switzerland. Unlike other minority languages, the Amazigh language is not only a minority language but it is also an oral language. Its oral nature distinguishes it from other languages and is naturally impervious to any attempt at archiving or research.

For the first time, Aglaia and Aziz experienced the technique of carpet embroidery with the Amazigh women. And thanks to help they received from experts in the Berber language, from the anthropologist Ahmed Skounti, from the women at the Cooperative Yagour in Tighduin (63 km from Marrakech), from the Cooperative Tigmi in Aït Ourir (33 km from Marrakech) and from the Cooperation for the Freedom of Weaving and Embroidery in Tameslouth (17 km from Marrakech), Aglaia and Aziz were able to deal with themes of great importance and in their

own ways universal, reflecting on the fate of a community whose roots are centred around a tradition, a community that by its very nature, is destined to vanish. The Amazigh language is indeed an oral language which is used less and less and which, for obvious reasons, is averse to comparisons and to a structured dialect with the rest of the world. Yet this does not seem to be a problem for the Berber women. They believe that at the beginning, the whole of Morocco was Berber and only later did it become Arab. Traditions can change but roots remain planted with the resilience of blood. The women from the various associations can speak both Berber and Arabic and they are often married to Arab men, while at night they most likely continue to dream in silence. A language that cannot be written, that sounds like a whisper in the wind. We can shut our eyes, pretend to be deaf, but that wind will continue to blow eternally on our skin and it will be felt like blood that becomes warmer and warmer and it will caress us like the evening breeze that blows from the sea. They asked Aglaia and Aziz to decorate onto fabric the words Exist, Read and Day, translated into Berber. We would like to think that, while they were embroidering, that breeze never ceased to blow through their hands.

The following year Aglaia and Aziz travelled into a region shrouded in a more obstinate and suffering silence, a region where Syrian women sought refuge in Beirut, in collaboration with the Syrian Refugee Women of the Association Basmeh y Zeitooneh in Shatila and the Art Residency Aley, and with the support of the Swiss Embassy in Lebanon. The women that the two artists met were women that had endured all forms of violence at the hands of the military. The artists suggested that the women rewrite their past by embroidering it on to fabric where their faces were printed. The tales told by these women were recorded and the video, which bears witness to their stories, can be seen on the «Embroiderers of actuality» website, alongside various photos that were taken.

As we alluded to at the beginning, there comes a moment in life that can never be forgotten, that moment in which we start to write. However, on reflection, none of us can remember that moment clearly. Nevertheless, we often come across that moment as our very first certainty and it is when someone, after far too long, comes close to us and says, and how are you? All of these women were probably able to return to their earliest certainty by completing the fifth chapter with the two artists, with whom they retraced their steps by covering miles and miles of road, vast open spaces, treks, pauses, falls, time that suddenly stops to remind us of where our journey started, that first moment when these women said no to a war for then finding themselves trapped in the realms of martyrdom. Perhaps things can change by telling these stories, they can be heard and a tragedy can redeem itself by turning into a finale of light. Light that dispels the shadows, justice that at last, when it needs to, increases its demands.

The penultimate project was also conceived in Marrakech and once again it involved the Yagour Berber women. They all embroidered an image created by the Dutch artist Jan Luyken in 1670 onto a large red carpet. The image depicts a King's guard, who was probably a black slave and undoubtedly a man of humble origins. And while the women embroidered, they spoke about themselves and they discussed political and social topics in the shadow of an image that was so ancient and at the same time,

so modern. During the exhibition, the public could watch the videos that portrayed the two artists and the Berber women together, sitting on the very same carpet that the women and two artists had embroidered together.

All of the material that was created during the course of these projects was, of course, recorded and some of these works can be seen on the website in the form of pictures and videos, a selection of these pictures and videos was used during the exhibitions where you can hear the sounds and where the pictures are displayed alongside the embroidered fabric and carpets, and where the public can sit down to listen to the tales of these women that come from afar, sometimes appearing to come from light years ago, and yet the voices of these women echo inside us just like that first voice after a far too deafening silence. It was said that we continuously speak about borders. Yet art stops us from taking these borders for granted and it continues to provoke them, and provoke our inhibitions, and it prevents us from becoming blind, suffocating behind those barriers which were erected through ignorance, for keeping out the rest of the world, where life is a race against time, or biding time behind prison bars, or simply trying to ensure that things can improve.

This was the case of the Filipino domestic helpers who feature in the final chapter of this project called "Exiled Home" carried out in Malta in 2017. These women were asked to draw a map of their journeys on pieces of paper. These maps were subsequently printed onto cushions, inside which there were audio devices that aired the voices of these women while they told their tales. And by leaning their heads on these cushions, people could listen to these tales.

The tales of these Filipino domestic helpers are no doubt different to those of other women who Aglaia and Aziz met while completing their project. The reasons for their journey were far different to those of other women. These Filipino women emigrated for economic reasons, leaving families back home, families which they hoped to reunite with as soon as they could. It was indeed the Philippine government itself that came to an agreement in assisting the movement of these women towards other countries. Their migration, however, compels us to reflect upon how the borders created by this form of mass movement of people over the last few years are not so much of a political or geographical nature, but more of human and cultural one. The true feeling of exile, however, is felt not so much by the Filipinos, but by the homeowners whose homes are taken up by a variety of faces, indecipherable voices and the spring in their movement. This feeling of exile can be felt every time such migration occurs, not particularly by the migrants themselves but by the local inhabitants who feel that they have been ousted from their own space. And it is not so much the external borders that instigate, but the internal ones, barriers that when breached by a foreigner, it is he who becomes the enemy. The South that penetrates the North, the East that penetrates the West. By following these movements, we are forced to alter the playing field on which the identity of each one of us is played out. We will probably never cease to be at war with each other until we accept the notion that identity is only an illusion that easily slips through our fingers, since we cannot pretend to define once and for all who we really are, but that we have to redefine our identity day by day, and if our prospects were focussed

on the dynamics of exclusion, the game we play with the other is destined to explode into a violent outcome. The other should not be excluded or even assimilated. The other should simply be listened to. As a result, the Filipino domestic helpers invade the homes of the Maltese, causing the local inhabitants to newly reconsider their own space, their homes and the borders of their daily life. A reflection that is unavoidable, not only for the local inhabitants but for all of us as well, in order for us to realise that a guest is not only someone who arrives but, above all, it is someone who leads us to where we see the sun die and rises at the same time.

Aglaia and Aziz's project is, therefore, set out as both an artistic and historical-political project. The work of art is the product of a real and unpredictable encounter between the artist and the silence of a woman, and it is within that silence that a memory is embroidered, a memory that even belongs to us and to all of those who will, one day, have the chance to stop and listen to a voice that perhaps will appear to be incomprehensible, but a voice that will stir something inside of them. The women who agreed to take part in the "Embroideres of actuality" project are, therefore, women who agreed to embroider their tales with the pattern of a memory that belongs not only to them but to all the women that have been forgotten in the shadows of history and to all of those who find themselves in those shadows, blinded and unable to see the important things. The project was created in the South to then be shown in the North, aimed at the East for then being brought back to the West. When you enter the rooms set up by Aglaia and Aziz, it is like being absorbed into a page written by a distant hero, or like that man who walked onto the stage for the very first time and asked his audience of strangers the question: to be, or not to be. That audience of strangers, clouded in darkness, which could only listen while being compelled into silence, just like the first foreigner in that perfect harmony of the West. And then, when the show was over and the lights turned on, the borders dissolved, the game was over. A performance, a provocation, art of the ephemeral. Nobody, though, has forgotten. It keeps on playing inside like the melody, the first beat of the heart, when that man opened the dance and, in silence, we followed him. Today it is he who is following us and who, in turn, becomes the foreigner. This is art, a game that starts from scratch every day and that makes us become exiles and foreigners at the same time. But after all, it is only a game. You only have to close your eyes to see more clearly the rays of light from those far gone times, times when we could follow each other, when it was easy to astonish. All we had to do was imagine and the light became stronger and the borders quickly dissolved under the new born sun.

And by closing our eyes we can feel the breeze on our skin that blows from afar. It could be the chant of Amazigh or the proud steps of a Filipino, that we have unwittingly descended into the silent revolution of a woman from Oukacha, or that we travelled to Cairo or to Beirut, with our fingers on those faces that without despair held their heads up high. This breeze can blow from the East, or perhaps from the South. It makes no difference to us, we are inside it, and in this breeze we have never ceased to ask ourselves: to be, or not to be.



ANTHEM, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



NIDA, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



RITZEL, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



JENIFER, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



CRISELDA, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



JAZMIN, still from the video, 4'30", 2017



LORNA, still from the video, 4'30", 2017







Laarnie, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

Cecilia, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

NIDA, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

RITZEL, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

CRISELDA, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

JAZMIN, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

Jenifer, stitching on fabric, 60x40 cm, 2017

BLOOM T, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

Michelle, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

LORNA F, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

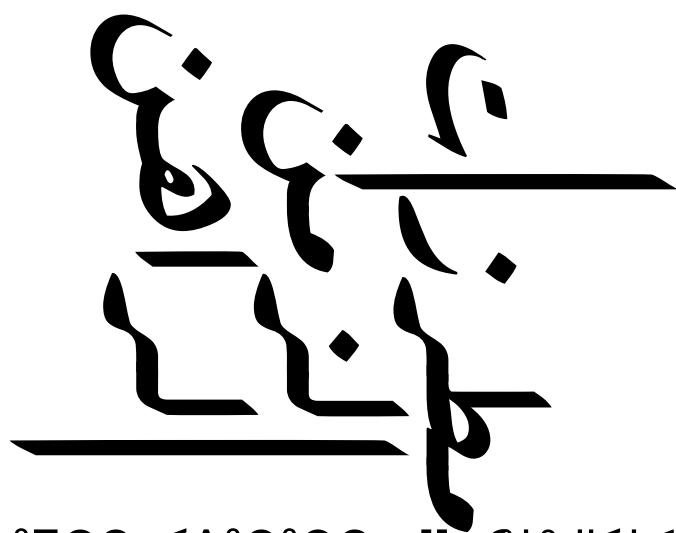
Mary Grace, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

Maria Theresa, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

AMOR, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017

Rezel, stitching on fabric, 65x50 cm, 2017





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