GRAPHICAL CONVERSATIONS OF *HOME*

PERFORMING LANDSCAPE

Sophie Ernst
Independent Artist, Leiden, the Netherlands

This paper considers landscape as a process, and focuses on drawing, mapping, and storytelling as performative actions. It takes the HOME *project as a case study, and demonstrates how images of landscape reveal, and also create, power relations. For the* HOME *project, artists, architects, and writers from Pakistan, India, Israel, and Palestine draw maps and vistas of places they once called home and were forced to leave. They do not point out the beauty of the landscape, but rather emphasize their claim to memories of a particular place. In this multifaceted artistic research project I look at how memories of specific topographies relate to identity and political claims. In particular, I view the act of drawing as an instrument of holding a graphical conversation with history.*

> In Jaffa there were no peasants. There were farmers who worked as day labourers in the orange groves and lived on the periphery of the city. But what happened, is that in the stories of exile, the peasant narrative became dominant [...] The orange groves and olive tree were the iconic symbols of the country [...] In Jaffa everybody had an orange grove, including people who did not have an orange grove.[1]

When I met the Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari in Ramallah in 2009, he told me how remembering in his part of the world is never simply sentimental,

1 Salim Tamari, interview by Sophie Ernst (Ramallah, 2009), *HOME: Architecture of Memory* (Wakefield: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2012), 97.

but also political, and that images of landscape not only reveal power relations and identities, but actually create them. Taking this as a point of departure, the *HOME* project is a collection of descriptions of memories of specific places, landscapes, and cityscapes (Fig. 1). I started working on the project in 2006, and currently, *HOME* consists of an archive of over sixty conversations about remembered places. It began as an exercise in conversing about the past, and grew into a collection of reflections about large historical events, such as the *Partition* of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the Palestinian *Naqba* of 1948, and *Operation Ezra and Nehemiah*, the Jewish exodus from Iraq, in 1951-52. Consequently, I focused on three moments in the wake of Asia's decolonization in the mid-twentieth century.

Fig. 1
Archive page
HOME: Architecture of Memory
Sophie Ernst
Wakefield: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2012

As part of the project I recorded over 100 hours of interviews. The participants were asked to draw the places they had left behind during political upheaval. Some drew detailed floor plans of their houses, some intricate village systems, while others sketched painterly views and vistas of the areas surrounding their

former homes. I spoke to artists, architects, writers, academics, and filmmakers working on notions of memory, representation, and place in their professional lives. These respondents were from India, Pakistan, Israel, Palestine, Indonesia, Holland, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In the interviews I recorded for the *HOME* project, people associated landscape with specific forms or objects, and the act of drawing triggered a remembering process. While drawing, erasing, and redrawing, the interviewees engaged with layers of memories, which became iconic and politically charged through this process.

This article will highlight some elements of the *HOME* project, in particular, how remembering can be simultaneously a sentimental and political act. Furthermore, it outlines the processual nature of landscape representations, using the *HOME* project as a case study. I explore how landscape, built and natural, can stir up memories, and how social and political associations inform the depiction of a particular location. In examining landscape as a process, I take on questions such as: What is given shape through landscape representation and how is this achieved? What does an image of a landscape contain? And, what is transformed?

LANDSCAPE AS A PROCESS

Early theorists of the picturesque, such as Reverend William Gilpin (1724-1804), Uvedale Price (1747-1829), and Richard Payne (1750-1824), argued that the picturesque stood for a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure, in which landscape was an ornamental surface and a source of endless entertainment.[2] W. J. T. Mitchell puts forward the thesis that "[l]andscape is not a genre in art but a medium".[3] He writes: "Landscape painting is […] a representation of something that is already a representation in its own right".[4] Mitchell emphasizes how landscape is steeped in meanings that are 'put' or 'found' in a place, and as such it can be an instrument of power.[5] In the *HOME* project I

2 Carrie Tirado Bramen, "The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization," *American Quarterly* 52.3 (2000), 451-52.

3 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5.

4 Ibid., 14.

5 Ibid., 1-2.

approach landscape as a means of communication in the discourse on memory and belonging.

As an artist, I find the notion of landscape as an ornamental surface limiting, because it reduces the landscape to a static arrangement. I look at landscape in the broadest sense, drawing on the theory of landscape architect, Anne Whiston Spirn, who explains that "human settlements, including cities, are part of the natural world"[6] and prefer to think of landscape, as Mitchell argues, as "a process by which social and subjective identities are formed".[7] A landscape, far from being an ornamental surface, is a living reservoir of stories, experiences, rituals, and traditions. My interpretation of landscape is also informed by Edward Said's identification of geography as a "socially constructed and maintained sense of place".[8] Representations of landscapes are not neutral entities: depictions of landscapes in paintings, drawings, photographs, or maps render relationships with those landscapes and also help us reflect on our place in nature.[9] I view landscape as an instrument to excavate an intimate past, which can transit experience through retelling. Sentimental memories of landscape hold potential for political debates on ownership and belonging. This understanding of imagining landscape and its relationship with a maker is informed by my work as an artist and my encounters through the *HOME* project.

6 Anne Whiston Spirn, "'One with Nature': Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination," in *The Art Seminar: Landscape Theory*, eds. Rachael Zaidy DeLue and James Elkins (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 43.

7 Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 1.

8 Edward Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 246.

9 Anne Whiston Spirn, "'One with Nature'," 43.

IMAGINATIVE MEMORIES

In most cases, the interviews I recorded for the *HOME* project were conversations between a parent and a child. For instance, the image of Sami Said and his father Saeed Shana'a, sitting together in their house in the West Bank city of Birzeit (Fig. 2), shows the pair remembering the family village near Haifa. Often the child would recall a place, not on account of having lived there, but by having listened to many stories about it. In some instances, the parents would not remember the place in full detail, despite having spent a substantial

portion of their lives there, but would recollect stories about that place. Slowly, over hours of conversations, they would visualize a territory, formed through mental images, and attribute events to nooks and crannies of their homes. Their drawn plans of their homes, a particular cityscape, or landscape, were the result of a deliberate, intentional effort (Fig. 3). In her work on personal, collective, and cultural trauma, Marianne Hirsch describes the relationship that a second generation has to memories of the past as a creative effort, which she calls 'postmemory'. She observes how the "connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation".[10] This has also been my experience during the conversations of *HOME*, in which recollection is part of the creative process. In particular, this project draws attention to the relation between drawing, mapping out memories, and storytelling.

Fig. 2
Sami Said and his father Saeed Shana'a
Birzeit, 2008
Photograph by the author

THE ACT OF DRAWING

I claim that a landscape becomes alive with meaning when it is being drawn, and I see the act of drawing as a gesture towards memory. Ernst van Alphen

10 Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemory," accessed 9 October 2017, http://www.postmemory.net.

discusses Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) notion of drawing as an 'intransitive activity', where the image is secondary to the gesture of representing. He writes: "We see nothing in the drawing (transitive); we see only the drawing as intransitive act".[11] In the *HOME* project, drawing is an intransitive activity, and the video archive of *HOME* records the process of remembering through this activity. The final drawing is of no particular importance to the project (the interviewees sometimes offered the drawing to me as a souvenir, sometimes they were keen to retain it as a keepsake). Instead, the emphasis is placed on drawing as a performative act.

11 Ernst van Alphen, "The Gesture of Drawing," in *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson, Øyvind Vågnes (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 112.

Fig. 3
Tassaduq Sohail
HOME
Sophie Ernst
Video still
Karachi, 2007

The process of drawing a landscape is like piecing together a puzzle of lived life. While depicting her home in Jerusalem, Liana Badr, a Palestinian novelist and a filmmaker, drew routes through the old city, which she identified through sounds and smells, or, in her words, "all the life's details".[12]

> When you enter the Damascus gate you hear songs of Khan El Zeit market: coffee shops, people sitting, vegetable stores, fruit sellers, sweets, and *raha*. When we were children we would smell the sugar-*knafeh*. This whole area was full of perfumes. [13]

12 Liana Badr, interview by Rana Shakaa (Ramallah, 2008), *HOME* archive.

13 Liana Badr, interview by Rana Shakaa (Ramallah, 2008), *HOM*E, 85.

The interviewees construct a landscape by drawing, erasing, redrawing, recognizing, holding up, evaluating, retracing, and interpreting various lines and dots. In a way, the act of drawing became an instrument to hold a graphical conversation with history. While drawing, people reasoned with themselves, they asked what happened, and drew out an answer in a messy way. If the goal of the drawing was to recreate their home, it was doomed to fail from the outset, because the passing of time and recollection through photographs and stories had blurred the original memories. This resonates with Derrida's description of the draughtsman as blind – searching and groping, and perhaps never reaching his goal.[14] Yet in the *HOME* project the goal of drawing was not to recreate architecture or complete a landscape painting of a specific place. Drawing was used as a method to intensify the conversations, and in most instances, performing the action actually activated a remembering process.

14 Van Alphen, "The Gesture of Drawing," 112.

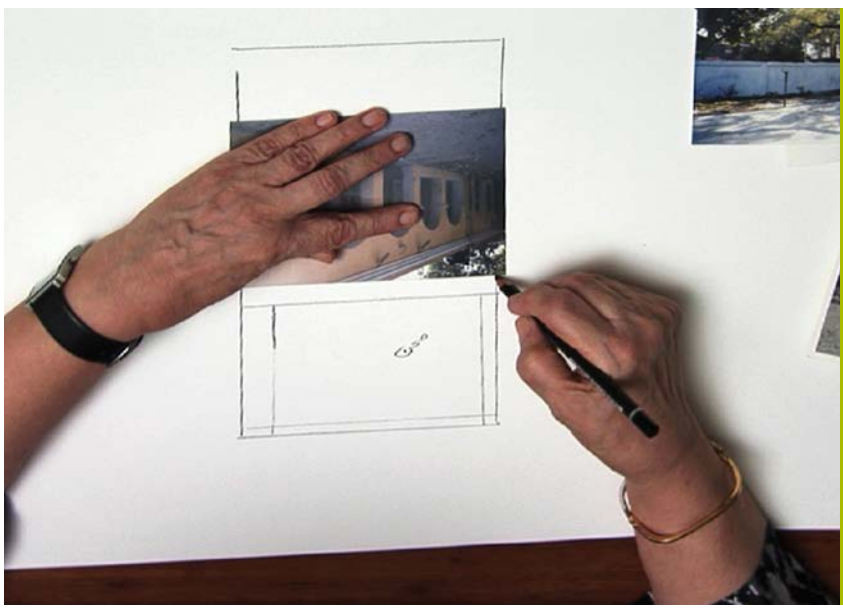

Fig. 4
Zarina Hashmi
HOME
Sophie Ernst
Video still
Karachi, 2008

One vivid example from the *HOME* archive that demonstrates the relationship between drawing and remembering is the recording of Indian artist Zarina Hashmi (Fig. 4). She drew the outline of her home in Aligarh, a university city in North India. While sketching she described what she felt in 1947:

> There were rumours that Aligarh would be razed to the ground, it would be burnt. One night we heard some noise, we went out and far away we could see some villagers working […] We didn't know what to expect. We had never experienced violence, we were scared.[15]

Drawing a landscape stimulated remembering, and a line or shape perpetuated the process of recollection through referred or associated memories. This concept is explored in design theory, which finds that "drawing is a vehicle for design reasoning, and therefore the spontaneous marks made on paper during sketching form a partial record of the designer's thinking".[16] Drawing is used here as both a trigger and evidence of reflection. According to Van Alphen, drawings have been "traditionally […] regarded as 'temporary' things that are not autonomous",[17] and have been considered as a working process towards another goal, such as painting, architecture, or sculpture. Artists, however, have come to value drawing as a performed act in itself. As Van Alphen points out in his article on the intransitive nature of drawing, that "[w]hat we see is the activity itself, not the activity's object or goal".[18] In the recordings of *HOME*, artistic expression is not the goal of the performed act of drawing. Rather, the gestures of drawing make visible thoughts and memories taking shape.

15 Zarina Hashmi, interview by Sophie Ernst (Karachi, 2008), *HOME*, 104.

16 Ellen Yi-Luen Do and Mark D. Gross, "Drawing as a means to design reasoning," in *Artificial Intelligence in Design (AID), Workshop on Visual Representation, Reasoning and Interaction in Design* (Palo Alto: 1996), 1.

17 Van Alphen, "The Gesture of Drawing," 116.

18 Ibid., 116.

QUOTIDIAN TOPOGRAPHY

Individuals interviewed for the *HOME* project often associated landscape with specific forms. These were not always precise, nor necessarily remarkable, but seemed to be dependent on the landscape and location. For instance, Liana Badr described a small detail she used to notice:

> Another strange thing was the floor of the house. Here in the corridor it had many openings, small gaps covered with glass. They made these long openings to let the air in and – I thought of this once – maybe in the past they used to call each other. There were no telephones, so if there was no glass they could call each other through them. […] [pointing to the drawing] This is the door of the house. You come into the salon from here and are able to see the entire city of old Jerusalem. You can see all the domes, the houses, the mosques. You can see the whole world of old Jerusalem from one window.[19]

Liana's memories of her family home in Jerusalem are that of private, everyday spaces. Old Jerusalem is a framed vista seen from the intimacy of her living room window (Fig. 5). By describing a close connection with the landscape of old Jerusalem, Liana also made a political claim of belonging.

19 Liana Badr, interview by Rana Shakaa (Ramallah, 2008), *HOME*, 85-86.

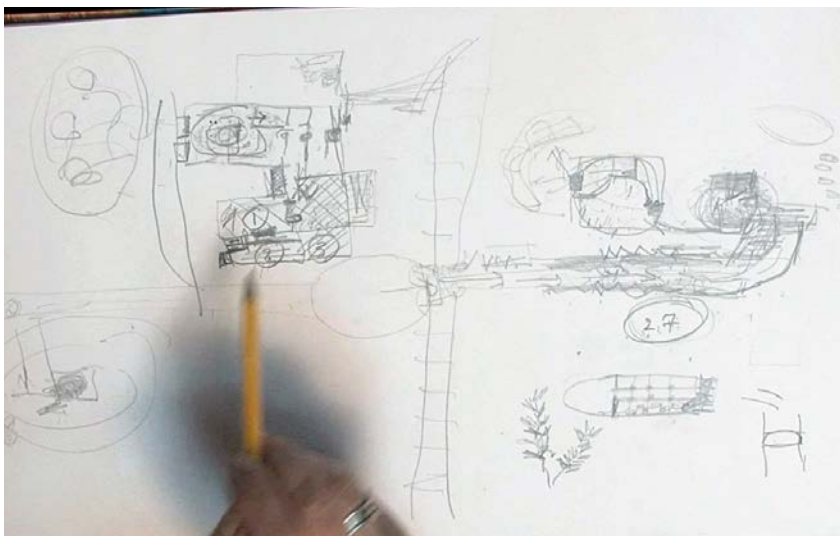

Fig. 5
Liana Badr
HOME
Sophie Ernst
Video still
Ramallah, 2008

Throughout my conversations, I also encountered many stories about orchards, farms, rivers, and mountains, and the activities that took place in these locations. Landscape may appear as a geography of daily rituals. For

instance, Indian performance artist, Nikhil Chopra, sentimentally remembered his family holiday home in the Kashmir valley. He talked about his grandfather:

> You would find my grandfather in the morning – he would put his table and chair out, put on his transistor [radio] and sit with a mirror and shave out in the open. So as kids, the first image we would wake up to in the morning seeing my grandfather take a shave.[20]

The places seem to retain memories of certain sets of actions and rituals. Landscape, in this sense, holds a performative value. During the process of recollection, the movements associated with landscape are drawn out in graphical stories.

STORIES

In my research I observed that experiencing landscape was a process of recognition. Nikhil Chopra felt he only owned stories, and has missed out on the opportunity to 'live' the landscape in the same way as the previous generation:

> I remember it with a lot more romance now than my grandparents do. The great sense of loss is for somebody like my father and me, because we feel we haven't had access, or don't have access, to this anymore. They [the grandparents] have seen their time here. They have come here and lived here for 25 years. They have enjoyed every single leaf in this place, every blade of grass. But we feel in a way that a sense of romance has been lost.[21]

20 Nikhil Chopra, interview by Sophie Ernst (Bombay, 2007), *HOM*E, 67-68.

21 Ibid., 72.

During the conversation I had with Nikhil in his apartment in Bombay, he explained where his fascination with the Kashmiri landscape came from (Fig. 6). While drawing postcard pictures of mountains, he talked about how his

father would open up a book of John Constable (1776-1837) to show big cumulus clouds; or how his grandfather, while a student at Cambridge, would vacation in the Black Forest, because it reminded him of Kashmir. Already the British colonizers admired the picturesque landscape of Kashmir, and made the connection to European alpine landscapes.[22] Self-aware, Nikhil described the entanglement between colonial British nostalgia for 'home' and Indian bourgeois nostalgia for British culture.

Fig. 6
Nikhil Chopra
HOME, Sophie Ernst
Video still
Bombay, 2007

Since the late 1980s, Nikhil and his family have not had easy access to the family holiday home. The region saw much tension and violence, which caused most of the Hindu elite to leave. The Kashmir conflict is a legacy of the Partition of British India. In Jammu and Kashmir, the population is predominantly Muslim. The Hindu ruler of the Princely State initially voted for independence from either India or Pakistan at Partition, but the largest region became part of the Republic of India, and three wars have since been fought over the territory. Nikhil's frustration at having lost "a sense of romance" appears to stem from "nostalgia for an imagined grander time [...] juxtaposed with critical reflection of how he was raised to conceive of (political) space in a way that ignored the reality of those being marginalized".[23]

Similarly, the Palestinian filmmaker, Sami Said, also felt deprived of 'living' the landscape. Saaed Shana'a, Sami's father, was only one-and-a-half years old at the time of the Palestinian *Naqba*. While discussing the family village, Sami asked why his father kept a bit of soil with him (Saaed Shana'a used to carry a small bottle with sand from the village) (Fig. 7). He replied: "I wanted to see my

22 Bollywood added yet another layer to this sense of the picturesque; until recently it was not customary to show lovemaking scenes. Instead, the hero and heroine would suddenly find themselves dancing in deep meadows in front of a Kashmiri mountain range. Notably, when tensions rose during the late 1980s, Bollywood productions relocated to Switzerland. See, *Spatial Dynamics in the Experience Economy*, eds. Anne Lorentzen, Karin Topsø Larsen, and Lise Schrøder (Oxon: Routledge, 2015).

23 Ernst, *HOME*, 51.

land". Sami asked what the benefit of it was, querying: "Don't you think this is too sentimental?" Sami attacked his father because he felt all he owned were "memories and stories", and that these feelings and memories did not feed his reality when dealing with today's conflict.[24]

> Sami Said (son): Your memories of the house, my grandfather's house and the land, all these stories, what do they mean to you?
> Saaed Shana'a (father): These stories pushed me to miss my land and my country – wanting to go back and plough and plant the land and to relive those memories of my homeland.[25]

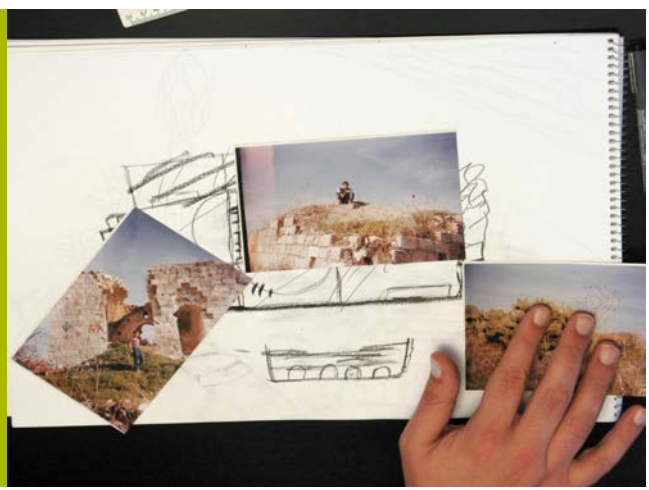

Fig. 7
Sami Said
HOME
Sophie Ernst
Video still
Birzeit, 2008

Sami Said and Nikhil Chopra both belong to the 'generation after', which "'remember[s]' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up".[26] In the case of Nikhil, this has become an important element of his performance art. He inhabits the landscape of the generation that came before through gestures of retelling and drawing.

The examples of Sami Said and Nikhil Chopra recall Edward Said's remark at the beginning of this text: landscape is a socially constructed and maintained

24 Sami Said and Saaed Shana'a, interview by Sophie Ernst (Birzeit, 2008), *HOME*, 81.

25 Sami Said and Saaed Shana'a, interview by Sophie Ernst (Birzeit, 2008), *HOME*, 79.

26 Hirsch, "Postmemory".

sense of place. When we spoke in Ramallah, Salim Tamari explained how in memories, certain images become dominant:

> If you look at the paintings of Shammout [Ismail Shammout, 1930-2006] for example, who became the iconic painter of Palestinian exiles, he and his wife drew pictures as if Palestine was a peasant country […] Cities do not exist in their paintings [...] So of course it becomes a loss of heritage, but the social differences are also ironed out. But it is interesting how the memory of exile becomes dominated by the image of the peasant. And in this case, as in the case of Jerusalem, or Haifa, or Akko, the city does not appear in these images, they are all farmers tilling the land.[27]

During exile, memories of Palestine as a peasant country became prevalent. Tilling the land, or a bottle of sand, become politically significant representations in a conflict about land. In retelling, landscape and certain details in the landscape become iconic and politically charged. Images of landscape are tokens of power relations and identities.

The conversations of *HOME* demonstrate that landscape can be claimed through gestures of drawing, mapping, or storytelling. These examples clarify how memory is dependent on related circumstances, and show that the gesture of drawing is equally influenced by power. Watching the process of drawing a landscape reveals social and political associations. Landscape functions as a cultural symbol, and, as Mitchell notes, meanings and values are put, or found, in a place. Therefore, remembering a landscape is not simply sentimental, but a political act.

In a conversation for the *HOME* project between Indian historian Taha Mehmood and Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie, Kamila said that the craft of writing "makes us look at memory in a heightened poetic sense".[28] I would like

27 Salim Tamari, interview by Sophie Ernst (Ramallah, 2009), *HOME*, 97.

28 Kamila Shamsie, interview by Taha Mehmood (London, 2011), *HOME*, 50.

to add that the poetics of landscape are revealed in the performative gestures of drawing.[29]

29 I sincerely thank two anonymous reviewers for critically reading the manuscript and suggesting substantial improvements.

Sophie Ernst is a visual artist who trained as an industrial mechanic before studying sculpture. She was a resident at the Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam and completed her PhD at Leiden University in 2016. She lived and worked for four years (2003-2007) in Pakistan, where she taught as Assistant Professor at Beaconhouse National University. She has exhibited her work internationally. In her artistic and theoretical work she follows the idea of projection in relation to memory, historical objects, architecture, urban spaces, and identity. Her works evolve from conversations and interviews, and she sees making art as a response to these encounters.