

# Barbed Utopia

by

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## **Abstract**

I create performative spaces with narratives implicitly inspired by my experiences in a repressive cultural context, and visually influenced by concepts of performance aesthetics, affect, emotions, expressiveness, rhythm and movement. My thesis research has been an amalgam of autoethnography, abstract installation and a critical, self-reflexive performance art practice. I use my expertise in architecture to create unconventional body-centric environments that explore the relationship of body, space and place to contemporary site-related art, scenography, performance and personal history. I use and investigate innovative methodologies of gesture, interiority and live art with a focus on my body as a site for creation, reinvention, memory and activism. My thesis artwork aims to critically scrutinize and challenge patriarchal and colonial systems. I incorporate feminist concepts through narratives that have connection to cultural identity, the gendered social gaze, cultural prejudices, home, nostalgia and diaspora.

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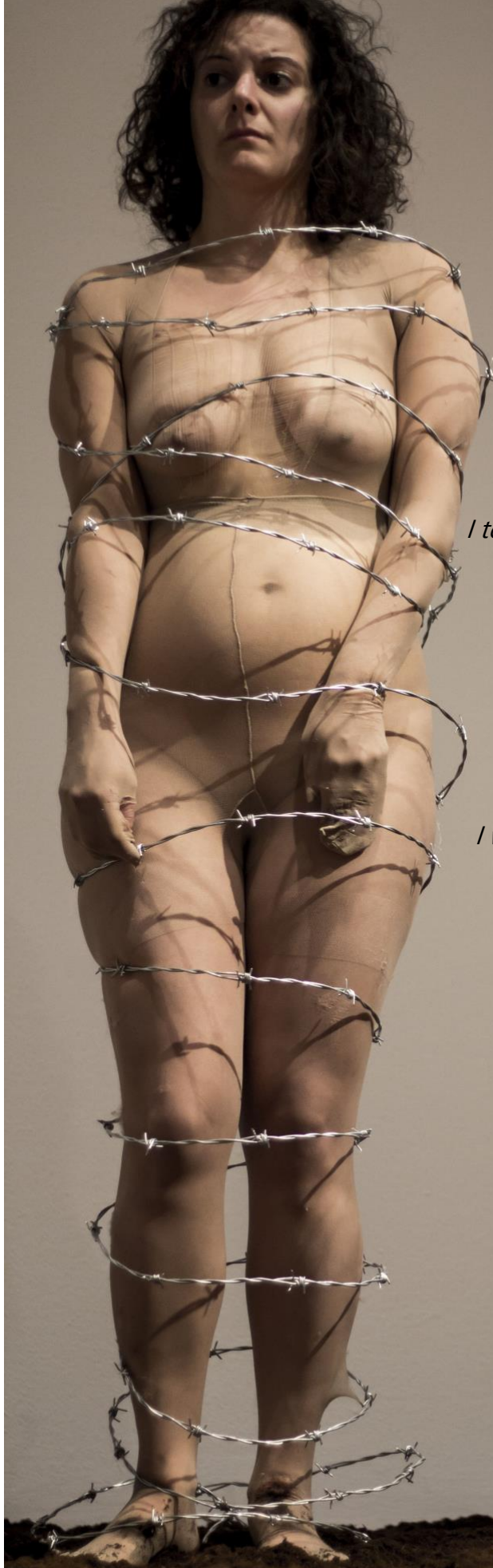
I couldn't have completed without my family's help, support, and love. My daughter, Linda, and my son, Adam, have been a continuous source of patience, strength and inspiration throughout the past three years of this graduate program. A special thank you to my loving husband, Fadi Hatoum, who supported me throughout the entire process, and has kept me well while I have pursued my dreams. I will be grateful forever for your love.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
A MEMOIR	7
SCOPE OF THESIS PROJECT	9
<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>RESEARCH METHODS</b>	<b>11</b>
IT'S NOT ME... BUT MYSELF (FALL 2017)	15
BITTER SWEET MIDDLE EAST (WINTER 2018)	17
THE SEEN AND THE HIDDEN (WINTER 2019)	19
DIS-SENSUS (SUMMER 2019)	22
I DARE... (SUMMER 2019)	26
MY IMAGINARY HAVEN (FALL 2019)	28
NOMADIC SELF; MUTE RAGE (WINTER 2020)	30
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>32</b>
THE "I"	33
"I" AS THE OTHER SEX	35
"I" AS THE OTHER RACE	36
THE OTHER "I" IN SPACE	38
"I" ENGENDER PLACE	41
"I" INDIVIDUATE THE SELF	43
<b>EXHIBITION</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>THESIS FINAL PROJECT: <i>BARBED UTOPIA</i></b>	<b>47</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>49</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1 Bitter Sweet Middle East Performance and Installation close up	9
Figure 2 My Imaginary Haven. Installation and Performance - video stills 1 & 2	10
Figure 3 First experiment combining pantyhose with barbed wire	12
Figure 4 My Imaginary Haven. Installation close-up	13
Figure 5 It's Not Me... But Myself Performance. Video still 1	15
Figure 6 It's Not Me... But Myself Performance. Video still 2	16
Figure 7 Bitter Sweet Middle East Architectural Installation, photo by Kristy Boyce	17
Figure 8 Bitter Sweet Middle East Installation close up, photo by Kristy Boyce	18
Figure 9 Bitter Sweet Middle East Dance Performance, video still	18
Figure 10 The Seen and the Hidden Installation	19
Figure 11 The Seen and the Hidden Performance. Video stills 1 & 2	20
Figure 12 The Seen and the Hidden Performance. Video still 3	21
Figure 13 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Lorenza Cini	22
Figure 14 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Christiana Zeta Rolla	23
Figure 15 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou	24
Figure 16 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Christiana Zeta Rolla	25
Figure 17 I Dare Performance. Video still, camera by Jasmeet Sidhu	26
Figure 18 I Dare Performance. Video still, camera by Jasmeet Sidhu	27
Figure 19 My Imaginary Haven. Spatial Installation close up	28
Figure 20 My Imaginary Haven. Installation view	29
Figure 21 My Imaginary Haven. Performance video still	29
Figure 22 Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance close up 1. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou	30
Figure 23 Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance close up 2. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou	31
Figure 24 Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week	31
Figure 25 Final show's Materials	45
Figure 26 Barbed Utopia Installation	47



*I was a silent follower for my whole life;  
a follower of other people's desires;  
a follower of my dad's rules;  
a follower of my husband's needs;  
a follower of my cultural norms;  
a follower of my religion's doctrines;  
a follower of my country's political dogmas.  
I tend to satisfy all people around me, but not myself,  
I mind to please everyone, but not myself...  
I'm wearing a mask!  
Is it because I'm a weak "middle eastern" woman?*

*I DISSENT!*

*I escaped.  
I migrated seeking freedom.  
I want to free myself of all these concepts, traditions,  
social judgments, and religious restrictions.  
I want to challenge all taboos.  
But, I'm scared...  
I'm a foreigner now.  
I'm strong, but not strong enough...  
I'm free, but not free enough...  
I'm a woman, yet, I'm not courageous enough!*

## **Introduction**

I am a person of hybridity: a Lebanese-Canadian artist and interior architect who has lived in Lebanon, Kuwait, Ukraine and Canada, a woman living in the diaspora. I am also a woman who refuses to be a victim of patriarchal systems. I challenge the dominant political and social discourses of social injustice promoted by authoritarian patriarchal systems, I lack stability and don't have a feeling of belonging. Through my art I seek to raise questions regarding perceptions of freedom and oppression while demonstrating the agency of individual action to push limits, challenge boundaries, and negate blocks of gender, sex, race and class.

## **A Memoir**

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I witnessed many major political and military events that negatively impacted my life. Those violent events were the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), the Gulf war (1990), and the Lebanese-Israeli war (2006). During the civil war in Lebanon I lived amid bombing, shooting, running, escaping, screaming, crying and hiding as if those were the normal and usual everyday activities. I saw starving kids, sick people, wounded bodies and dead corpses which became a normalized scene. Since then I've never stopped questioning the perception of "men in power" and I dissent from their motives and approaches to rule. I dissent to the cruelty of their strategies in planting fear and hatred among citizens. This harsh situation led me, as a young immature girl, to conclude that most men share common desires to repress, control and dominate. It caused in me a psychologically complex dance with misogyny: it grew in me a rebel, a silent rebel.

Alongside harrowing wars, I was raised with endless restrictions and limitations. In my Druze community, like in many other conservative cultures, a well-raised polite girl should be calm, demure, serious, shy, bashful, chaste and reserved. My austere dad exerted extreme control over my behaviors in order to maintain a good social reputation and avoid culturally scandalous incidents. I had constraints on the way I spoke, walked, the way I dressed and the way I ate. Despite my refusal to be subordinate to male power, I married to break free from my dad's authority and confinement. I was dreaming of autonomy, simplicity, spontaneity, comfort, and

mystical experiences. Disappointingly, the feeling of being inferior is still the same after getting married, and the pattern of moving from one country to another didn't change either.

In the midst of instability, I was seeking solidity. At the age of 30, I enrolled in architecture school, a buried passion, in order to find fulfilment. I wanted to feel committed to a place and a goal that meant something to me personally. I believed then that designing and building homes for clients might create an empathetic bond and make up for the absence of my own home. I specialized in interior spaces that relate to people's private lives and daily exercises. I was seeking to derive stability in my life from theirs. Also, as a woman working in the middle east, I was encouraged to focus on interior design projects that are more convenient to accomplish in a male-centered architecture industry. In my architectural practice, I am inspired by deconstructionism and expressionism, movements that liberate spaces from fixed dogmas. Therefore, my journey of liberation started there through my academic architectural projects and successful career.

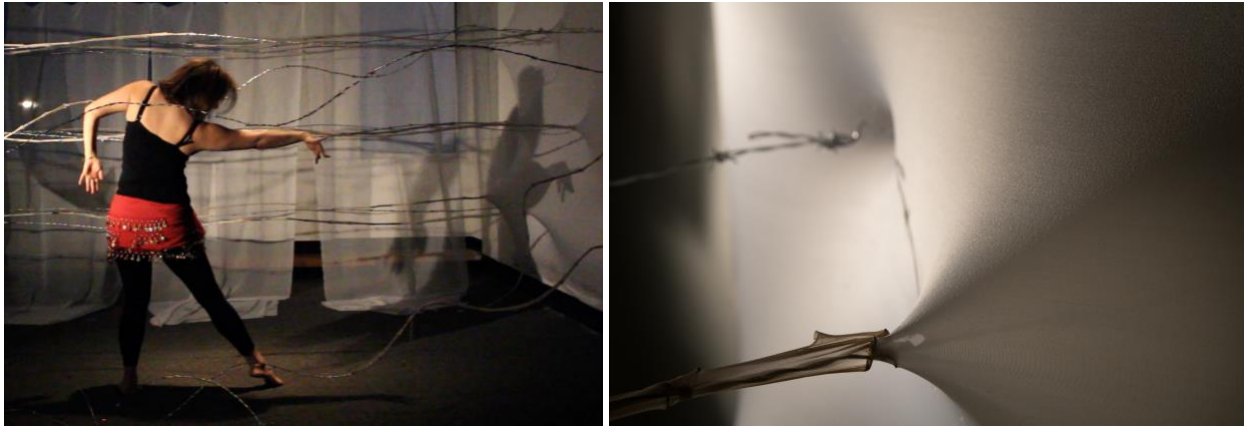
I was always leaving Lebanon to follow my father's and later my husband's work in different countries and places, but also always going back. I dissented from my destiny. I continued to seek solidity, dignity and stability. Living forever in diaspora I lost the true meaning of home. Where is home? Where do my roots belong? It's very difficult to understand the meaning of home and roots when the maximum number of years I've spent in one country is not more than five years in a row. It's too hard to define home after I've moved into more than twenty houses in my life in four different countries. I moved into fourteen different houses in the last sixteen years.

I migrated several times escaping wars, political oppressive regimes and social injustices, and searching for better work opportunities. I have now lived in Toronto, Canada, for more than five years. I came to Toronto seeking to fulfill my ambitions in a new home with hope for stability, dignity and respect. I've just started to achieve a "shy" feeling of belonging and to develop a confident realization of my potentialities, since this city has embraced my personal aspirations and my artistic ambitions. However, I miss the familial



milieu. I feel displaced and alienated again. Home feels to me like an ever-changing place. Do I need to trace my home, build my home, or just imagine my home?

### Scope of Thesis Project

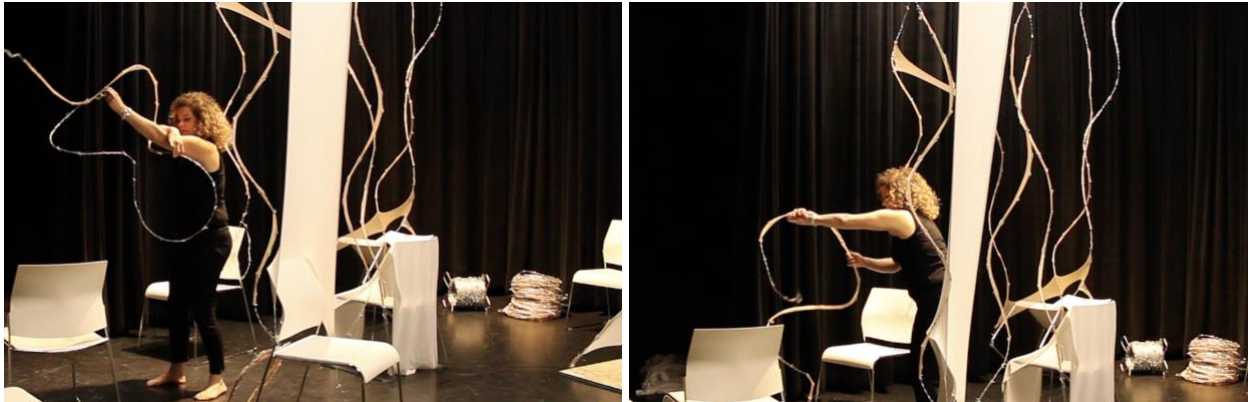


*Figure 1 Bitter Sweet Middle East Performance and Installation close up*

My thesis project attempts to analyze the aesthetic and political potential of my female body to both represent myself in the diaspora, and to stand in for others. I explore the tensions between my lived bodily experiences as a woman and the cultural meanings and familial prescriptions inscribed on my female body. I've always been interested in the aura of live performances and craved the intensified emotional experience that they offer. Thus, I focus on autobiographical material from a feminist perspective, and make works of live performance art inside and alongside experimental installations to help me feel my existence and understand my shifting identity and my (new) place in this world.

This led me to explore the node joining architecture and performance, thereby fusing expressive architectural sculptures with affective body gestures. To support this I have been doing practice-led research in performance with a focus on my presence as a woman and my individual agency in raising feminine empowerment concepts. I'm often bearing in mind subjective body-based methods of gesture and choreography, in addition to practice-based methodologies of scenography that merge emotive scenic concepts with animated spatial installations (Fig. 1 & 2). I create and activate eccentric sets in attempt to challenge the tension between familiarity and unpredictability in a

performance environment and also to enable the creation of conversations between the space and myself. I investigate physical along with intangible opposing dualities, such as mass and void, presence and absence, expression and suppression, passive and active, desire and fear, lust and guilt, masculine and feminine, logic and emotion, and the real and the virtual.



*Figure 2 My Imaginary Haven. Installation and Performance - video stills 1 & 2*

My work is partly a reaction to my censure by fundamentalist religious frameworks and my traditional culture's prejudiced judgements of women's behaviors and desires. I was taught to always be subservient so that my family, society, religion and culture would accept me. Now I focus on a life story that is the result of my silent refusal to submit to the male dominance of my culture. Through performance, I amplify my struggle against paradigms of inferiority and resist being oppressed and exploited. I consider the creative process of telling my story silently by creating an immersive space for my autonomous body in an attempt to examine channels that depict and condemn the harsh reality of subjugation. My artwork is a self-reflexive feminist act of responding to the constructions of knowledge and power within and on my body. Through an activist performance art that will employ the interaction of my body with a constructed symbolic space, I break my silence. I build architectural installations and perform within them actions that question my deeply felt question – what makes a home? Every version of this installation/performance questions a different aspect of my research that relates to my personal diasporic experience. I've been in continuous search for a "good" place that can be a source of peace, joy, protection and freedom; I've been in search of something absent in Lebanon and the Arab world. I create environments that offer an intermediary space for the development of a craved haven.

## **Research Questions**

- To what extent can my self-reflexive performance art, using my feminist body and voice, articulate a context of oppression to suggest ways to talk back to governing social systems?
- In what ways can I as a fugitive woman construct spaces that offer haven from dominating patriarchal systems in order to freely celebrate my womanhood?
- How can I perform dissent and symbolize resistance through activist body language and gesture, while resolving any dissonance between my intentions and physical actions, and without exploiting the sexuality of my body?

## **Research Objectives**

My objective is to investigate my own female body's relation to political and social issues in a physical tangible way, and to analyze it in the contexts of cultural and feminist thinking with an interdisciplinary approach. Through live performance, I seek to explore ways that my female body is capable to use in order to construct metaphorical spaces and places for self-recognition and belonging. I also aim to adapt or create physical spaces in order to analyze the themes of space, materials, site and frame using my architectural training practice as a framework. At the micro-level, I mean to explore the symbolic meanings of objects and materials used in a performance, and assess how their qualities and behaviors speak to my personal experience.

## **Research Methods**

I assemble ordinary materials in unfamiliar combinations in order to make the atmosphere appear provocative and symbolic with a purpose to show beyond what is visible. I interact with the constructed environment through movement and gestures to enable the creation of conversations between the space and myself. In making my artwork, I ask myself: What moves me? What offers me security? What heals my pain? I question what makes the space I inhabit receptive, empowering and affective. I seek to

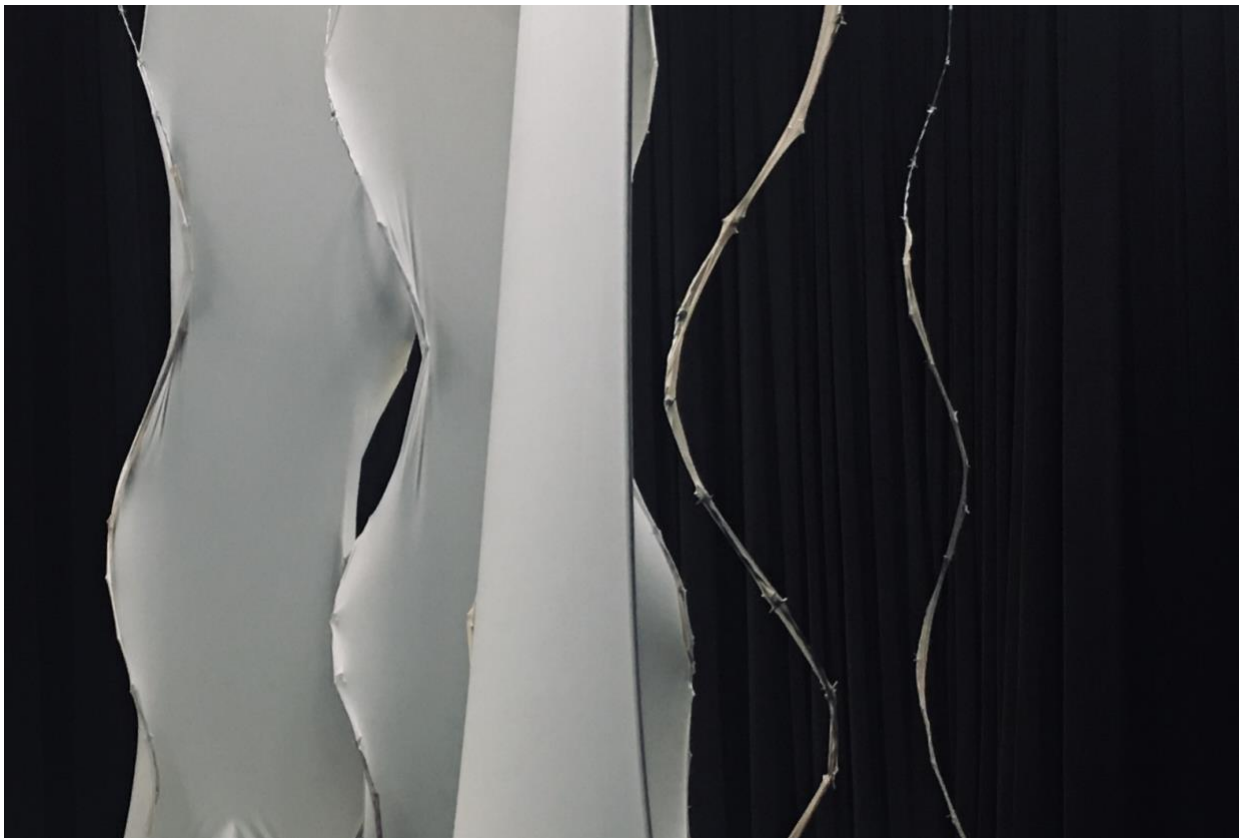
understand how the scenographic visuals influence the conception and perception of my performative artwork, by studying the interconnection of my body and the space I have created. I engage in actions that may also stimulate my audience's awareness of their own histories in relation to my position as a vulnerable but strong woman in this space.



*Figure 3 First experiment combining pantyhose with barbed wire*

I often use barbed wire as a primary material in my work because it becomes a symbol that summarizes my life story. The past wars along with the continuing ruthless political situations in Lebanon are all about dividing the Lebanese people according to religious and sectarian political parties. During wars and throughout conflicts and demonstrations that occur in my homeland, citizens are repeatedly being separated by barbed wire, street barriers, burning tires, spike strips and dividing walls in order to bar them from trespassing to the "other" side. Roads that connect politically opposing regions, cities or villages are often blocked by all possible means of barriers to impede movement and prohibit crossing through. I still see barbed wire spread across my bittersweet homeland as if they have become part of our Lebanese landscape. It's a symbol of intolerance, oppression, degradation, torture, and human captivity.

I attempt to translate my opposing emotions and state of mind in an experimental performance act within an architectural installation that consists of unconventional combinations of materials, affective objects, and abstract forms. Through an autoethnographic process, I draw upon the resources of the self to understand my body's relation to political and social issues in a physical, tangible way. I deliberate over concepts that have a connection to home and territory. I consider personal narratives that relate to my identity as a displaced woman, my social position as a wife and mother, and my cultural milieu. Coming originally from an extremely conservative Arab, Lebanese, and Druze background (a religious minority embedded with hardline beliefs and with strict and severe rules), I frequently develop contradicting thoughts and emotions whilst thinking through my practice and research. I try creating spaces that offer me emotional stability for myself as a migrant, through sentimental links to my homeland. This approach awakens the feeling of belonging and reveals the extreme paradoxes within. I question my confused identity amid my fears and pleas, my freedom and captivity, my desires and abandonments and my surges and escapes.



*Figure 4 My Imaginary Haven. Installation close-up*

I maintain the idea of connecting to my homeland and culture, and awakening the feeling of belonging by focusing on the extreme paradoxes within. I build architectural installations with dichotomies to understand how the same environment can convey opposite meanings and thus have dual emotional effects. I experimented with my work whether my holistic shelter needs to have a passive character or have an active presence. I tested these dual representations in installations that I constructed, like the utopic white cubes in *It's Not Me, But Myself* and *The Seen and The Hidden* as minimal and neutral (Fig. 12 & 14), and like the dystopic installations, *My Imaginary Haven* and *Bitter Sweet Middle East* as articulated and chaotic (Fig. 7 & 9). I study modes of making architectures that would stimulate my reactive mind through immersive experiences while the behavior of the materials converge with my movement. In the scope of my work and research I question how to articulate the paradoxes and amplify the qualities of my yearned for place.

**It's Not Me... But Myself** (fall 2017)



*Figure 5 It's Not Me... But Myself Performance. Video still 1*

This performance displays a scene of intimacy within a voyeuristic environment that reveals a sensual experience of lived space. I explore notions of visibility, surveillance, intimacy, female body, touch and improvisation to study the relationship between gender and space. I perform in a utopic cube that replicates my dancing shadows on both internal and external interfaces of translucent screens. I dance to a classic song by the iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthoum. I have mixed feelings of nostalgia, fear, joy and pain. For the construction, I was inspired by modernist “masculine” architecture aesthetics where I used rectilinear forms crafted in elegant simplicity for this intimate structure. This architectural style of sharp lines and angles has been historically constructed by men such as Le Corbusier, Mies Van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright (Curtis, 1996).



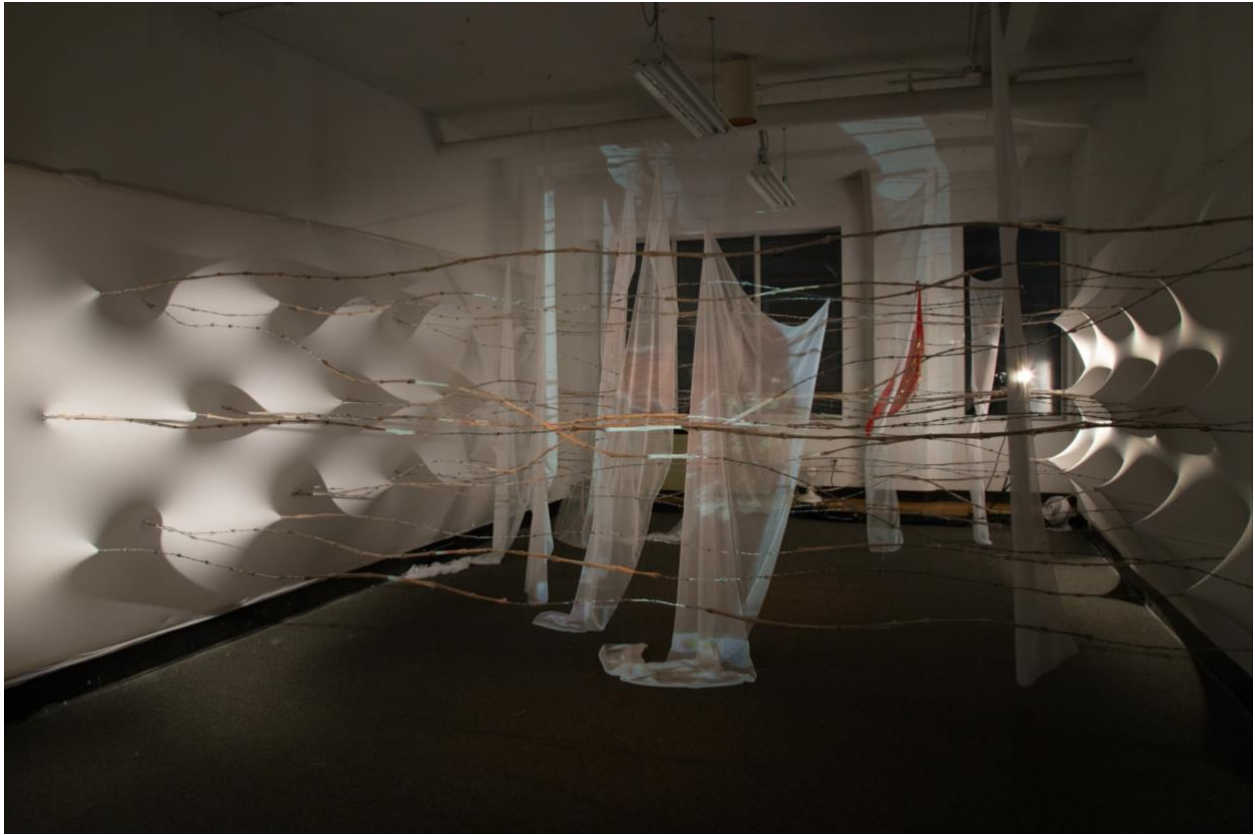


Figure 6 *It's Not Me... But Myself Performance*. Video still 2

*It's Not Me... But Myself* amplified my struggle with the patriarchal culture that suppresses women in the name of religion and traditions. I was being observed but my identity wasn't easily recognizable, which in contradiction gave me the feeling of security to express myself in the intimate space. The minimalistic space that I created resembled an imagined "utopic" haven that I've been yearning for forever. It looked like the place that I dream of and also fear every day. It's a blurry image and I cannot imagine its details. However, it is serene and safe. I speculate on the impact of a self-reflexive and reflective space on my behavior and emotions. In this piece, I express my need to own my choices for the way I want to live and for the place that I want to belong. I illustrate female embodiment by building a reflective room for myself to see my body through my own gaze, but this room has translucent partitions to amplify that the male gaze still permeates everywhere.



## **Bitter Sweet Middle East** (winter 2018)



*Figure 7 Bitter Sweet Middle East Architectural Installation, photo by Kristy Boyce*

This work evokes the idea of connecting to my homeland and culture, and the illusive feeling of belonging. I condemn my home as source of violence, crisis, and oppression, and I experience contradictory feelings about nostalgia, alienation and hyphenated identity. The idea of contradiction is intensified through the use of soft pantyhose juxtaposed with harsh barbed wire. They reveal the flexible versus the rigid, the soft versus the harsh, the peaceful versus the aggressive, the welcoming versus the hostile, and the attractive versus the repulsive.



*Figure 8 Bitter Sweet Middle East Installation close up, photo by Kristy Boyce*



*Figure 9 Bitter Sweet Middle East Dance Performance, video still*

I dance between the barbed wires to the songs of the Lebanese singer, Fairouz, that ignites my emotions to dance with extreme feelings of longing. A fragmented close-up video of my performance is projected on the sheer curtains. In the final installation, the only sounds are my foot steps and the jingles of my belly dance skirt. In it, I embody a dream that was lost in the chaos of conflicts and restrictions.

With my work, I aim to inspire, to provoke, and to bring hope to myself and to all dreamers. I aspire to break my silence and liberate myself from authoritarian patriarchal culture and institutionalized religion. Sheathing the barbed wire with pantyhose manifests my individual agency in taming the brutality of its sharpness. The randomness of the wire give the space a particularly menacing dynamic.

### **The Seen and the Hidden (winter 2019)**



*Figure 10 The Seen and the Hidden Installation*

The scenographic installation, *The Seen and the Hidden*, experiments with concepts of space and body, human presence, emotional affect and ephemerality. It builds on the structure of *It's Not Me... But Myself* (Fig.5). In this work, I probed ways to articulate ideas of self-awareness in an interactive cube. *The Seen and the Hidden* revealed a scene of intimacy in an environment that exposes a bodily experience in a surveilled but secretive space. The performance explores self-consciousness within a site, in this case one that involves interactive tactile materials and sensory reactive experiences.

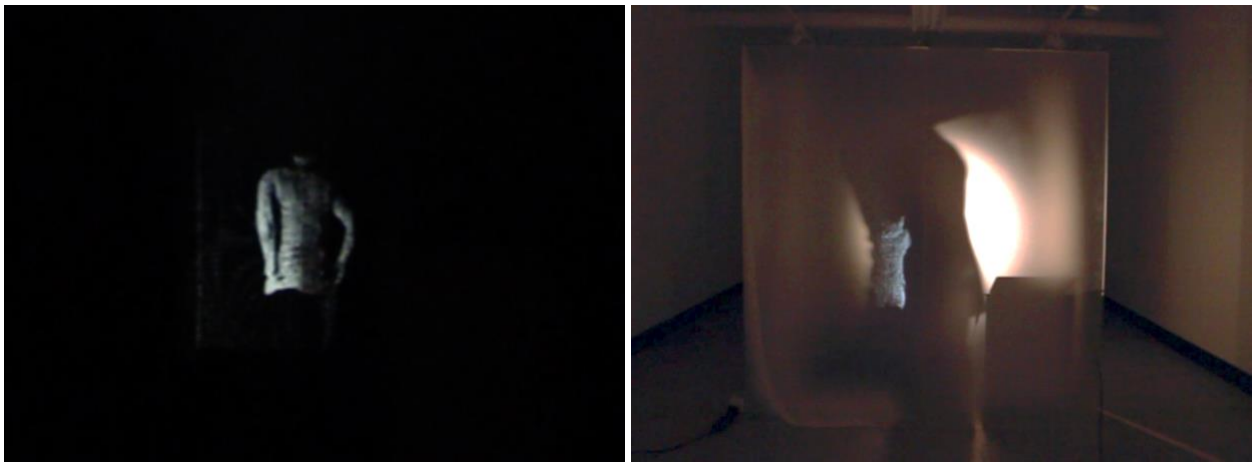


Figure 11 *The Seen and the Hidden Performance*. Video stills 1 & 2

My dancing body was replicated in the space through a three-dimensional digital scene projected alongside my own body's shadows. Replicas were projected on both interior and exterior interfaces of frosted translucent acrylic screens. Conceptually, these patterns create a dialogue between me, the performer, and my representation, bringing the contrast of control and authenticity into question. For the viewer, this montaged image challenges the tension between familiarity and unpredictability. I was being observed from the outside, but my identity, location and orientation weren't detectable.

Both projects, *It's Not Me... But Myself* and *The Seen and the Hidden*, speak to my childhood desires. My over protective traditional father rarely allowed me to join friends' gatherings and often forbade me to dance at parties. I always rejected his authority, however, I was silent and afraid to argue. I love to dance. Dancing was my childhood dream. It is a memory that evokes passion, sensuality, self-discovery and inspiration. It's



my way of celebrating my woman's body and femininity. However, to dance is a pleasure that is constantly coupled with the fear of being surveilled. I am always concerned when traditional conservative people, mainly men, observe me when I am dancing for my own pleasure. Women who dance as a profession or even who dance shamelessly in public are socially judged as prostitutes. Nevertheless, my community somehow also encourages women to traverse all aspects of arts, politics and knowledge, though they expect her to appear extremely reserved and to comply with the social code.



Figure 12 *The Seen and the Hidden Performance*. Video still 3

*It's Not Me... But Myself* and *The Seen and the Hidden*, were both influenced by Mona Hatoum's 1982 performance piece *Under Siege*. Hatoum, a Palestinian performance and installation artist, performed for seven hours, naked, covered in clay, and trapped inside a huge transparent cube-like container where she tries to stand upright, but keeps falling down and trying to stand up again, leaving traces on the glass with her body and her hands. In the room, revolutionary songs in Arabic, French and English,

news reports and statements tied to the political situation in the Middle East can be heard. This performance was also accompanied by a leaflet with the following statement:

As a Palestinian woman this work was my first attempt at making a statement about a persistent struggle to survive in a continuous state of siege. [...] As a person from the 'Third World', living in the West, existing on the margin of European society and alienated from my own [...] this action represented an act of separation [...] stepping out of an acquired frame of reference and into a space which acted as a point of reconnection and reconciliation with my own background and the bloody history of my own people.

(1982)

### **Dis-sensus** (summer 2019)



*Figure 13 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Lorenza Cini*

I was accepted into an Intensive Summer residency workshop during Venice International Performance Art Week where I entered into a concentrated process of artistic practice-led research. Led by the artist duos VestAndPage and Andriago&Aliprandi we engaged in practice-led exercises and actions from multiple traditions including performance art, experimental theater, dance, ritual shamanism,

and live jam sessions. This experience was a turning point in my practice and for my thesis research. I was guided to inquire into performance art as a way to explore the physical, mental and spiritual body through the possibility of crossing the exterior/interior boundary. We analyzed the creative process, the issues addressed by our work, its aesthetic currency, cultural impact and political relevance. We inquired into a poetics of tolerance, understanding, and the acknowledgment of divergent thinking.



*Figure 14 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Christiana Zeta Rolla*

In *Dis-sensus*, a durational performance of two hours, I perform the art of building as a symbolic action. I use threads to narrate my story and weave it as the structure of my own haven. This act is an attempt to honour self-actualization and to reconcile with my destiny. Like the spider who creates its web, a living architecture, out of its own body, I am using my own body to create architecture with greater awareness of its purpose. I unroll the yarn and weave it around the four pillars of the performance space. I move slowly and take my time with every gesture while looping the thread in a cube-like web. I treat the fixed structural columns of the archaic space as the fixed dogmas that I built

my life around. Over the time of my performance, the yarn becomes an extension of my body. It urges me to explore what we share. I dance with it. I caress it. I fight it. I pull it hard and antagonize its stubborn knots and tangles. I test its limits and characteristics. In a moment of revelation, I spew my guts out.



*Figure 15 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou*





Figure 16 Dis-sensus Public Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Christiana Zeta Rolla

I whisper my life story to that resilient white thread. Yet, I feel its delicacy and vulnerability. I learn that time provokes memory through experiencing how my body remembers trauma over the extended duration of a performance.

We transients, who are defined by motion instead of rootedness, have a tangled relationship with the concept of home for we live in a space that tells us the place we are now is not our homeland but our homeland may not be home to us again. (*Weaving A Way Home*, Leslie Van Gelder, 2008, p:60).

## **I Dare...** (summer 2019)



*Figure 17 I Dare Performance. Video still, camera by Jasmeet Sidhu*

I participated in the workshop "Imaginary and the Synchronous: Working with Accounts of the Self in Performance Video" at Trinity Square Video with performance artist Irene Loughlin. This workshop was designed to employ autobiography as a means to explore video performance. We, participants, linked an aspect of our life with an object/s that represents this event or characteristic, linking it to a wider socio-political platform. I used the barbed wire that triggers the traumatic memory of the political conflicts I've witnessed. I performed an action with the wire to convey antagonizing notions of intolerance and human captivity.



*Figure 18 | Dare Performance. Video still, camera by Jasmeet Sidhu*

This work was an experiment to test my female body's boundaries where I took physical risks with real sharp barbed wire in order to confront my limits. The barbed wire has a life of its own and an intense charged inertia. I felt its coldness and danger when it suddenly sprang. I was constantly pricked by its spikes, and I learned ways to defy its harmful tangible touch. I learned how to deal with my bodily pain and the triggered negative emotions of fear and anxiety. In that moment, I introspected with my inner feelings and I asked what this physical pain meant to me. I discovered that there's a phenomenal connection between my sensory physical pain and my emotional psychological pain. This action revealed my vulnerability. I touched my honesty. Then, I realized my strength and trusted my senses, despite my delicacy in opposition to this harsh material.

## **My Imaginary Haven** (fall 2019)



*Figure 19 My Imaginary Haven. Spatial Installation close up*

In *My Imaginary Haven*, I built a changing immersive architectural installation in which I performed mundane actions to interrogate what makes a home. I built the installation using barbed wire as the primary skeleton of the structure. I hung the wire vertically from the ceiling grid. They were pendulous and curvy. I dressed them with nude-colored pantyhose and white spandex fabric to connect the wire and create partitions. The pantyhose created abstract, soft, organic and translucent torn screens (Fig. 19). I performed fragments of my chaotic life cycle (Fig. 21).

I start by sitting at my “work station” uncoiling barbed wire and wrapping it with pantyhose. Then I move to a serene intimate space created within the installation and write with passion my secret emotions and buried thoughts on papers that I hang on the barbed wire’s spikes. I walk to a mattress, placing barbed wire around it, and lie down on my back with a belly dancer’s skirt on my torso and a black veil covering my face. I perform a repetitive gesture that resembles a forced sexual act. I hold this act until my body collapses. Afterwards, I return to the “work station” ready to repeat my life cycle.





*Figure 20 My Imaginary Haven. Installation view*



*Figure 21 My Imaginary Haven. Performance video still*

**Nomadic Self; Mute Rage** (winter 2020)



*Figure 22 Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance close up 1. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou*

I participated in Venice International Performance Art Week 2020, in the Co-creation Live Factory "Dissenting Bodies Marking Time" with performance artists VestandPage and Marilyn Arsem. For the final public event, I undertook a five-hour durational performance. The performance conveyed the struggle of exile and the pain caused by the lost feeling of belonging. I always wonder if home means where my roots are, where my relatives are, or where my family and loved ones are. I wonder if home is the place where I lived for a long time, the place of pleasant times, or the place of meaningful times. I used my body as my "only" home whose time is equal to my lifetime, soil as my land that's timeless and barbed wire that has a shorter or perhaps a longer life than mine.



Figure 23 *Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance close up 2. Venice International Performance Art Week, photo by Fenia Kotsopoulou*



Figure 24 *Nomadic Self; Mute Rage Performance. Venice International Performance Art Week*

My whole body is coiled with a barbed wire and my feet, which are my roots, are planted in a heap of soil. I slowly spread the soil over the entire room's floor with my restricted small steps. Step by step, my land grows outwards. During this durational performance, I see flashes of images that awaken in me the feelings of nostalgia, anger, pain, bliss and ecstasy. As I move through time in a circular motion. I elevate into another level of perception. I am floating in the infinite universe, and feel myself growing spherically. Time has stopped. Gravity vanishes. I look down to the earth; I tear; I smile.

My dissenting body was marking time and place through a repetitive, simple and specific action. The soil traced my journey. It traced my silent rage too. At the end, I was stunned how time passed without sensing it. I experienced the effect of time on my body and on the materials. Through examining my physical and my emotional stamina, I learned how a durational performance can amplify inner emotions and reveal buried memories.

## **Literature Review**

I employ a feminist post-structural research framework that not only challenges, but also seeks to disrupt issues of constructed colonial knowledge, patriarchal power, dominating societal systems, and inscribed femininity discourse. Feminist poststructuralism uses the concept of subjectivity to comprehend social relations, social institutions, and power relations especially in relation to gender (English, 2010). In my research, I examine notions of subjectivity and agency, to first understand and then, revise the way these issues shaped my life and my identity. I consider a theoretical framework that attempts to address the rules, and traditional norms that affect my life as a woman and how they exercise power in my daily life. I study a multi-layered body of literature from Judith Butler, Sandra Bartky, Susan Bordo, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Rendell, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Erin Manning and Peggy Phelan. Their work has supported and helped me understand how performance along with my spatial art can be read as a form of antagonism. I am enthused by feminist theory's charged literature that challenges binaries and dualist notions such as masculine/feminine, self/other, and east/west. With these provocative concepts, I feel motivated to produce influential art by using my body in evocative acts that empower me, as a woman, towards being a free subject rather than the objects of society's gaze. I employ my



culturally hybrid self to blur the boundaries between polarities of social and political schemes, and posit that contradictions co-exist to create a third space. In doing so, I sometimes elide these binary categories (linking Male with West, for example, or Female with Other and Diaspora) in order to illustrate and also challenge the ways in which they continue to condition both patriarchy and my opposition to it.

I engage with concepts of autobiography, performance as activism, architecture as a performing art, and improvisational, somatic<sup>1</sup> body-based practices. Throughout my thesis research, I have been positioned in a place between art and architecture. I explore the relationships between performance art, personal history, my female body, architecture, space and site and the conceptual intersections between them. I apply this multiple platform methodology to examine to what extent I can employ my female body to fulfil aesthetic needs, bring new experiences to audiences, and maybe provide refuge (for myself and for an audience). At the early stages of my research, I focused on creating scenographic installations for theatrical performances, and then later used my body in live performance as a method to understand the connection between my "self" and the spaces I created. Performance itself became an important part of my research and it developed to become the artwork, and not just a method to assess environments and the emotions that they convey.

### **The "I"**

My research methodologies also employ autoethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997), self-reflexive performance and practice-led research, which are first-person methodologies that are embodied and self-enacted. I discovered that performance that comes from a personally relevant subject creates artwork that can express complex situations. The notion of critical performance art has shifted my research interests and allowed me to more deeply investigate my life experiences. This depth was reached by implementing actions and engaging in physical exercises that strengthened my inner sensors in order to activate personal memories, and then enabled their use as primary matter for an artistic body of work. By challenging my physical and emotional limits, I aspire to shape

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<sup>1</sup> Western body-mind disciplines that encompass ways of working with the body that are therapeutic, educational, creative and physically expressive defined in *The origins and evolution of somatics* (Mangione ,1993).

a critical awareness and disturb the status quo to probe questions of identity and home. Through improvisation, contemporaneity and spontaneity, I participate in a situation that I'm creating. This multilayered analysis involves self-observation and investigation of a subjective experience during performances in which I explore ways to confront my struggles.

Tami Spry shows in *Body, Paper Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* how to move from the body, our lived performances, to the written page, and from the page to that uncertain, unstable site where we navigate gender, class, language, race, intimacy, power, and politics (2011). Spry states in her *Introduction*: "The performative-I is the positionality of the researcher in performative autoethnography and is based in a negotiation between self/other/culture/language, a system of relation between body/I/we/word" (p. 30). I am moved by her claims about autoethnography as a radical resistant democratic practice, a political practice intended to create a space for dialogue and debate about issues of injustice. I create my work from the space of the personal, about my own body and my desires, dreams and fears, in order to communicate with the world possible alternative situations.

Linda Park-Fuller similarly discusses autobiographical staged personal narrative, applying insights from studies in conversational personal narrative, the staging of collected stories, and therapeutic testimony. In her text, *Performing Absence: The Staged Personal Narrative as Testimony*, she pays specific attention to contemporary essays about performed autobiographical narrative (2000). I especially respond to the notion of the embodied "I" and interrogate the politics of autoethnography. I investigate how I can remember my past and narrate my own story of dissent to challenge the boundaries between my inner emotions and my physical body reactions. Park-Fuller explains that through this mode of performance practice, "the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act—a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced—an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics" (p. 26). My aim with this is to look at the politics of my memory and history as a making method and to use performance art as a medium to create and communicate provocative new perspectives of my life narration. Therefore, my work seeks to communicate ways that rupture the status quo through art

making that engages my subjecthood and my inner conflicts, which are traces of my cultural, social, spiritual, and corporeal conflicts. My own voice is used in creating this work.

### **“I” As the Other Sex**

I grew up suppressing my desires in order to be accepted and commended so as to make my parents proud. I was taught to forever accept my inferiority as the “second sex”. Simone de Beauvoir (1962) used this term to describe what it means to exist as a woman in a world dominated by men. I strongly relate to de Beauvoir's thoughts about the cultural construction of women and the distinction between sex and gender. She presents an ambiguous picture of human freedom, in which women struggle against the apparent disadvantages of the female body. The concepts that are expressed in all of my experimental projects also convey Judith Butler's influences (1997). I'm moved by her stimulating feminist agenda to make art that challenges how society views sex, gender, and sexuality. Butler's argument that gender roles are assigned through the “performance” of socially authorized practices, resonates strongly with my viewpoint. To Butler, the forced societal laws that are incorporated into the subject can be challenged to undercut these constricting norms of the binary social constructions and gender hierarchy. Sandra Bartky (1997) likewise addresses in her text, *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, the female body as a site of oppressive discipline and surveillance, and illuminates how when power is exercised by institutions it becomes adopted by our bodies and minds. She asserts that women have internalized the male gaze and argues that the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity is an aspect of the restrictive system of sexual subordination. Thus, a woman who refuses to follow this discipline will find herself facing the most significant rejection of all in a male-controlled society.

De Beauvoir, Butler and Bartky's texts have provided me with solid support for my beliefs and my anger, as well as lending support to my research propositions on finding alternative standards for my self-actualization in order to live freely and authentically. I too dissent from traditional social prescriptions and their unforgiving judgements on women's bodies, appearance and behavior, and resist their oppressive standards of acceptance. This conception awakens a rage within me, that has been building up since my early childhood. It reveals the reasons that I was nurtured to perform, dress,

speaking, looking and behaving in a certain way and then to strive to receive the “honorary” nomination for being a noble “future wife” candidate. My thesis project becomes a protest to reject the male gaze<sup>2</sup>, and the resulting objectification and subordination, on a political and social level. In my performances, I attempt to expose the fragility of my identity and communicate resolute gestures of dissent. Although I don’t aim for self-harm, in every performance and installation I challenge my limits, I surpass my stamina and I risk my body in a protest against the constructions of power within and on my body. It is an opposition against culture’s prejudiced judgements on women’s behaviors and desires, that I also link to the irritating western biased representations and conclusions about ‘Third World’ women.

### **“I” As the Other Race**

I relate in my work strongly to Gayatri Spivak’s notion of subalternity. Spivak is a leading contemporary feminist deconstructionist who pays careful attention to issues of gender and race. Spivak’s essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, addresses the way the subaltern woman is constructed, as absent or silent or not listened to (1988). The “muteness” of women in postcolonial societies is the main issue which her work confronts and an issue which my work specifically speaks to. The main argument of her essay is that, between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation, the figure of woman disappears into a marginal position between tradition and modernization. Subalternity comes to suggest the repressive dominance of white western thinking in an allegory of the displacement of the gendered and colonized subject, by the imposition of narratives of internationalism and nationalism. She takes The Third World to be a creation of the West that locks non-western cultures into an imperial representation. Spivak’s theory of the subaltern draws attention to the inexpressible situation of individuals, specifically women, who have been traditionally ignored by history. For countless reasons, ranging from societal stereotypes to mere misogyny, their vital stories have no way of coming to light; their voices, as rhetorically implied by the title of Spivak’s essay, reverberate with unequivocal silence. Spivak couples gender inequality with class subjugation; therefore, the truly subaltern figure must have a

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<sup>2</sup> Coined by Laura Mulvey (born 1941), British feminist film theorist in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975)

gender orientation delimited by society at large and belong to the lowest, most suppressed class of her society.

As an originally Lebanese woman I've always wondered if we, Middle Eastern people, unintentionally participated in constructing a false image. I say unintentionally because our silence could be understood as acceptance. However, we are silent because we are distracted, deceived, defeated, dislocated, isolated, and immersed in pain and suffering from a long history of wars and colonialism. Edward Said, the Palestinian American theorist, in his book *Orientalism*, had criticized the way that the Occident views the Orient through their own biased historical perspectives (1978). He condemns western scholars, artists and media that created a powerful visual archive of the Middle East largely made up of clichés of violence, chaos and belatedness, beside Orientalist metaphors of exoticism and repression. The relationship of the Occident and Orient becomes the relationship of "power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony" (p. 5). Said's rejection of discrete geographical spaces that are defined on the basis of religion, culture or race, has inspired me to embody ways that colonial discourse made the imaginary line between East and West to become more visible. Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism shows the negative stereotypes of Arab women as well. Gendered stereotypes circulated the sexually immoral exotic Oriental female image. Orientalists assumptions about gender presented oriental women as twice as inferior, being both women and Orientals. The Occident has imposed these distortions in order to dominate the Orient. Said states "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')." (p. 43) This recurrent subversion of historical representation emphasizes the impossibilities of providing a unified inclusive narrative.

In my work, I stand up for the sexual liberation of Arab women but at the same time condemn the Orientalist clichés. I am empowered by Jamelie Hassan's activist artworks that reconfigure political and social terms of representation and discourse. Hassan is a Canadian artist from Lebanese origins, who experienced the disturbing gaze of being the "other", along with her immigrant parents and relatives (being Arabs and Muslims). Her works inherit Edward Said's theoretical framework which critiques Western thought

for signifying the East as exotic, violent and inferior (Said, 1978). She condemns through her practice the fact that the Orient was constructed by a set of recurring stereotypical images and clichés. Her film project, *The Oblivion Seekers*, expresses the tension between the subjective and the collective memory. Hassan sheds light on the multiple hidden realities in that official story, then seeks to make lost or displaced historical information physically present. She critically depicts the spectacular and dramatic reporting provided by Western media and confirms that representation itself is a politicized practice. To reverse the projection that women are arrogant, active creatures of sexual pleasure and mysterious erotic delights, Hassan focuses in her film on the aspect of dancing showing women and men dancing with joy and pride side by side and hand in hand. Putting into circulation images of playfulness and joy helps create an alternative vision that counterbalances the much more common negative image found in Western media of people, and especially women, in the Middle East (Haladyn, 2010) (Hassan, 1996). Since reality is never delivered with credibility, I likewise try to show possible alternative approaches that talk about the Middle East beyond the Orientalist clichés, in order to rupture authoritarian systems of representation.

### **The Other “I” in Space**

If we consider difference from a social perspective, it has been argued that women's socialisation fosters a different value system, one which emphasises certain qualities such as connectedness, inclusiveness, an ethics of care, everyday life, subjectivity, feelings, complexity and flexibility, each of which suggests a different approach to design.

Jane Rendell (2000, p. 21)

I aim to connect my radical feminist viewpoint to my architectural practice and diasporic experience by employing a critical performance art praxis. Therefore, I try to tie concepts of spatial environments to place-making values, then weave them together with gender theories enacted through my expressive body. Through my research, I am analyzing the space which I create, in relation to the performative practices that I, as a female, enact within this space. Jane Rendell's text, *Introduction: Gender, Space, Architecture*, crosses architecture, art, feminism, history, gender theory and psychoanalysis (2000). As a feminist and architectural theorist, she critiques architecture as a gendered form of representation. Following this idea of sexual

differences and their effect on work, performance and creativity, I refer to her argument that “the most obvious manifestation of sex difference in architectural practice has traditionally been in connection to biological difference” (p. 229).

Luce Irigaray's text on sexual subjectivities and spatialities *This Sex Which Is Not One*, has had a remarkable influence on feminist theory and practice in architecture and the spatial arts (1985). Although Irigaray comments that there is no essential womanliness, she discusses masquerade and mimesis as a way to rupture the status quo and to expose the fragility of identity and, in turn, through these vehicles to discover female empowerment. Influenced by Irigaray's literature, I attempt to propose a self-referential female sexuality which is disconnected from "masculine parameters" (p. 23) of sexual conceptualization. Man and woman, she argues, are simply too different and incomparable, thus comparing their organs, pleasures, and desires would reaffirm the male logic of the "primacy of the phallus" (p. 31). Important in this regard is Irigaray's concept of the other, and the capacity to create an alternative definition of the feminine, which defies the one created by patriarchy.

I'm inspired by Elizabeth Grosz's theories that suggest one should think about architecture differently and challenge the discipline's expectations (2001). I normally oppose the idea that architectural spaces are gendered depending on their appearance and ambiance. Therefore, my work communicates Grosz's argument in her essay, *Architecture from the Outside*, against architecture's historical indifference to sexual specificity, asking if the existence of two sexes might have an impact on how we understand and experience space. I similarly question space and inhabitation in relation to gender politics. I try to find ways to produce differently and engender the new in order to scrutinize, as Grosz states it, “how to think architecture beyond complementarity and binarization, beyond subjectivity and signification” (p. 59).

Rendell, Irigaray and Grosz motivate me to rethink the conventional definitions of masculinity and femininity that I grew up with and which I was also trained to consider in my architectural practice. Their analyses reinforce my argument while I interrogate the notions of masculine versus feminine forms of architecture, that are associated with perceptions of the rational versus the irrational, and are also related to "clean",

rectilinear, geometric forms versus “messy”, curvy, organic forms. I examine those concepts with the spaces that I create to assess how they communicate those meanings and whether they are sufficient to cross such dualistic boundaries. For my spatial explorations, I think of materials beyond their classic functions, then I create with them symbolic assemblages to maximize their potentiality and to exploit their metaphoric connotations. This experiment has manifested in most of my architectural installation projects, such as *My Imaginary Haven*, *Bitter Sweet Middle East*, *It's Not me... but Myself*, and *Dis-sensus*. This causes me to think about the learned design principles of form and texture, and to question the representational language of architecture with reference to social spaces.

Julieanna Preston's projects are discussed in her book *Performing Matter: Interior Surface and Feminist Actions* (2014). Preston is an interdisciplinary spatial artist and interior designer whose work merges intersecting avenues of feminist philosophy, political research, fine art practice, construction, materiality and architecture. Similar to her thoughts and methodologies I consider materials as a site of political protest and everyday demonstration to liberate them from “oppression of supposed inertia” (p. 3). Preston uses feminist methods to disrupt power structures through pushing building materials to perform beyond their historical applications. She follows the material reactions rather than imposing pre-established ideas upon it. Inspired by her work, I attempt to set the matter free with my open-ended making. When I work with spandex fabric, pantyhose and barbed wire, I try to use those materials out of their context in a non-realistic setting. Spandex fabric is normally expected to be used as a clothing material, pantyhose is typically expected to be worn by women and barbed wire is usually expected to be used outdoors to mark borders and protect territories. Through critical material investigation, like Preston, I work towards confronting the pre-constructed patriarchal structures.

I indicate autobiographical material as the uniting common ground for the interchange between architecture and performance art disciplines. Thinking multi-perspectively, I adapted the methods that I used in my architecture practice to create site-specific spatial installations. I use my expertise in advanced architectural skills in a complete process from ideation to execution. I employ my proficiency in using tools and detailing



materials methods while making structures for spatial interventions (Allen, 1999). I also embrace methods that are used in performance art practice for my experimental performative actions, like somatics (improvised sensation-based movement), inner library, creative writing and critical gestures.

### **“I” Engender Place**

As an interdisciplinary artist and architectural designer, I am inspired by the Iraqi-born British architect Zaha Hadid for her radical deconstructivist designs. I'm motivated by her artistic process of architectural creation and her design abstraction. Hadid's designs are fluid, flexible and expressive, and I am influenced by her design methodology in taking art as an inspiring flexible medium for experimenting freely essential spatial thoughts. Her rebellion towards the conventional has fundamentally affected methodology of architectural designs (Abdullah, 2016). My work similarly challenges the barriers created by traditional architecture rules by being spontaneous in creating architectural forms. I study the space, consider its restrictions and note its potentials. The specific time, place, materials all affect and thus identify the finished form of the final human-scale spatial art. My experimental artwork starts from the initial moment of the improvisational movement in constructing an unpredictable installation. I carry with me my feelings, my perceptions and my explorations throughout the building process, which will consequently affect my performative actions in the space.

I consider also a temporal in addition to a spatial consideration of an imagined “ideal” place in order to explore with performance art the notion of duration in relation to the utopic. The focus of Elisabeth Grosz's essay *Embodied Utopias: The Time of Architecture* essay is the complex relation between three (Deleuzian) concepts: utopia, time and embodiment (2001). She criticizes how utopian architectural ideals elide the notion of duration. She suggests that utopia might be the way for architecture to find its own place in the political by re-conceptualizing itself as that movement of time which is duration: a concept of time as a perpetual becoming. Grosz attempts to think of the time rather than the space that is implied within the utopic. She states that: “It is clear that they [utopias] involve not only the political and social organization of space and power—which Plato and More have recognized and specifically addressed—but also two elements that remained marked, if unremarked upon, in their works: the notion of

time as becoming" (p. 137). As a displaced and emotionally unsettled woman, I find hope in her idea that utopia is the good place that is no place. When I perform, my present time connects my past with the future. My thesis' durational performances examine my role in deconstructing the utopic notion that is understood as enactment of the privileged. I believe a 'supposed' utopia brings alienation to whom does not fit within the ideal image of the body politic, in which creates a dystopic atmosphere. Therefore, I explore how an extended process of improvising an architectural structure may serve as an impulse to question and negotiate through proliferation and multiplication of ideals.

Grosz also raises questions about the relationship between body and city in her influential essay *Bodies-Cities* (1992). Her work has explored "the way in which the body is physically, socially, sexually, and discursively or representationally produced, and the way in turn, bodies re-inscribe and project themselves onto their socio-cultural environment so that this environment both produces and reflects the form and interests of the body" (p. 242). I relate to how she presents urban space as partly physical and partly imagined, and the way she seeks to reveal how the two are combined. Furthermore, she attempts to "problematize the opposition between the inside and the outside by looking at the outside from the point of view of the inside" (p. 242). She understands the inside to be the body and the outside to be the city and argues that each is necessary to the comprehensibility of the other. I am examining this notion of the inside and outside in my final thesis exhibition where I show my work in two different locations, with different circumstances and settings. One is my solo show that represents my inside, my private, my personal, and my sanctuary, and the other is the group show that represents the exterior world, with representations of the cities I've lived in and the diverse communities I've encountered.

I feel my agency to imagine spaces that cross over borders and push against the existing constraining containers, whether they're my woman's body or the cities where I've dwelt. Grosz also claims that particular smells, sounds, visions, textures and tastes mark cities as sensory environments that cultivate hedonism, pleasure and desire. In my work, I create sensorial environments that activate my memory and connect me with my homeland. I work with affecting materials that ease my indulgent process with

sentimental retentions, for example: listening to the sound of Arabic music and voice of Fairouz, witnessing revelations of emblematic objects, smelling the soil and the natural wood, touching the warmth of the soft fabric, and sensing the harshness of the barbed wires, all take me back to specific places and to certain times in my life.

### **“I” Individuate the Self**

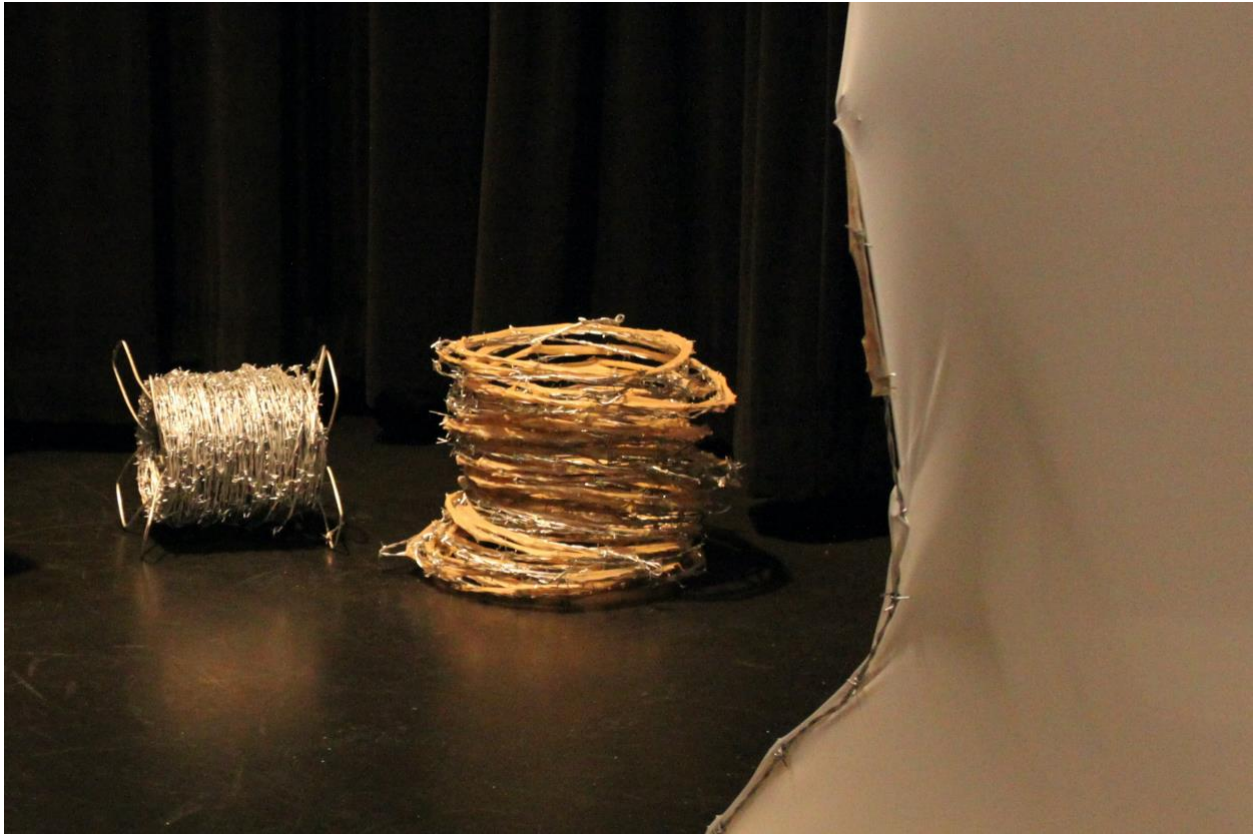
My study employs somatic practices as a basis for creative research methodology, where I pursue a perceptual and practical discovery of influences of different body-based practices that expose points of weaknesses and consequently help invent my own strong entity. In her book *Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations through Dance, Yoga, and Touch*, I refer to Sondra Fraleigh's reflections on methods of touch and movement that foster generative processes of consciousness in which create a fluid interconnection between sensation, thought, movement, and expression. "Somatic movement experiences have a potential to extend consciousness and transform lives" (Fraleigh, 2015). In my performances, I amalgamate practices of somatic arts and achieve conscious embodiment of movement in order to examine its potentials. This somatic methodology and framework, develops oneness of body, mind, spirit and soul, hence allowing me to exercise personal agency in reconciling my identity, and celebrating my female body.

Touch informs the body, and the body shapes our knowing, feeling and being. In my performances, I rely on Erin Manning's perspective about how the body is relational and how improvisation engenders new concepts. She considers how touch informs participation in self-individuation, and analyzes individuating human bodies that are considered "in-formation," as metamorphosing form and matter. A touch is the intersection of virtual and real, as she states it: "when I reach to touch you, I touch the you that will become in response to my reaching toward" (87). Touch as a reaching-toward is a form of engendering in the sense that it is constantly in motion, generating, and becoming. A moving body individuates always in excess of its previous identifications, remaining open to qualitative reiteration. Her concepts suggest ways to think about social phenomena in terms of its gestures of resistance, and its spaces of otherness. Influenced by her text, I attempt to understand with the physical corporeal, to what extent I am able to organize myself in my environment, and whether I will know

where/what I am, what/how I am learning or how I can communicate my feelings, experiences and modes of being. My work speaks to Manning's idea of bodies redefining the self through their mutual, non-hierarchical interactions, detached from prejudices and negative predilections, through multiple physical encounters, and through touch and movement.

As a practitioner of critical feminist performance art, I am influenced by Peggy Phelan's text *Broken symmetries: memory, site, love*. My work resonates with her position, in which she states that "Employing psychoanalysis and feminist theories of representation, I am concerned with marking the limit of the image in the political field of the sexual and racial other" (1993, p. 2). I am motivated by her belief that there is insufficient understanding of the relationship between "visibility, power, identity and liberation", and consequently between "the real and the representational" (ibid). She associates performance with disappearance and its generative possibilities and argues that the ephemerality of performance is crucial to its force. Influenced by her writings, I am eager to explore the links between power and visibility, and consequently between visibility and gender in a political context. I aim to discover to what degree the employment of performance within constructed visual forms, may afford me a new understanding of visual regimes and the ways we traverse them. Phelan also argues that the political potential of the art form lies precisely in its impulse to direct the gaze towards the edges of disturbance, dissent and irreconciliation which unfix any naturalized relation between representation and reproduction. The core intention of my thesis project is to find ways to unfix the logic of male hegemony through the creation of my performance art and architectural forms, and I find Phelan's theories on performance and politics are very concrete in grounding my research.

## Exhibition



*Figure 25 Final show's Materials*

The final thesis work is a synthesis extracted from my previous investigations. It outlines the essence of my research concerns and also expresses my questions and findings. The work navigates and challenges my limitations, hence, confronting my struggles. My work manifests how I built my life around oppression and boundaries, and how it helps me break my silence and, at the same time, tame my wild anxiety feelings. I exhibit my thesis work in the form of live performative art. I create an act of poetic revolt by performing the art of building my imagined sanctuary, as a symbolic action. The work attests this position through affective assemblages of live performances revealing politically charged matters. The work actualizes dissent to social oppression, displacement struggles, power inequalities and cultural prejudices. I create conceptual installations with emblematic objects and materials, then activate them, interact with them, move within them, cherish them, transform them, destroy them, rebuild them, and repeat deliberately, leisurely and sentimentally.

The final work can, at best, only tell fragments of my narrative. I rely on inner resources to metaphorically reenact traumatic events and scenes that trace flashes from my memory. I try to distill certain images of spatial and material relationships and examine their engagement with my body. I design a series of performances that progress in a chronological order from early childhood to present. Every performance symbolizes a notable memory of an incident, or a lived experience, in a particular epoch of my life. The solo show embodies my private story from childhood to womanhood, while it also symbolizes my history of migrating between East and West.

## **Conclusion**

After I came to Canada I started questioning how the Middle East is represented within Western culture. My work addresses my personal narrative (by way of being measured as a subaltern figure) as one who is silenced and represented by others; by the dominant. The dominant, be it man or the West, marginalize women, particularly those of supposed Third World cultures. I lived and grew up where the dominant man speaks for inferior women in the name of protection and care. He pretends to be righteous to accommodate and safeguard women; we're unfortunately considered as primitive humans. I have been silenced even when attempting to speak, on the other hand, I attempt throughout my work, to be reframed as resistant. I try to represent the unrepresentable by seeking modes to express through form, and through my body in performance, what is recognizable by the dominant. My work assuages the urge to speak for myself, and to be heard as well. Through this scheme I emphasize the use of body practices as a physical marker of refusal to dominant political and social discourses, specifically, on oppressed and exploited Arab women, and generally, to address pre-constructed concepts about women social inferiority. I feel the urgent need to speak out against voices of domination that used to suppress my freedom and silence my voice. I want to be a voice for all oppressed women, regardless of their class, religion, or ethnicity.

I use performance art as a primary medium through which to create and communicate provocative new perspectives on my freedom and empowerment. Through my artwork I seek to transform from being a marginalized and silenced Arab woman into a self-

determining, active, and powerful feminist. In so doing, my work will realize the agency of individual action to effect transformative possibilities through pushing limits and challenging boundaries of liminal and unconventional spaces I create. Therefore, this project is a tool for healing, for breaking the silence, for liberation, and for catharsis as I seek a resolute presence whilst confronting social and political injustices of this world.

My thesis is an observational research of my journey and how this investigation affects me and my future work. With a therapeutic method, I attempt to depict suffering and to find agency in my body and my voice. With the building and performing process I have found ways to realize security and safe havens. I have become transformed through this work, from feeling myself a victim of wars and patriarchy and colonial authority, to becoming a self-actualized woman and a feminist artist. I have come to realize that "Home" is not a geographical location; it's an emotional state.

### **Thesis Final Project: *Barbed Utopia***



Figure 26 *Barbed Utopia* Installation

Barbed wire spiral strings are hanging from a ceiling grid. They are partly sheathed with pantyhose. Some are weighed down by heavy burlap sandbags. I'm turning 40. I present four stages in a durational four-day performance to embody a significant memory lived over or during a 10-year period on each day. For my original solo show, I plan the following:

**Day 1** recalls war's traumatic memories and the stolen childhood's joy. I navigate between wires and physical obstacles. I build swings with barbed wires and use sandbags for seats. I struggle with building the swings and also with riding them.

**Day 2** recalls my struggle as an adolescent with forced cultural femininity morals and womanhood constructs. I put on multiple layers of pantyhose. I tear them with my long nails and teeth, then I attach pieces to the barbed wire while still attached to my body. I struggle with my restricted movement being caught in the installation. I find escape through riding a swing while being entangled with barbed wire and pantyhose. Later, I peel off those confining layers and cut off strands of wires and pantyhose.

**Day 3** recalls overwhelming motherhood liabilities. I fill my mouth with milk. I spit them on barbed wire and I feed the helpless sand bags. I dump flour on floor, then I make a massive dough, by pouring water with my hands from a jar to the flour and kneading it intensely.

**Day 4** portrays my present ongoing experiment in imagining my haven in relation to a geographical space. I stretch and fix the barbed wire down. I cut off its sharp spikes, then I guild it with gold leaf to represent my ways of taming the cruelty and polishing my inescapable cage.

Due to Covid-19 Pandemic, I have half a day to set up the installation and only one day to perform the four stages of the final project, in order to be able to document as much as possible of the originally planned thesis show's process. The situation is overwhelming. It is very challenging to perform and be fully present while I feel nervous and anxious. I



find it too difficult to be grounded in this intimidating situation. I set up the installation in The Black Box, at 49 McCaul, the night before my performance, with the assistance of some close friends. On March 18, I performed the four stages in a duration of six hours, from 11:00 am to 5:00 pm, with small 5-minute breaks between each stage. The first three stages were emotionally and physically very intense. By the last stage, I was very exhausted and I didn't feel a strong connection to what I wanted to express or present. I was fighting the clock, and security were asking me to leave at 5:00 pm due to closure restrictions. Although I had a cathartic experience in the first three stages, the last stage, that was supposed to be the final healing one, was the most stressful and irritating one under time pressure. If I am to repeat this work in a complete show, I would rethink each and every stage with better ways to focus and take the time that feels right for each and every action.

A full photo documentation of this project can be found at the following link:

<https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipM19p9lqqiHWQPn0KJIHzPoxmCKXH0DRvc5b-A4>

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