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Questioning Artists

Contributing Societal Critique and Alternative Visions in Dark Times

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I explore the concept of the questioning individual through life history research with two female artists from (post)war contexts. Afghan theater producer Monirah Hashemi's story illustrates how self-expression in contexts of violence is not only politically but also socially repressed, and illustrates the role that marginalized outsiders can play in questioning. Diala Brisly, a visual artist from Syria, talks of public expression after the suspension of censorship and shows the power of creative self-expression to support resistance to repression. This article explores their contributions of both societal critique and alternative visions of (post)war societies from their positions in exile. I argue that creative processes and cultural expressions can play crucial roles as sources of resistance and ways of creating alternative societal visions.

KEYWORDS: art, courage, exile, questioning, transformation, violent conflict

Figure 1. Diala Brisly, *Pied Piper*. Image courtesy of and reproduced with permission from the artist.

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> I remember me and my sister were at a checkpoint and we were stuck there for a few hours, and to get from A to B was like 15 minutes, but it took us three hours. So we were thinking a "piper" [the Pied Piper of Hamelin] could come and take all the soldiers outside Syria. At that time, when I drew the sketch in 2012, it was just the Syrian army. When I drew the painting in 2017 there was ISIS and the Syrian army, the Russians, Iranians, and Hezbollah.
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> So, this drawing of the flowers, it just . . . I find it really weird and cynical and funny and strange that these people, these killing machines, were kids one time, and they were innocent. So, I wanted to paint this to remind us that these were once kids. (Diala Brisly, interview, May 2019)

In this article, I argue that in times of oppression, artists expressing themselves through critical artistic practice engage in important political action with transformative potential. Artists engage in practices of questioning, in the sense of providing both critique of the present and visions of an alternative future. These practices of questioning, which take place within the creative space that artistic practice provides, form a crucial societal contribution. Art serves to connect the inner world of the artist with the outer world (Jackson 2016). The back-and-forth between these two spheres is happening in a world where we always appear to and are recognized by others through how we disclose ourselves through speech and action. By understanding political action in the broad sense of individuals critically inserting themselves into the human world through speech and action (Arendt 1958), creative forms of expression that come from genuine inspiration and critical reflection become a concrete form of political action. Their publicly questioning attitude facilitates similar processes in others and pushes at the boundaries of what individuals can imagine themselves thinking and doing. Thus, inserting oneself into the world creatively or artistically easily obtains a political character in contexts of violent conflict and repression, where there is little tolerance for the public expression of a plurality of perspectives and actions.

This article is based on life history research with a total of ten artists from Somaliland, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Syria. The life histories were collected in Oslo, Norway, and Hargeisa, Somaliland, between 2014 and 2019. Interviews focused on life phases in the personal story of the artist; inspiration in art; the meaning of art in the individual's life; levels of support versus levels of repression; and reflections on what creative contributions the artist aimed to make.[1] Interviews were conducted in Norwegian and English and lasted between 1.5 and 5 hours, over one or two sessions. Several artists were furthermore invited to participate in a public seminar series on art, peace, and conflict.[2] Data from interviews and seminars was supplemented with material from media appearances, seminar performances, and artworks. Data was transcribed and coded, and I decided on the focus on questioning because it stood out so strongly as a key insight from this analysis.

Using life history methods facilitates a nuanced and grounded understanding of the ways in which particular events, practices and ideas appear meaningful to those who take part in them (Maynes et al. 2012; McAdams 2008). A life history approach foregrounds agency and subjectivity and encourages those reading these life stories to understand other people's experiences (Bornat 2008; Erel 2007). Life history methods also enable the study of societal transformations as processes that happen through the everyday acts of common people, rather than necessarily or only taking place at the macro level, through decisions made within hierarchical structures of power. In this way, traditional understandings of power and powerholders can be contested without necessarily overstating the agency of the actors involved (Lazar 2013). Through life stories, I can also study and show the continuity between experiences during violent conflict and oppression and in exile, and in so doing, work anthropologically across boundaries of peace and conflict studies and forced migration studies (Horst 2019a).

In this article, I introduce the life stories of two female artists who have experienced violent conflict, oppression, and displacement and are working artistically with these themes.[3] Monirah Hashemi is an actor, playwright, and director who lives and works in Sweden after having fled Afghanistan. Diala Brisly is a Syrian visual artist who creates paintings, murals, graphic illustrations, and animations. She currently lives in France. Their life stories illustrate just how difficult and courageous it is to contribute critique and vision in times of violence and repression. These questioning artists publicly challenge the status quo in ways that are emotionally challenging and possibly dangerous. Yet they speak with great conviction about their drive to continue inserting themselves into the world through their art, aiming to contribute to societal transformation. While their stories are unique, in Afghanistan and Syria—as well as among artists in exile from these countries—there are many artists and activists like them who are engaging in civil resistance and are trying to transform conditions in their respective countries. Before I introduce the stories of Monirah and Diala, I will theoretically elaborate on the importance of understanding questioning artists in "dark times" (Arendt 1968) as political actors with transformative potential.

Questioning Artists in Dark Times

Hannah Arendt's (1976) controversial work on totalitarianism and the banality of evil argues that there are always thinking and acting individuals who are willing to go against the status quo, even though it appears that "their conceptions of wrong and right are out of fashion" (Fogelman 2011). This requires these individuals to be autonomous actors who express themselves authentically. The premodern, secular concept of freedom as related to politics is about the freedom to call something into being that did not exist before, that was not given and therefore could not be known (Arendt 1960). In Greek and Roman antiquity, freedom in the sense of the ability to act in new ways was an exclusively political concept, the quintessence of the city-state and of citizenship. In Greek and in Latin, "to act" implies both to begin or set in motion, as well as to carry something through or support the continuation of past acts (Arendt 1958). This concept of action thus includes both the individual opportunity and responsibility to act, as well as the (potential) collective consequences of such acts, through inspiring and motivating others to do the same.

According to Arendt (1960: 44) "Every new beginning breaks into the world wholly unexpected and unforeseen—appears to us like a miracle the moment we look at it from the viewpoint of the processes it interrupted. Historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative." The danger of totalitarianism, in her view, is that it aims to stifle initiative and spontaneity and to depend entirely on automatic processes in the political arena. In authoritarian contexts, engaging in autonomous action and authentic expression thus comes with great risks, and resistance is often only expressed to a small group of trusted others "at the kitchen table" (Goldfarb 2006) or in hidden ways that are understandable for a select group only (Scott 1990). And yet, some of those who have experienced the consequences of inhuman and undignified treatment common in these contexts may be more inclined to speak up and act against it, thus displaying a questioning attitude toward the status quo. This is especially the case for those in exile, who often face less risks while feeling a great sense of responsibility and guilt for the country and the people they left behind (Horst 2018; Horst and Lysaker 2019).

Yet, in any setting, "a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own," ultimately "leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self," requires courage (Arendt 1958: 186). Courage is the

ability to face and confront fear; it is about setting oneself to do something despite being afraid (Bauhn 2003). Courage is crucial for maintaining a sense of political agency because it helps the individual not to lose hold of themself as an autonomous agent. The individual's sense of autonomy may be endangered by external interpersonal and structural circumstances, such as when in an authoritarian context, speaking up might lead to imprisonment or death. Personal positionalities and dispositions are of relevance too; as the individual's sense of autonomy is influenced by their (lack of) confidence in their power of agency. Courage that stems from a sense of moral conviction is particularly crucial for everyday resistance in violent and repressive times, as a strong sense of moral responsibility has an immense power to influence action (Bauhn 2003, 2017).

In anthropology, research on normative narratives about right and wrong, good and bad—and our own role in contributing to the world—is well established and influential (Cassaniti and Hickman 2014; Fassin 2015; Lambek et al. 2015). The focus of the anthropology of morality is on the intention, responsibility, and reasons for the actions that individuals are involved in when aiming to be a certain kind of person. This refers to what one says and does, and whether one is living according to the criteria thereby established (Lambek 2010). James Laidlaw (2002: 327) discusses the object of study in this research strand as people's "attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live." I explored similar themes in my life history work with artists who experienced violent conflict and oppression.

In addition, seeing or interacting with people who dare to engage in ways that resist a violent and repressive context plays a crucial role as well in inspiring others to act, sparking the potential for further engagement. In its classical sense, "to act" refers both to the initiation and the continuation of new, alternative ways of doing and thinking. The arts offer both rare opportunities for courageous critical expressions during repressive times, as well as potential for sustained, larger political action. Socially engaged artists use a range of tools, methods, materials, and forms to explore, critique, and challenge oppressive social relations (Bell and Desai 2011). The arts' unique potential lies both in critique and vision, which means that art can mobilize individuals and collectives in unique ways.

In terms of offering societal critique, artistic processes can "create something with the potential to question society and engage people in political action" (Manresa and Glăveanu 2017: 45). In recent years, there has been considerable research on the role of art in resistance (Awad and Wagoner 2017; Nassar 2006). Art can creatively expose the norms and hierarchies of the existing social order, and this can be done in indirect or hidden ways that may put political authorities under a lot of pressure. As Majken Sørensen (2008), for example, shows through a study on the use of humor as a form of resistance by artist-activists in Serbia, it is quite difficult for authorities in repressive contexts to know how to respond in an effective way to creative expressions without drawing unwanted attention to these expressions and/or appearing ridiculous. When the least detrimental official strategy is to ignore these expressions, artists create a space for art as critique. Artistic practice can then also make subterranean movements that challenge dominant culture visible to others who are critical to the status quo (Adams 2002)

Besides providing space for critique, an even more powerful aspect of artistic creation is its power to transcend what is given or already there, which makes it "psychologically, socially and politically potent" and a "considerable threat for those who want to maintain the status quo" (Manresa and Glăveanu 2017: 46). Art has the potential to open up spaces for thought and imagining new meanings. It can rearrange what exists, create surprising juxtapositions and emotional openings, and connect people to what is possible in their lives and societies, expanding the limits of what was seen to be possible before (Adler and Ippolito 2016; Glăveanu 2017).

Vlad Petre Glăveanu (2017) argues that one of the most important qualities of art is its capacity to make us wonder. Wondering, creativity, and imagination are needed to envision what a better society may look like, presenting us with new questions and perspectives. While these do not automatically lead to social change, they can provide empowering experiences that leave a mark and lay open the possibility for change. Art can transform inaction into action in a range of ways, nurturing the political imagination of both artists and their audiences. New transforming stories can develop to collectively imagine and enact alternative possibilities and offer models of resistance; while creative practices can also generate dialogue and open up new ways of using public space (Bell and Desai 2011). In this article, I sum up the critical and visionary aspects of art together under the concept of questioning, as both the specific word and the general attitude appeared very regularly in the life stories of Monirah and Diala, and the rest of the material this work is based on.

Monirah Hashemi: The Social Context of Self-expression and Repression

Monirah was born in Iran in 1985 to Afghan parents who had fled the war in Afghanistan as children. Her family moved back to Herat, Afghanistan, when she was 19 years old. Although Monirah was born in Iran from parents who had also been there most of their lives, understood the culture well, and is fluent in Farsi, she felt she could never belong. She explains how Afghans were second-class citizens in Iran and how her own family had limited access to education and job opportunities, even though she comes from a good family. One incident she describes, for example, is when a younger sister was expelled from school despite being a top student. When Monirah was 19, the family returned to Herat in Afghanistan. She reflects on the difference she felt between being a refugee with no rights and being an Afghan in Afghanistan:

> I think that living that life, under those circumstances, probably taught me to, kind of, try to change when I had the opportunity to. Because I remember, in Iran there were . . . there were no questions. You could not ask someone: "Why do you treat me like this?" because we were told that: "You are Afghan refugees, and this is not your place." That's what this teacher, when we called her and said: "Why did you send my daughter out of school?" said: "If you're not satisfied, if you are unhappy, go back to your own country."
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> So it means that this place, when you live here as a refugee, you do not even have the right to ask a question. And this is what we grew up with: we thought that we cannot ask any question. When we meet injustice in society as a refugee, we have no right to ask a question: "Why?" But when I went back to Afghanistan, I noticed . . . the first thing I was really happy about was that now I could ask that question. Now I could ask why. Now I could try for change.

In this period, Monirah first heard about a TV channel that had started in Herat, where she was particularly amused by the movies they occasionally showed, which were dubbed in Dari in one voice only. She wanted to work there and during her pursuit heard about a group making film, which she joined to first provide behind-the-camera support and later as an actor. But then, someone started distributing letters at her home and to the neighbors that contained terrible gossip about her. Monirah broke down and did not go outside for three months, until her mother came into her room and talked to her:

> One day she came and said to me that this girl that I am now, this is exactly what these people wanted, "and you are giving this person to them. You are becoming that scared, frightened woman that cannot do anything, and is just stuck in the corner of the house, and doesn't go

> out . . .” And then she told me that: “Every second that you go out until you come back, I die. But I want you to go out. I want you to go for your dreams.” She told me something that really stayed with me, and it is going to stay with me all my life. She said: “I feared once in my life and I never experienced happiness and freedom ever again. I never want the fear to find its way to your heart. Go and do whatever you want to do.”
>
> . . . And then I noticed that fear, that . . . that trembling moment when she said that: “I die every second when you go out until you come back. Every second for me is death. But I want you to go out and don’t let the fear find its way to your heart.” I was thinking . . . how can it be possible that a woman who has gone through so much in her life still wants to stand up, and wants to be that solid ground for her child to not fear. To stand up and rise again. Though I didn’t know how to go out again. I was scared. I didn’t know if these people still remembered, if my neighbors remembered about that letter. But I decided to go out.

This incident ultimately changed Monirah’s commitment to her art. After an initial short period where she had been allured by the glamour she expected from showbiz, when she went back to film and theater—eventually setting up her own company—her creative work was no longer just about entertainment. She wanted to do something else with it, something meaningful:

> I remember that at the end of 2004, after this experience that I had, when we had received lots of letters; exactly there, I was already changed. Because when I started my own company in 2005, I had a clear picture of what I wanted to do. I wanted to create a space for women, for young girls, where they can come and practice art, do whatever they want, express themselves in any way they want, without being harassed by any man. Without thinking that coming here will damage their family honor, will violate . . . I don’t know, their values. So I was trying in the beginning to make that space for these women, because I never had it myself.
>
> Then I was thinking that, for me, art is never going to be for entertainment. Theater and film [are] never going to be for entertainment. For me, it would be the most important tool. For me, art would be the torch, a kind of guiding torch, a light that I can take to make the path clear for myself. But also in that way, of going that direction, many other women can also use that torch. So it was quite clear to me what I wanted in the beginning.

Throughout the years, Monirah has related to this mission in a range of ways. She has written plays that address taboo subjects such as violence against women and children, early and forced marriage, women’s civic participation, and democracy. She has also produced community theater, where the aim was to engage with these themes locally, creating a space for debate within a particular community (Sonn et al. 2015). And she has trained children, in particular girls, to express themselves through theater performance. Monirah notes that, whether she wants it to or not, her work always has a political message. She has “always tried to address issues that were very controversial in the society and hard to talk about. And use art and this space in a different way, where you invite everyone to be part of the discussion.”

Yet this work was not without risk. Both directing and performing theater plays and creating space for discussion with an audience, as well as providing a space where young women learned to express themselves in ways that challenged society, was understood as threatening when it became more public. Over the years, Monirah was increasingly invited to perform internationally, and in 2012 she was invited to come to Sweden. She performed a play based on women’s narratives about the Afghan civil war at the Riksteatern in Stockholm, which was recorded and posted online with her permission. She did not imagine the consequences, and when she returned to Afghanistan she found out both her brother and father had faced threats:

> And then I received lots of threats. The threats were not only to me and my family; they were also addressed to my students, my colleagues. And there were young girls, very beautiful,

> innocent girls, who only wanted to change the society. To change the atmosphere around themselves. To change the mentality of the people, of the society, to let them go out, study, work and have freedom in the society. That was the only thing they wanted.
>
> But then I notice that what I'm doing not only puts my family in trouble and danger, but also them. And I know this is a very common way. That when you see a woman you cannot control, or you cannot make her obey you or quit something she is doing by threatening that person directly, then you . . . then these people start to threaten the family. Because of course the family is more precious than you yourself, your body. Because these women in Afghanistan who are working for change at the front line are not thinking about themselves. They have thought that this path will be dangerous, full of threats and death, so they decided that, yeah, they are ready to die any minute. But they don't want their work to put their family in danger, to put their students or colleagues or loved ones in danger.

Monirah first tried to move to other cities in Afghanistan, living a more hidden life and breaking contact with her family, colleagues, and students, but found that the threats continued. In the end, after a year of deliberation, she drew the conclusion that she had to leave Afghanistan.

> I was thinking that if they do anything to me, the effect that it can have on other women in my society can be huge. The effect that it can have on my students will be huge. I am sure that their families will not let them work in theatre and film anymore. I am sure that their families will not let them be involved in art and culture anymore. And I am thinking, "No, I won't let that happen. I won't let it change, because, because my death is also going to change many women's lives. Not in a positive way, but in a negative way. Because families will also be scared of their own young girls' lives." So I decided to get out.

Marginalized Outsiders and Exiled Artists Questioning the Status Quo Publicly

The role of the questioning individual is often fulfilled by those who face marginalization of one kind or another. After all, as Iris Marion Young (1989) has pointed out, those who speak from marginalized perspectives, experiences, or positionalities are *always* understood as highly political. Outsiders of all kinds play a crucial role in times of violent conflict and repression because they have an interest in demanding space for alternative perspectives and ways of being. Authoritarian and violent contexts repress plurality; those most likely to recognize this are "marginalized others" who feel a sense of nonrecognition and a lack of resonance with the collective narrative. This may lead to a wish for a space for them to be different, or rather, for them to really just be themselves. While in some cases, this wish can be satisfied in deeply private ways, at other times it can lead to an expressed demand for opening up such space. This more public approach happens not least when artists understand, through the responses they receive to their art, that their individual experiences are not unique to them at all. Public artistic engagement by marginalized outsiders creates an awareness of the possibility of a greater plurality of perspectives and ways of being than originally believed possible, especially in dark times.

Several factors can contribute to shaping an outsider perspective. Personal experiences unrelated to the collective traumas common in violent and repressive societies can create a sense of being an outsider. The very choice to become an artist can lead to an outsider status. Artists, or specific types of artists, may be placed on the outskirts of society; minority groups or women are particularly exposed as artists. Monirah experiences this as a Hazara girl in Herat:

> I was the only Hazara girl in 2004 who was working with a group of people from outside my own community or ethnicity. So that created lots of issues and problems at that time. [I experienced] both threats that were coming from my community—"You cannot work with these people"—and I also became the subject of sexual harassment and such [from my colleagues].

Returning from or living in exile can also create an outsider perspective. William Spanos (2012) draws on the work of both Hannah Arendt and Edward Said to claim that those who question publicly are more likely to be exiles, people who already don't belong. Individuals in exile may gain new perspectives and learn about different ways of being and doing things, which may make it difficult not to question the taken-for-granted "at home." In certain situations, individuals may end up getting to know fellow compatriots from "enemy" groups in exile, which may or may not change their view of dominant narratives inside their country of origin.[4] Living in exile can also introduce the artist to experiences of being Other through facing bad treatment as a foreigner or a refugee. When Monirah talks about her degrading experiences living as a refugee in Iran and how they affected her choices later in life, she says:

> I mean, there is something when you're living [laughs], when you're living with lots of . . . limitations, and when you are living . . . well you are always at the margins, outside of a group. Like I lived in Iran. I was born in Iran, and I always thought I speak the language as fluent as everybody else there. And I knew the culture, and I knew the history of Iran. But yet, I never became part of that. And then when you are under so much oppression and pressure that you struggle every day for every single thing . . . Then everything that you don't know becomes so precious. Becomes so far beyond reach . . .
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> When I was doing theater for the first time, that was when I realized that I can . . . I can be happy. Because being famous did not make me happy. But I can make myself happy in another way by reaching other women. By helping other women to find out. I could see how theater has changed my life, how art has changed my life, how art gave voice, gave solid ground to me, helped build my worldview, to change that kind of hard childhood into a more clear future where I had some more hope. Then I was thinking that I could use art to reach women who are closed into themselves and cannot get out of those red lines and boundaries, and everything that the society and the family and the culture and religious institutions has created for them.

Diala Brisly: Engaged Public Expression When Censorship Loosens

Diala was born in Kuwait in 1980 and is the oldest child in a family of six. Her family returned to Syria when she was ten. Her grandfather had fled to Syria years previously to escape the dictatorship in Turkey and had married a Syrian woman. Although Diala is thus third-generation Syrian, she was confronted as a child with being an outsider. As she expresses this, "I have always felt kind of alien, in a way," and "I have a big history of being rejected." This experience related in part to being treated as different by other children because of her accent and her strange name, and in part to a difficult childhood. When she was 18, her father left the family, and soon after, her mother left for long stretches, eventually disappearing when Diala was 20. When her parents left, Diala became responsible for her 14-year-old sister and 10-year-old brother. This meant that she had to work to support them, and she got a job at a cartoon channel. She worked for the company until 2005, after which she started working as a freelance artist.

Then, in 2011, the Syrian uprising started and changed Diala's reality and art in fundamental ways. Some of her freelance and volunteer work started to address the traumas that children

were facing as a consequence of the war, as well as aiming to give these children hope and a sense of a normal life. Then, in 2012, she decided to "express how she feels," as Diala puts it:

> When the Syrian uprising started in 2011, I always felt like what I'm doing, in general in my work, is not satisfying to me. Because I wasn't working on interesting topics, let's say. Especially in Syria you can't really—you can't really express much through your art, because of the dictatorship that we have. So when the Syrian uprising started, that was a very big boost for my art, and for many other people as well—for many other artists and journalists, writers, musicians. So in 2012 I created my first art to express what is happening in Syria. It was coming from frustration. I wanted to say anything that could really express what is going on.
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> Then, because we didn't really have journalism, we had alternative journalism, some journalists started sharing my artwork to support their reports. So that encouraged me more to do art, and I got a good impact. I just started because I was really angry, but then I felt it was really, very, very . . . It's stronger to express it through art because people pay more attention to this. So that literally encouraged me to do more and more.
>
> But it was really hard to express other things, because there were many things that we were not allowed to talk about in Syria. So the revolution helped me a lot, and gave me a big boost to do a lot of things that are meaningful. I wanted to talk about everything that I wasn't allowed to talk about before. When I realized that art could really help, it's not just a picture on the wall, I wanted to discover more about this.
>
> Once I was talking to a really young man in the Free Syrian Army. He told me: "Yes, your art is nice and beautiful, but do you think it will change anything in our situation or bring down Assad? This is not going to happen." I like challenges. My life is based on challenges anyway. When people tell me, "Do this," I do the opposite. Just like, it's me. Now I listen more, I'm getting better at that. But I don't like to know that something is impossible. It drives me crazy. So when he said that, I started to try to find more useful ways to create my art, and give it a bigger role than just expressing what is happening.

Diala left for Istanbul in 2013, when Damascus became "like an island," as she expresses it, and it became impossible to engage in activism. Her brother, who was still in Syria, died in 2014 while she was in Turkey. She decided to move to Lebanon to stay closer to the Syrian situation and be more involved in what was happening there. She started working with Syrian children displaced by the war, doing workshops with them and developing murals. Diala displays a strong sense of responsibility for doing the work she is doing, and describes the fact that she has the strength to, for example, work with traumatized Syrian kids, when many of her friends from Syria and elsewhere cannot:

> I know some people, they are not strong enough. It affects me as well emotionally, and I felt really tired because I had a double life. In one day, I would go to very hard circumstances in the refugee camp and when I go back to Beirut, I take part in the nightlife, getting drunk, dancing. A different . . . atmosphere, totally different.
>
> But someone has to do it. We can't really all be emotional and cute, you know? It's not acceptable. I mean, you are afraid that your emotions get hurt when you deal with those kids. How about them? They live it. But I don't talk with my friends about it. I know that I can do it, and I like to adapt to all kinds of circumstances. Because I faced hard circumstances with my family, and I always wanted to challenge this. So I know I'm a person who challenges.
>
> And there are a lot of amazing people that are really doing amazing things. And they have this double life. They are still living in Beirut, and they are doing an amazing job. They are really exhausted emotionally as well. So I'm not alone, you know. They are the other drops in the ocean.

Diala's commitment to both supporting Syrian kids in expressing themselves creatively and to creatively visualizing what is happening in Syria forces her to continue her work despite this being emotionally taxing for her. During a conversation we have at a public seminar in Oslo, she explains that it keeps her going to know that there are other "drops in the ocean" like herself,[5] and at the same time, it reminds her that she must take care of herself:

> It was really tough. I stopped watching the news for a while because I was so overwhelmed. Then I thought that if I really want to move on and continue doing what I am doing, I have to have balance in my life. I reminded myself how to live in a normal way. Among normal people. While not forgetting about people left behind.
>
> Once I was talking to someone, we were working together in *Zaytun and Zaytuna* magazine . . . he is a musician . . . He was based in northern Syria, in a liberated area, and he worked with kids. So, he told me, "if there are just five kids I can work with, I am not going to leave Syria." For me, he is the hero of this world. I always am in contact with people who are still inside, and they tell me these kind of things . . .
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> So yes, at times we feel down. I get depressed, but I feel really ashamed and shy: how can I, with these amazing heroes in my life? And we are still in touch all the time. So yeah, I think we really have to keep in contact just to remind ourselves of some people who do not give up. But it is kind of circular, we have to support each other in a way . . .
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> I think that we all have this very . . . we are very emotional and very sensitive and if we can't do it because we are afraid to get hurt, no one will do it. But we really need to take care of ourselves to keep the balance. I know some people always say that "we really can't do it, because we just can't stand it." It is really hurting, and I understand that. Some of my other friends who are artists and really involved in these kinds of things cannot do it, because they are really very sensitive. But it is . . . kind of like working out, you get used to it in a way. But you need to keep the balance. Otherwise you go insane.

The Power of Creative Self-expression

Diala's story illustrates her development as an artist, where at first, her visual arts offered a career that allowed her to earn an income when she needed it, and this work enabled her to learn and develop her skills as an artist. But—made possible partly through the 2011 resistance and spurred by the atrocities of war—she further evolved to needing her creative space not just to express beautiful things but also to create meaningful art. As Diala indicates: "I have a lot of things to say. So it's my language and I want to use it. And I don't think it's a luxury to do this. It's part of our responsibility as well." The responsibility Diala refers to here relates to the authentic self-expression that requires courage in dark times due to the risks involved as well as the emotional strain it takes. This responsibility reflects the intersubjective aspect of art, as public art is intimate self-expression that is shared with others. This process involves inserting oneself into the world, to be seen, heard, felt by others. Diala explains this further when she discusses a particular work she created in 2014. It shows a girl with a missing leg standing in front of a boy who is missing part of his arm:

> I drew this one month after losing my brother, I call it *Be my leg, I will be your arm*. It is about . . . since a lot of us have faced loss, we know what losing means and we can really support each other. It is not just about losing limbs, it is about . . . it is about losing anything in your life. When that happened, I had a feeling of course there is a big loss for me, and it was really sad, but it was another way to understand how other Syrians are losing in the war.

Figure 2: Diala Brisly, *Be my leg—I will be your arm*. Image courtesy of and reproduced with permission from the artist.

Being able to express one's personal loss in a way that connects this loss to the losses of others, then, is a way of growing and developing empathetic skills. Yet the personal is deeply political in these contexts, and creative expressions of personal loss that are shared and recognized as collective trauma are a threat to the governing forces. Diala describes her astonishment after the uprising over how many artists were in Syria, when they had never known anything about each other. The increased level of public expression of individuality, and of artistic perspectives of what was happening in Syria, was a surprise to her and simultaneously a threat to the government:

> Just drawing about the war itself, the kids who are suffering, this is scary for the government. Everything . . . anything we express about what is happening could be scary and threatening the authority of the Syrian regime. Even this blood, the red thing, everything could be scary, all the symbols in the drawing. Not just in my artwork, but in general in all Syrian artwork. And yeah, many Syrians . . . I had never heard about them, I never knew that we had this much creativity.

Diala's story explores how, for her, a space opened up during the early years of the Syrian uprising to use the language that her artistic expression offered her to express what she felt about the situation in Syria. In many ways, she explains her drive to do this from a sense of wanting to make a difference. On several occasions, Diala also alludes to the fact that she does believe creating her art has an impact: it scares the government, it connects Syrians by expressing their losses and suffering, and it enables all those "drops in the ocean" who are fighting against the violence and repression to see others do the same and keep going. When I ask her specifically whether she believes that she has inspired others with her work, she says that she knows she has, since she receives messages from people who have been inspired by her work. She mentions an example of people who were inspired by the murals she makes for schools in refugee camps in Lebanon:

> The closest one to my heart is the people who started doing murals in schools or tents of education in the north of Syria, in different places, inspired by my work in the refugee camps. They told me: "We saw what you did and we really liked it and we started doing this in our schools, in our tents, and the kids they really love it." Because for me, the first time I wanted to do a mural I just wanted to impress my small audience, the kids there. And I found it really challenging to do with the kids in the refugee camp: they have a lot of trauma, and I feared it won't interest them to look at an artistic thing. But then, when I saw people are doing the same in different places . . .
>
> [mentions another example] So yes, I myself was inspired as well by others and I feel it is a chain, it is contagious.

Both her strong wish to make a difference, and her understanding of the fact that she does, enable Diala to continue expressing her critique and creating alternative visions that provide a sense of hope through her artistic practice, despite the high emotional toll it takes to do so.

Conclusion: The Courage to Question and the Creativity of New Beginnings

This article opened with Diala Brisly's painting of soldiers and militia men being seduced away from Syria by flute music, inspired by the Piped Piper of Hamelin legend. This image came to Diala in the grim everyday reality of the Syrian uprising and civil war. The painting not only questions this reality but also uses imagination to create an alternative reality while expressing genuine wonder at the fact that "these killing machines" were once children. Both Diala and Monirah express, through their artistic practice, their critical reflections on everyday life in conflict and during oppression, while also clearly exploring alternative societal visions. These visions are explored visually and creatively, by attempting to give shape and form to new ways of imagining the world. They encourage others to dream, envision and ultimately believe in the opportunity of a different future. At the same time, and equally important, such visions are explored practically, by creating space for others to learn to express themselves critically and authentically.

I aimed to retell parts of the life stories that Diala and Monirah recounted as two powerful examples of the stories of many others who resist violence and repression through art. The wish to express is often a wish to question, to explore openly and publicly, and the need to imagine alternatives in a situation that offers little hope for a better future. Diala says about the period after the Syrian uprising that the artists that started emerging "gave themselves the right to express themselves about other things," where before, the regime determined what was expressible and what was not. Through their daring actions, they inspired others. In many of the life stories that I explored for this study, questioning, challenging, not accepting the status quo, independent critical thinking, wondering, and creative imaginations of alternatives are recurring themes. These artists describe themselves as stubborn or as rebels, independently making choices and creating their own life in the way they want, despite societal or political pressures. They describe themselves as doing the opposite of what most others would do in dark times, when the risks of speaking up are just too great. At the same time, they are not alone, and they are inspired by and inspire others.

In contexts of violent conflict and oppression, the space to express oneself artistically or otherwise is often extremely limited. During war and in periods of political repression, the expectations to conform to a collective narrative are very high. And yet, the individuals introduced here question the established status quo. They did so while in Afghanistan and Syria, and they continued to do so while in exile. They question the consequences of war, or the way in which women and minorities are treated in society; but above all, they question the absence of the right to express oneself freely and autonomously. With so little space for a plurality of perspectives—for uniquely individual, autonomous self-expression—counter-expression and counter-conduct requires courage. Arendt writes about the possibility of new beginnings: in every human being, there is the potential of inserting themself into the world through speech and action in unique ways, thus possibly setting in motion new processes. While in contexts with limited space for alternative viewpoints there may be many who question the status quo, there are far fewer who express these questions publicly and even fewer people who actively try to envision alternatives and try to change these realities.

It is clear from their stories that self-expression for both Monirah and Diala required great courage, even in exile where free expression is no longer putting their lives in danger, because both authorities and society at large engage in different forms of silencing. As pointed to earlier, "leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self," requires courage (Arendt 1958: 186). This is more strongly felt in dark times, when one's inner world is often a place of anxiety, sorrow, anger, and other emotions that are difficult to

share in public. As such, it is important to remember that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the ability to act in spite of fear (Bauhn 2003). Both women describe a transformative moment in their lives which seems to have strengthened their courage: for Monirah, it was the moment when she had been silenced and her mother insisted she continue to express herself artistically, whereas for Diala, it was the Syrian revolution that opened up a space for expression that had been closed due to censorship, making visible the many creative artists the country housed and the diversity of perspectives that existed.

Diala argues that using her artistic language to express herself is not just a luxury but is in fact a responsibility, which is in line with what many people argue when they explain their fight against injustice in violent and oppressive contexts (Horst and Lysaker 2021, Stapnes, Carlquist, and Horst 2020)). This responsibility relates to the fact that the inner world of the artist is at once unique and shared by many others. Expressing oneself artistically in dark times has an impact on the collective by bringing out into the open—whether through verbal or other means—thoughts, feelings and perspectives that are in fact shared by many. This can inspire others to share and express, but it can also encourage them to act and resist.

Monirah and Diala express a clear desire to make a difference through their artistic work, whether through their art, engagement with audiences, or inspiring and training a next generation of artists. There are two ways in which this wish to make a difference is put into practice. First, they use their art to draw attention to what is supposed to be left unspoken or unseen. Second, through their art and the process of engaging with audiences and a next generation of artists, Diala and Monirah contribute to the creation of new perspectives. They create the possibility of a new story. One crucial element in creating change is the creation of a new, shared definition of a situation in which the old reality no longer appears as absolute and radical political change seems possible. Monirah and Diala's strong sense of autonomy and their courage to continue this engagement of questioning, despite the risks involved, could be an important inspiration for others to dare to express their questioning attitudes and willingness to engage in resistance in dark times.

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NOTES

1. Interviews were collected by myself, Trude Stapnes and Ebba Tellander, for the TRANSFORM and ACT projects.
2. This seminar series was hosted by the Centre on Culture and Violent Conflict (CCC) at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).
3. In this article, I do not focus on the intersectional positionality of the two women, which would require a larger study. My interest here lies with their position as critical artists engaged in resistance in violent and repressive contexts.
4. See e.g. life history interview with academic, activist and creative artist Mete Hatay (Horst 2019b).
5. A theme that returns in Diala's animation *A Future for Syria*.

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