# University of Alberta

Implications of Performance, Site, and Dialogue in

Abdulnasser Gharem's Social Practice Artworks

by

Tracey Hilden

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture

Department of Art and Design

# Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the artworks of Abdulnasser Gharem and situate them within the genre of social practice. I isolate three features to examine in conjunction with Gharem's works. My first chapter draws on performance scholar Shannon Jackson's theories to address the roles of support and spectacle in creating social artworks. Secondly, I address concepts of site-specificity as put forth by academic Miwon Kwon to examine the importance and multiplicity of site. Finally, my last chapter looks at dialogic art as explicated by professor and researcher Grant Kester to unfold the role of dialogue in socially engaged artworks. These three components of performance, site-specificity, and dialogue contribute to enhancing community life which Gharem strives to undertake through his artworks.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Natalie Loveless for all of her guidance, and encouragement throughout the entire journey. Her help and wealth of knowledge has been invaluable to me. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Betsy Boone for her support and wisdom, as well as to Piet Defraeye for his help on my committee. I would also like to thank the faculty and staff at the University of Alberta for everything they have and continue to do. In particular, I would like to thank Joan Greer, Lianne McTavish, and Steven Harris, whose classes and knowledge have influenced my work.

I would also like to specially thank Abdulnasser Gharem for his help throughout the thesis and making time to talk with me and answer questions that arose while writing.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the University of Alberta Department of Art and Design, and the Graduate Student's Association for financial support throughout my Master's degree.

Finally, thank you to Perry Hilden, Laurie-Ann Hilden, Bonnie and Dustin Moreau, Barbara Hilden, and Vahid Rashidi for their love and encouragement throughout the process.

# Contents

# List of Figures

# Introduction

In this thesis, I examine how Abdulnasser Gharem strives to incite social change through his artworks. Gharem, an artist working and living in Saudi Arabia, raises awareness about such concerns as environmentalism and poverty within the country. I examine these concerns particularly in the contexts of performance, site-specificity, and dialogue as seen in his artworks with particular attention to the role of the community. I address the idea of community in a theoretical manner, though Gharem works within specific locales. My argument is that such an examination is important because although Gharem addresses local issues, they can impact a wider international audience; the idea of community is always an underlying component of his works. Gharem strives to bring about social change particularly by highlighting issues affecting locals and brings attention to their problems in order to provoke change. He interacts with community members and draws them into the artwork. It is important to consider his works because they have not yet been widely discussed or written about; currently, the only literature on Gharem (aside from newspaper articles and interviews) is a monograph written by Henry Hemming in collaboration with the artist entitled *Abdulnasser Gharem: Art of Survival,* which documents Gharem's works and life. Gharem has stated that he believes his works must somehow make a positive difference and contribute to the betterment of people's lives;[1] in what follows, I argue that he does so by instigating an indirect dialogue which serves as the foundation of social change instead of remaining stagnant in the face of social upheaval.

---

[1] Nathalie Farah, "Everything I Create Must be to Help People," *Gulf News*, January 13, 2012. Accessed November 28, 2012. http://gulfnews.com/arts-entertainment/performing-visual-arts/everything-i-create-must-be-to-help-people-1.963940

Abdulnasser Gharem was born in 1973 and lived in a small village in the Aseer region of Saudi Arabia before moving to Khamis Mushait when he was seven years old.[2] The oldest of eleven siblings,[3] Gharem grew up during a time of *Sahwah* (Awakening) in which freedoms in Saudi Arabia were restricted: men and women were segregated, women were no longer allowed to drive, and money was invested into institutions like the *Mutawa*, or religious police.[4] Gharem began his artistic endeavors during his years in school, spending his spare time drawing portraits (which were considered *haram,* or "religiously unacceptable").[5] He planned to join the army following graduation, but his father encouraged him to follow his passion for art. Consequently, Gharem applied to study at the local university whose art department offered instruction in classical painting techniques. He supplied paintings as part of the entrance exam, but the university never responded, and thus Gharem joined the military academy in 1992.[6] During his training with the military (with which he still currently serves as a lieutenant-colonel), Gharem further educated himself in English, philosophy, and fine art. He also regularly visited a funded studio space in which artists could work at their leisure; this was one of the only spaces in which Gharem's art production could become part of a dialogue in which artists helped each other advance.[7]

The late 1990s saw the introduction of the internet to Saudi Arabia, which helped Gharem develop a more "universal" view; not too long after, 9/11

---

[2] Henry Hemming, *Abdulnasser Gharem: Art of Survival*, (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2011), 190, 32-33.
[3] Denize Marray, "Soldier Artist with Humanitarian Perspective," *Arab News*, November 6, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2014. http://www.arabnews.com/news/473011.
[4] Hemming, 33.
[5] Ibid, 34.
[6] Ibid, 37.
[7] Ibid, 38.

occurred which impacted Gharem particularly in that two of the hijackers

involved had been Gharem's classmates in school growing up.[8] As Henry

Hemming points out, the aftermath of 9/11 saw "a new cultural interest in Saudi

Arabia [...] Alongside military attempts to occupy physical tract of this region

came a growing desire to shift the western understanding of the Middle East [...],

to get beyond an archaic set of essentialist stereotypes."[9] It is in this social and

political context that Gharem works to establish an artistic foundation to provide

opportunities to young contemporary Saudi artists. He recently launched the

Amen Art Foundation in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The Amen Art Foundation is

currently composed of a group of twenty-three artists under the age of thirty who

are showing at the Venice Biennale this year (2013). During my interview with

the artist (May 15, 2013), Gharem questioned what else he could do with

additional help: if he had a library and even more resources and space, how much

more could the arts develop within the country?

In addition to recently establishing the Amen Art Foundation, Gharem was

one of the founding members of what is now called Edge of Arabia. Edge of

Arabia is a collection of primarily Saudi artists who work alongside British artist

Stephen Stapleton in reaching new, international audiences in order to heighten

complex visibilities surrounding Saudi Arabian culture. Gharem, Stapleton, and

Saudi artist Ahmed Mater co-founded the group in 2003 as the aftermath of 9/11

and the impending invasion of Iraq affected Saudi society.[10] In analyzing

---

[8] Ibid, 39, 41.

[9] Ibid, 41.

[10] Stephen Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia,* (London, United Kingdom: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012), 23. Many of the group's international exhibitions have explored the notion of transgressing

Gharem's works, I am particularly interested in the way that his work can fall into a number of artistic genres, including those of conceptual, activist, and what has recently been called "social practice" art. In this thesis I work to situate Gharem's works within the genre of social practice art in particular, with reference to how the two earlier movements (conceptual and activist art of the 1960s and '70s) influence and inform the latter.

Social practice is a genre of contemporary art which widely seeks to stimulate social change. The genre crosses art disciplines and media, combines politics with aesthetics, and draws similarities to activist art which uses a public arena to question the dominant hegemonies of a society.[11] Social practice challenges the division between where an artwork ends and the world begins,[12] a notion which also rose with constructivism of the 1920s, situationism of the 1950s, and minimalism and conceptual art practice of the 1960s and '70s.[13] Importantly, social practice is not medium-specific and has largely emerged as a way of talking about how twenty-first century artists are using art forms to induce social change.

I draw on a combination of methods in approaching the topic. I primarily use textual analysis in this thesis which allows me to incorporate different theoretical approaches with Gharem's artworks. I also rely upon an interview

---

borders. Such exhibition themes have included "Grey Borders" (Berlin, 2010), "Transition" (Istanbul, 2010), "Future of a Promise" (Venice Biennale, 2011), "We Need to Talk" (Jeddah, 2012), and "Come Together" (London, 2012). All of these exhibitions display artwork by Arab artists and ultimately aim at fostering international relations, providing an alternative view of Saudi Arabia to an international audience.

[11] Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1:2 (2007), 4.

[12] Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: the infrastructural politics of performance,* (London: Routledge, 2010), 15.

[13] Ibid.

conducted with the artist, which I felt was necessary to provide me with a more complete view of the artworks which supplements the information garnered from Henry Hemming's book. The limit of this method is that I primarily draw on the artist's perspective and not that of, for example, the audience of the works. I also conducted site research, as I travelled to see Gharem's artworks in London, United Kingdom, and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Ideally, I would have liked to travel to Saudi Arabia to visit art galleries and experience the social context for myself, but at the time of writing this thesis, Saudi Arabia did not issue tourist visas. The limitations of seeing Gharem's works in galleries is that I primarily focus on Gharem's performance-based work and could not see the artworks being performed (as in the case of *Flora and Fauna*), or visit the site itself (as in the case of *Siraat*).

In producing my analysis of Gharem's work, I rely heavily on performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson. In her book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Public*, Jackson coins the term "social heterogeneity" to refer to the various social forms the genre can take, and combines it with the notion of "aesthetic heterogeneity". These terms help her to understand contemporary art as a form of social practice.[14] Her contention is that the genre is not rigid (that is, refuses homogeneity) because the media and form have the freedom to respond to the social issue. Accordingly, Gharem partakes of the genre of social practice in a manner which "provoke[s] reflection on the contingent systems that support the management of life."[15] In other words, Gharem's social

---

[14] Ibid, 14.
[15] Ibid, 29.

commentary does not overtly incite change, but rather initiates a discourse which

could then lead to political change. Jennifer Gonzalez and Adrienne Posner point

out the difference, however, between the terms "activist" and "political". Political

art, they state, can refer to "a set of art-making practices defined as art that

occasionally elaborates upon social issues, is sometimes *concerned* with social

issues, and usually reflects these through ironic critique," while "activist art

employs strategies gleaned from conceptual art and performance art to engage in

the 'real' world while attempting to blur the boundaries and hierarchies set up by

social, political, and economic systems."[16] Gharem's work, then, lies between the

two, but more dominantly leans towards activist art, while remaining more subtle

in its approach.

New York-based curator Nato Thompson similarly addresses the difficulty

of categorizing social practice, suggesting that in analyzing the field, works

should be grouped based on their methods of addressing political issues.[17] The

conversation would then need to shift, he argues, from aesthetics to the social

forms produced by the work, such as political conversation.[18] This

interdisciplinary approach incorporates media pertinent to the issue and is useful

in considering Gharem's works. As I will argue, the aesthetic form of Gharem's

works is coupled with the importance of the opportunities and discussions that

arise as a result.

---

[16] Jennifer González and Adrienne Posner, "Facture for change: US activist art since 1950," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 212-213.
[17] Nato Thompson, "Living as Form," in *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012), 22.
[18] Ibid, 23.

Although many of the works I focus on are performance-based, Gharem also uses other media (such as sculpture) which are also very important to note[19] as they too raise awareness of social issues. While not the same as actions with *his* body, they are designed to instigate social interactions, hence performance. These include Gharem's "Concrete" series (Figures 1 and 2), in which Gharem covered life-sized concrete barriers with rubber letters from stamps, often spelling out phrases such as "Don't trust the concrete"; these were exhibited in art galleries to divert the direction of human traffic.[20] The barriers responded to a wave of terrorist attacks in Saudi from 2003-2005 in which fortified compounds were often targeted. The country began to change because of the attacks, and the government erected barriers surrounding foreign embassies, hotels, compounds,



Figure 1: Concrete Block (Red & White), 2013
Abdulnasser Gharem
Rubber stamps, digital print and paint on 9 mm Indonesian Plywood board

---

[19] They are important to note, albeit briefly, since I cannot address all of his works within this thesis. Rather, I fully explore a small selection.
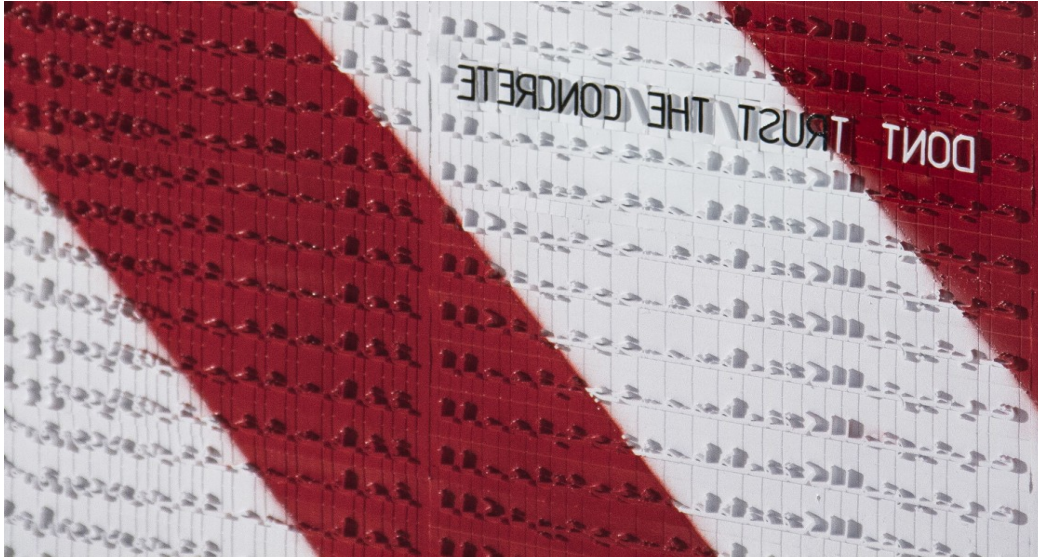[20] Hemming, *Art of Survival*, 133.

Figure 2: Detail from Concrete Block (Red & White), 2013

and government buildings, setting up detours to ensure further protection. In this

sense, Gharem explored what it meant to place trust in concrete and stated that,

"concrete walls like this appear not just to protect people, [...] but to keep

knowledge and ideologies separate from one another", drawing on the example of

the Berlin Wall.[21] He wanted to focus on the education of people rather than

trusting these barriers which created "walls of bureaucracy."[22]

   While Gharem uses different types of media to express his social practice

works, ranging from body-based performance as we will see throughout the

thesis, to works that are more sculptural and painterly, each can be theorized in

terms of social practice. In her important text *Social Works*, Shannon Jackson

considers what the term "social" entails, asserting that its meaning can range from

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid. There is an interesting comparison between this work and Allan Kaprow's *Sweet Wall*, in which Kaprow directed the assembly of a wall made out of jam and bread near the Berlin Wall. Kaprow wanted to draw on the idea of a wall as a structure to divide ideologies. The builders of the wall destroyed it upon its completion.
Allan Kaprow, *Allan Kaprow: Art As Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 186.

explicitly political forms to an aesthetic examination of time and embodiment.[23]

The activist side of social practice can demonstrate anti-institution sentiment;

however, that is not to say that all art within the genre does so. In the case of

Gharem, I argue that it is community, rather than institution, that figures most

prominently. The form of activism and/or politicism Gharem marshals begins a

dialogue that functions to examine social issues relevant to a particular

community. He uses social practice to develop a socially sustainable community

with interdependent facets instead of denying or rebelling against institutional

forms. Indeed, as curator Basma Al-Sulaiman has pointed out, Gharem is in no

way opposed to the government. He speaks out on issues affecting society, but in

a respectful manner which makes him unique and successful as an artist within a

conservative environment.[24]

   In each of the chapters that follow, I isolate one feature of social practice

which is illustrated through Gharem's works: performance, site-specificity, and

dialogue. I explore each feature through one artwork. It is important to note,

however, that although I will isolate one characteristic to examine in conjunction

with one particular work, all three aspects are present in all of the works. For

organizational purposes, though, I will choose works which demonstrate one

feature most clearly. All three chapters answer essential questions about the issue

being presented: What is happening, and when? Where it is happening and who is

affected? And lastly, why is the issue important and how can artistic interventions

help change? The three elements I have isolated work together to create an overall

---

[23] Jackson, *Social Works*, 14.
[24] Hemming, *Art of Survival*, 128.

view of the issue and each contributes to knotting together the issue at hand as a stepping stone to implement social change. And, as I indicate above, all three are attentive to the role of community in social practice.

My first chapter addresses *Flora and Fauna* (2007) in conjunction with Gharem's use of body-based performance. I will look at how Gharem engages with a specific community through performance, encouraging residents to take ownership of their locality. In my second chapter, I examine the site-specificity of *Siraat* (2003). In *Siraat,* Gharem addresses a deeper moral meaning behind an event through the history of the site. Finally, my last chapter addresses dialogic art in conjunction with *Manzoa* (2007), a plea in which Gharem tries to stimulate an active community debate within a region that has been physically destroyed. To conclude, I will explore how community is implicated in each component. Ultimately, I examine the way that Abdulnasser Gharem strives to stimulate a positive change within Saudi Arabia, addressing local problems while simultaneously attempting to raise a generation of contemporary Saudi artists who do the same.

**Chapter One:  Performance and *Flora and Fauna***

*A man in a thobe and shemagh stands enwrapped with a tree in a sheet of plastic. Cars pass on either side of him as he stands on a median. The hot sun gradually burns a hole in the plastic encasement. City authorities arrive in a pickup truck six hours into the performance to calmly end it; this is just one performance which will occur in a series throughout the Middle East.*

Figure 3: Flora and Fauna, 2007
Abdulnasser Gharem
Performance in Khamis Mushait, Saudi Arabia



Figure 4: Flora and Fauna, 2007



Figure 5: Flora and Fauna, 2007

For his 2007 performance, *Flora and Fauna,* Gharem wrapped a tree with plastic and stood encased with the tree for six hours. During the performance, individuals came to ask Gharem what he was doing and why. The performance ended when city authorities stopped it. An enlarged image from this performance depicting Abdulnasser Gharem wrapped in plastic is framed on a white gallery wall at the Edge of Arabia Gallery in London, UK. The image captures one moment of the performance in which Gharem gazes at the viewer from within an oversized piece of plastic. White dominates the image: Gharem clutches the plastic bundled in his fists, obstructing the view of the road behind him. The white of the bunched plastic echoes that of the sky and Gharem's thobe; it is as if his body can stand in for the tree trunk, centered beneath a manicured mound of luscious green leaves. Another tree is visible to the right of Gharem, and another, further receding into the background. Gharem clearly stands in a city, in the middle of a four lane divided street. Cars are parked on the sides of the road, underneath colored store signs.

Around the corner from the massive photographic print hanging in the gallery, viewers can enter a darkened room to view a brief video of the work on a wall. Playing in a loop, it displays brief scenes from the lengthy performance: Gharem stands in the plastic encasing with the tree as the wind blows around him; cars drive on either side of the median. The video ends as Gharem tears the plastic to exit the artificial cocoon. The same image hangs in a booth at the Abu Dhabi Art Fair. Black and white prints lie on a table in front of the print, with white gloves for viewers to leaf through. These prints similarly show glimpses of the

six-hour performance, including images of Gharem wrapping the tree with plastic, the artist standing within the plastic, and the tree artificially wrapped on the street.

Gharem's first performance of *Flora and Fauna* responded to the importing of the Australian *conocarpus erectus* tree to Khamis Mushait and nearby Abha, both popular holiday destinations within Saudi Arabia. One compelling feature of this region is the climate which receives more rain than other parts of the nation, leaving the landscape lush and verdant in comparison to the rest of the country. The municipal government imported the *conocarpus erectus* and planted it in medians down main streets of Khamis Mushait to add to the foliage of the city.[25] However, when the *conocarpus erectus* reached maturity, the other native trees in the area began to wither: what the municipal government had not anticipated was that the trees' roots, which grew horizontally instead of vertically, would draw the water from the surface of the ground and result in the other native trees dying from drought.[26]

Henry Hemming underscores Gharem's aim to use his body to help bring attention to this disruption of the local ecosystem, describing how the scene created a spectacle, as drivers would slow to watch Gharem, causing traffic jams and general confusion in the area.[27] The performance garnered a wide range of reactions: generally, spectators were very curious, expressing a desire to know more about Gharem's performance. During a recent conversation, Gharem described how, initially, spectators thought he was "crazy" for wrapping himself in plastic on a main street. However, once Gharem began to speak with them

---

[25] Hemming, *Art of Survival*, 85.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 86.

about the issue, many people joined in to complain that they could no longer grow

other plants in their yards, for example, because the *conocarpus erectus* had upset

the ecosystem.[28] For Gharem, the spectators became a crucial part of the work

itself:[29] the work was no longer about Gharem standing in the plastic with the

tree; rather, the work's significance was found in the interactions he had with the

audience and that the audience had with each other, thereby raising ecological

awareness in the region.

After six hours, the authorities arrived in a pickup truck to stop the

performance (as Gharem had fully anticipated would happen).[30] Since then, other

art institutions, such as the Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates, have

invited him to perform the piece again; the *conocarpus erectus* is a tree that has

been imported throughout the Middle East, and various regions experience the

same problem. One of my arguments is that while *Flora and Fauna* has a political

impulse organized by a conversation-based social practice perspective, it relies on

the framework of spectatorial performance to do its work. Petra Kuppers, an artist

and scholar on community and communal performance, discusses the origins of

the term "performance", stating that in contemporary art discourse, the word was

used throughout the 1960s and 1970s by artists such as Allan Kaprow to

specifically refer to everyday actions which shaped social reality; however, she

---

[28] Many people complained about the tree, but no one knew exactly what the problem was. Gharem researched into the matter and found that, in particular, foreign compounds and universities had planted the tree, but they did not first consider the ecological impact which would consequently follow. Botanists informed Gharem that the issue is quite serious and happens more often than many people know. For example, the United States conversely imported a tree from the Middle East for its beneficial effect on soil, but they too experienced consequent ecological problems.
Skype interview, May 15, 2013.
[29] Hemming, Art of Survival, 86.
[30] Skype interview with Abdulnasser Gharem, May 15, 2013.

also claims that the definition of the term is conditional and subject to change between individuals.[31] This chapter asks "why performance" and what is its significance to social practice?

**Performance and Social Practice**

Reading through monographs and edited volumes on performance, I noticed that many (including Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane's *The Ends of Performance* and Marvin Carlson's *Performance: A Critical Introduction*) begin by addressing the relationship between performance and anthropology. Carlson, for example, begins by examining the 1970s collaboration between theorists Richard Schechner and Victor Turner (Schechner's background is in theatre and Turner's in anthropology; Turner in particular was well-known for his theories on ritual and rites of passage). Together, these men outlined the similarities of their disciplines, including the performance of everyday life, an analysis of communication, and unified theories of performance which are also theories of behavior.[32] Such perspectives automatically set up performance as being culturally, and often socially-based. In this chapter I will consider how Abdulnasser Gharem's use of performance supports social practice. In doing so, I will particularly draw on Shannon Jackson's concept of "support". I will then pair this with a consideration of the role of the spectacle as demonstrated through Claire Bishop's theories, and finish with a discussion of time and duration as part of both performance and social practice.

---

[31] Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction,* (London: Routledge, 2007), 8.
[32] Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction,* (London: Routledge, 1996), 13-14.

Shannon Jackson specifically situates the medium of performance within the genre of social practice, stating that the term social practice combines politics with aesthetics, and "as a term for art events that are inter-relational, embodied, and durational, the notion of 'social practice' might well be a synonym for the goals and methods that many hope to find in the discipline of experimental theatre and performance studies."[33] The commonalities between performance and social practice lie, then, in their aim to create a lasting impact which implicates both the practitioner and audience. This is not to say that all social practice must be performed, nor that all performance art is social practice. Rather, the two can overlap when examining their goals and end products. Formal boundaries of performance include audience interaction, as performance challenges the division between where an artwork ends and the world begins. It blurs the distinction between autonomy and interdependence.[34] Distinguishing between the performance and the world is difficult as the performance action is fused with the everyday action.

Jackson's theories allow me to consider how Gharem's work melds performance with real life. Gharem physically uses his body to address a growing concern. However, his form of action extends beyond merely standing in plastic and engaging with the community. In addition to these actions, Gharem wrote a letter to government officials encouraging them to take action on this matter as a result from his conversations with locals. He explained the situation and suggested finding a local tree to replace the imported one which had caused such

---

[33] Jackson, *Social Works,* 12.
[34] Ibid, 15.

an undesirable effect on the local ecosystem.[35] Thus, Gharem provides an

example for the locals by directly acting on the issue in real life by addressing

government officials about the problem. Performance is an active medium; it

requires the practitioner to physically use his or her body. The artistic

performance is a catalyst for action, and Gharem stands as an example to the

audience who are no longer merely an audience, but rather Gharem's co-

inhabitants.

**Support**

In *Social Works,* Shannon Jackson considers the distinction between art

and life and the effect of recasting this difference as the mediation between what

she calls "Art and its Support."[36] She argues that the meaning of "support" in the

arts has shifted historically. For example, Jackson points out that WJT Mitchell

defined support as the variety of practices which enable images to be embodied as

pictures (i.e. an image is not just paint on canvas, but rather implicates the canvas

stretcher, the curator, and the art collector in the art making process); the entire

system allows for the promotion of the image.[37] Support is often found in the

context of the performing arts (theatre, drama, etc.), but is also found in

performance art. In film, Jackson highlights, the term "supporting actor" is used;

the primary actor relies upon the support of others to carry out his role and is

never fully independent.[38] To extend this notion to performance art, the artist must

rely on others to assist in executing the artwork. This support comes from his or

---

[35] Skype conversation with Abdulnasser Gharem, May 15, 2013.
[36] Jackson, *Social Works,* 29.
[37] Ibid, 33-34.
[38] Ibid, 37.

her artistic team in addition to the audience of the work both during the performance and in the gallery viewing the performance's documents. Abdulnasser Gharem's social practice performances are truly collaborative. As Hemming states, Gharem aims to distinguish himself from artists who engage with the public on a hierarchical scale, placing the artist above the public.[39] For example, Gharem creates workshops where he invites the public to give input on his art before actually creating it. He also posts pictures of his designs on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to get feedback, stating that he considers the process a conversation via social networking.[40]

Jackson's theory of support can be considered through *Flora and Fauna* in a very distinct manner. The ecological system depends on a series of support mechanisms to function properly. Gharem created this performance because the support within the ecosystem was upset; plants and trees depend on each other for survival, and when a new tree is introduced into an existing ecosystem, other living organisms are affected and the support system is disrupted. With this in mind, Gharem (with Hemming) decided to title his book "Art of Survival". At a basic level, the art of survival is contingent upon support, whether the survival is plant or animal based. Both have support networks which enable each to flourish, and other species are affected and can wither if support is tampered with, as in the case of the *conocarpus erectus*. Similarly, art itself depends on a support system

---

[39] Hemming, *Art of Survival,* 139.

[40] Ibid. Gharem's use of public participation also extends to his exhibition in April 2013 in Berlin, Germany, entitled "Amen – Have a Bit of Commitment." Gharem uses exhibitions such as this as a means to raise both funds and awareness for art education in Saudi Arabia. Alongside his exhibited works, visitors with an understanding of the issue are asked to contribute ideas and suggestions to help Gharem advance artistic education within the country.  Side by Side Gallery Akim Monet press release, emailed to me, April 10, 2013.

to survive. Jackson outlines the different facets of support which aid in how art can be conceived, produced, documented, circulated, etc. If one of these is no longer present, art too cannot reach its full potential. My argument is that the artistic support within the performance can be compared to the support of the ecosystem.

**The Spectacle**

While as I have suggested dialogue is crucial to *Flora and Fauna*, I want also to focus on the way that it is spectatorial performance that creates this platform for the dialogue. The politicism of Gharem's works lies in gently raising awareness about an issue by creating an opportunity for discourse. However, in *Flora and Fauna,* he isolates the event and draws attention to it through the use of spectatorial performance. Claire Bishop, in her article "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?" examines the notion of spectacle, suggesting that the definition varies between artistic contexts because of its political connotation.[41] Bishop states that:

> For Rosalind Krauss, […] it means the absence of historical positioning and a capitulation to pure presentness; for James Meyer, […] it denotes an overwhelming scale that dwarfs viewers and eclipses the human body as a point of reference; for Hal Foster, […] it denotes the triumph of corporate branding; for Benjamin Buchloch, […] it refers to an uncritical use of new

---

[41] Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now in *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012), 35.

technology [...] And yet, for [Guy] Debord, 'spectacle' […] is a definition

of social relations under capitalism (but also under totalitarian regimes).[42]

This exemplifies the wide array of definitions of one word can hold which can

vary based on different contexts and visual experiences. However, none of these

definitions are quite accurate for considering the spectacle within Gharem's

works. Bishop outlines these definitions for other authors with the consideration

of "visuality" in mind.[43] I would propose a new notion of the spectacle for the

context of Gharem's works, which uses the spectacle as a means to draw attention

to a) the visual, and then b) the intent and reason behind the work.

Considering the varying definitions outlined by Bishop, I propose that

"spectacle" can not only reflect these meanings to varying degrees depending on

context, but can largely refer to the presentation of ordinary objects in a

fantastical manner. During my conversation with Gharem about the work (May

15, 2013), he stated that he first performed the work in Khamis Mushait, a city in

which contemporary art was not yet established. His aim was not only ecological,

but was also to teach the people about the interventionist power of contemporary

art, which was difficult as the citizens were not accustomed to seeing such an

artwork in the city. The mere act of performing created a spectacle for that given

community; the cultural climate of the site and its exposure (or lack thereof) to

performance was the first layer of spectacle. Another means of reflecting

spectacle in *Flora and Fauna* was through the objects Gharem used. The residents

of Khamis Mushait are accustomed to seeing the *conocarpus erectus* line the

---

[42] Ibid., 35-36.
[43] Ibid., 35.

streets. However, covering the trees with plastic created an uncanny effect. His actions defamiliarized an aspect of everyday life (such as the trees) and, through this, dramatized it for political effect.

In this way, the spectacle that Gharem creates serves to draw people into the artwork, combining spectacle with dialogue in a way that structures the work as participatory. Social practice requires activity both from the practitioner and the audience. The active viewer is drawn into the performance to become part of the piece itself, as demonstrated in *Flora and Fauna*.[44] Bishop argues that this active, participatory audience stands in stark relief to "passive spectatorial consumption" as the art can restore a communal space of social engagement, ultimately generating a "participatory social body."[45] However, the spectacle that Gharem creates is not one that is merely visually consumed, but one that involves the viewer (Bishop distinguishes it as participation merging with spectacle).[46] While social *discourse* traditionally rejects the artistic discourse as insufficient to expose social issues, according to Bishop,[47] social *practice* brings the two together through the creation of spectacle which can aesthetically present social issues. In this context, spectacle is not a negative concept or something merely for visual consumption. Rather, Gharem uses spectacle to garner attention to initiate

---

[44] Marcel Duchamp addresses the active viewer in "The Creative Act," where he states that the artist and the spectator comprise "the two poles of art". The spectator becomes the "posterity" of the work, and the artist can declare himself a genius as much as he wants, but must wait for the spectator to validate his claims. This can be seen in *Flora and Fauna* which draws the spectator into the work. The artwork is not simply about Gharem displaying an aesthetic for the passive viewer to watch, but in a sense co-creates the work with the audience. Duchamp further clarifies that the field of art history has analyzed art separately from the artist's (explained) intention. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," (paper presented to the convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas, April 1957), accessed December 5, 2013. http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/sound/aspen/mp3/duchamp1.mp3.
[45] Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle," 36.
[46] Ibid, 40.
[47] Ibid, 38.

discourse about the problem at hand and draws attention from the spectator towards the spectacle, or something to be looked at. Importantly, in *Flora and Fauna*, this spectatorial attention emerges in and through time.

**Time and Duration of Performance**

I will end this chapter with a consideration of the time and duration which performance occupies. The next chapter addresses site-specificity, so this will help transition to the discussion of a particular space within a particular time. Jackson states that, "[p]erformance's historic place as a cross-disciplinary, time-based, group art form also means that it requires a degree of systemic coordination, […] that must think deliberately but also speculatively about what it means to sustain human collaboration spatially and temporally."[48] As a performer, Gharem manages these factors to organize his social practice work within dimensions of both space and time. Performance scholar Peggy Phelan famously states that performance can only occur in the moment and any documentation of the event is considered something else, distinct from the performance; performance demonstrates reality through the presence of the body.[49] The viewer visually consumes the piece which becomes a memory where it can no longer be regulated: a limited number of people witness the performance, and writing about the act eliminates performance's "traceless" quality.[50] It is interesting to consider Phelan's assertions in the light of Gharem's works. Gharem ensures a means to document his performances, and if he did not record the event in some way, he would not be able to continue to raise the issue once the event was finished. The

---

[48] Jackson, *Social Practice,* 14.
[49] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance,* (London: Routledge, 2004), 146.
[50] Ibid, 149.

performance itself creates an immediate awareness, affecting those people local to the region if they happen to come across the performance. However, the issue could not be seen across the country or even internationally without photographs, video, or writing about the performance; the isolated event would remain at the community level. It is important to Gharem that this is not the case.

The issue of documenting performance only arises because of the impermanence of the act itself within time. Writer, curator, and creator of performance Adrian Heathfield points out that "the use of duration in works of performance brings to the front of aesthetic perception and understanding not only the sensate dynamics of temporality as they are manifested in human presence but the radical heterogeneity of durations."[51] Thus, performance can draw on a variety of durations. Gharem's performance alone addresses various time frames, including how long the ecological problem had existed in the area, his physical performance (the duration of which was determined by city authorities), and even the duration of his series of performances (which was prolonged through invitation to perform the work in other locations). Duration is a key component to making lasting changes, which Gharem attempted to do by acting on the issue outside of the performance itself.[52]

[51] Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh,* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009), 21.

[52] Michelle Bastian also addresses the multiplicity of time. She argues that particularly during ecological crises, time must be considered "not as a quantitative measurement, but as a powerful social tool for producing, managing, and/or undermining various understandings of who or what is in relation with other things or beings." (25) She also points to the multiple ways of telling time, stating that the clock is not the only physical manner in which time can be measured (drawing on examples of the layering of rocks and the changes in an atom); she also notes that different clocks exist to coordinate natural crises, such as the Doomsday Clock and One Hundred Months Clock. All of these challenge the conventional notion of the clock, and possibly help to develop more sufficient means of telling time. She finally argues that the clock, while useful in estimating what

In making his argument, Heathfield draws on philosopher Henri Bergson's theory on time. Heathfield states that "though time is progressive, the past survives in the present and is only separated from it by thought,"[53] suggesting that time is similarly multiple. When related to performance, performance occurs within a particular time but can draw on history, especially of a given region (as in the case of *Flora and Fauna* and the history behind the *conocarpus erectus*). Similar to performance, experiencing the site-specific art object entails a bodily experience, "in a sensory immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration".[54] The experience involves time and duration, and, to build on my interest in performance, I will now look at the way Gharem's site-specific works combine performance with time and (a very particular) space.

---

is going on with other people, is not helpful in considering what is happening environmentally at the time. Bastian's arguments are interesting to consider in conjunction with how Gharem draws on the multiplicity of time (such as durations of both the performance and the ecological issue). Michelle Bastian, "Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological Crises," *Environmental Philosophy* 9:1(2012): 23-48.

[53] Heathfield, *Out of Now*, 21.

[54] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity,* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

**Chapter Two:  Site Specificity and *Siraat***

Siraat *directly denotes "the path" or "the way", but has a twofold meaning. It can refer to the path in life and choosing the "right" path, but also carries religious implications, used in the Qur'an to refer to the Day of Judgment as the bridge over hell that leads to paradise. This word, صراط, is scrawled thousands of times on a destroyed bridge which stands amidst a harsh, barren and dry landscape of rocks and mountains, with paths sneaking through the valley.*

Figure 6: Siraat – The Path, 2007
Abdulnasser Gharem
Silk-screen printed with 16 colours and 2 glazes on 410 gsm Somerset Tub paper
(The work exhibited in the gallery is the silk-screen image.)
Tihama Valley, Saudi Arabia



Figure 7: Siraat, 2007



Figure 8: Siraat, 2007

The writing creates a sea of white letters covering the surface of the bridge. A deep crack runs through the bridge, dividing it into two. The word is also written in red along the concrete sides, accented by more red writing amidst the mass of white. Two faded yellow lines run through the centre of the bridge, echoed by further yellow lines on the periphery. The landscape of the scene is barely visible; only slopes of rocks and the occasional bush creep into the frame. The bridge comes to a sudden stop in the image, dropping off to (assumingly) more rocks below.

In 2007, Abdulnasser Gharem assembled a small team including his brothers and a few friends, bought cans of white spray paint, food, coffee, and tea, and together with this team, began to spray paint a single word all over a bridge in the Tihama Valley of Saudi Arabia: *siraat*. Six hours into the process of painting with his team, Gharem realized the task would take a lot longer than originally thought and called for more help. In total, Gharem had twenty-four men, some from the community, spray paint *siraat* over the bridge for the next four days and three nights straight, writing the word thousands of times – an action invisible to cars passing on the road below. The artwork made reference to an event that occurred twenty-five years previous.[55]

When he was nine years old living in Khamis Mushait, Abdulnasser Gharem heard about the death of a group of people from a nearby village.[56] In 1982, the region's infrastructure had been recently upgraded; the major road running through the area was reinforced to include concrete tunnels and bridges.

---

[55] Hemming, *Art of Survival,* 55.
[56] Ibid, 53.

As Hemming tells it, the authorities claimed that these bridges would "last for a hundred years" upon completion.[57] Accordingly, the villagers took refuge on one of them during a storm with heavy rain and flooding, putting their faith in the assertion of the bridge's near-indestructibility. Instead of protecting them, however, cracks began to appear in the concrete as the water level rose, gradually widening until the bridge gave away. Most of the villagers died as a result. Though the news went unannounced in Saudi Arabian media, it was remembered locally. The bridge was never rebuilt. Instead, it was left as an unintended memorial with a section torn out, suddenly dropping to the rocks below. A new road was built detouring the bridge's remains. When the spray-painting was completed, Gharem decided to video[58] the work and, while doing so, heard goat bells chiming on the hill above. He tried to entice the passing goats down to the bridge, but they only responded to the goatherd's call. When the goatherd arrived, Gharem explained his artwork to him, and the goatherd in turn summoned the goats. Gharem drew a parallel between the goats and villagers twenty-one years ago, stating afterwards that the goats were perfect for the video: they did not question, but rather put their faith in the goatherd and followed blindly.[59]

**Site-specificity and Social Practice**

"Site-specificity" is a term used in many disciplines and genres. Miwon Kwon (a leading scholar on site-specificity), in her book *One Place After Another,* explores the term as both an artistic notion and a concept in the realm of "spatial

[57] Ibid.
[58] The video of *Siraat* can be viewed on Abdulnasser Gharem's website: http://abdulnassergharem.com/artwork/film/the-path-film/
[59] Hemming, *Art of Survival*, 57.

politics."[60] Drawing on Kwon, this chapter explores site-specificity to answer the

question of *where* the artworks exist, and correspondingly, *who* is affected at the

local, national, and international levels. I examine site-specificity's role in social

practice, unpacking Kwon's arguments about site-specificity in conjunction with

Gharem's work *Siraat*. I consider the site of *Siraat,* the space in which it exists,

and later exhibitions of the artwork within institutional spaces. Following this, I

draw on Carol Becker's notion of public and private spheres to examine how they

overlap within Gharem's works, and couple this examination with Chantal

Mouffe's discussion of agonistic spaces. Together, these scholars help me to

consider the various (physical, social, and political) spaces in which Gharem's

work exists to unfold the multiplicity of the site.

 In *Once Place After Another*, Kwon questions the community addressed in

site-specific works. She notes the term's vagueness, something she says is

characteristic of community-based art more generally.[61] The transposable use of

terms such as "site" and "audience" in particular link the questions of *where* the

work occurs and *who* is affected or implicated by it.[62] Kwon highlights the way

that terminology has shifted over the past few decades from "site-specific" to

"community-specific" and even "issue-specific"; this modification of language,

Kwon argues, brings the production and reception of art nearer together, in turn

---

[60] Kwon, *One Place*, 2. Kwon's arguments trace the lineage of site-specific art from Earthworks in the 1960s to contemporary, community-based artworks. She explores how the term is shaped throughout different artistic periods. Site-specificity stems from minimalism, and many artists have regarded the site as both physical and cultural.

[61] Ibid, 94.

[62] The audience factors into site-specificity in several different ways, which I will continually come back to throughout the chapter.

creating a closer relationship between the artist and audience.[63] The physical

qualities of the site became secondary to the qualities of those who inhabit the

site, or the people themselves;[64] *community* links site with audience. The audience

of *Siraat*, however, is indirect: unlike *Flora and Fauna* which aimed at engaging

with the community at hand, *Siraat* speaks to the audience by drawing attention to

the history of the site and community. Gharem preserves the memory of a site

which has *affected* the wider community (and audience).

The community, then, is essential to site-specific works in linking them to

social practice. Kwon states:

> […] A central objective of a community-based site specificity is the
>
> creation of a work in which the members of a community – as
>
> simultaneously viewer/spectator, audience, public, and referential subject
>
> – will see and recognize themselves in the work, not so much in the sense
>
> of being critically implicated but being affirmatively pictured or
>
> validated.[65]

The use of community and undoing of the passive audience, here, echoes Claire

Bishop's notions in the preceding chapter. The viewer no longer passively views

the artwork, but is drawn into it (possibly through the spectacle created) and even

participates in it as well; the community is reflected in the artworks. Gharem

literally includes the community in *Siraat* both through the collaborative

production of the piece, the dialogical aspects of it, and through the representation

of both of these in the work's video. The video shows some of the individuals

---

[63] Kwon, *One Place,* 109.
[64] Ibid, 111.
[65] Ibid, 95.

who participated in the work, and Gharem further pointed out during our conversation (May 15, 2013) that the young man shown towards the end of the film was directly impacted by the event: his father was one of the people killed during the flood. Unlike Earthworks such as Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* or Walter de Maria's *The Lightning Field* which merely exist within the landscape with no community referent, the site extends beyond the physicality of a destroyed bridge by referencing a very particular event which impacted the entire community.

Kwon continues:

[T]he emphasis on the social stems from the belief that the meaning or value of the artwork does not reside in the object itself but is accrued over time through the interaction between the artist and community. This interaction is considered to be integral to the art work and equal in significance (it may even be thought of as constitution the artwork). What this means is that the *artist's assimilation* into a given community now coincides with the *artwork's integration* with the site. The prior goal of integration and harmony in terms of unified urban design is reorganized around the *performative* capacity of the artist to become one with the community.[66]

The validity of the artwork, then, can lie with how an artist interacts and "assimilates" with the given community. Gharem is an active part of the community[67] in which he works. For example, an artist commissioned to go into

---

[66] Ibid.
[67] This notion of the reflection of the community differs within Gharem's works as well. We will see in the next chapter how Gharem documents a community in his work *Manzoa*. The artwork's substance is in itself documentation of individuals' lives. Moreover, Grant Kester's concept of the

an area to create a piece of social practice art could potentially have less validity

than one who becomes acquainted with and integrated within the community.

Kwon moreover clarifies that issues affecting a community cannot be considered

"a priori" by an outside artist or individual, but rather each site has needs that

must be explored personally, slowly, and over time; the most effective work

would be one conceived by the community or reflecting the community in some

way.[68] This is applicable to Gharem's works: He either researches the community

ahead of time and builds a relationship with the people, or has lived there himself

which gives him the credibility to create these site-specific social practice

works.[69] Gharem is part of the community which is reflected in *Siraat,* as he

---

orthopedic comes into play here. Kester states that the orthopedic aesthetic implies that the viewer is intrinsically flawed and must be "corrected"; the viewer is inferior to the artist who can improve and rectify the viewer. This perspective has been associated with the work of institutional critique (such as Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser's 1990's work). Gharem avoids this aesthetic by integrating himself into the community. By doing this, he can eliminate (or at least drastically decrease) the barrier between artist and subject.
Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 88.
[68] Kwon, *One Place,* 96.
[69] The issue of author-function arises here. Discourses of belonging and authenticity have failings, some of which I will briefly address here. However, this is an expansive topic, and one which I cannot cover fully within the realm of this thesis, but it is important to bear these limitations in mind. Michel Foucault states that the question of the author remains open so that it can be addressed multiple times. Discussing the "author-function," Foucault states that historically, works with anonymous authors have been celebrated (contrasting with ""literary' discourse" which contains authorship (126)). Foucault also argues that in certain cases, the reader (or viewer) projects traits such as 'profundity' or 'creativity' as a response to considering texts. Roland Barthes also addresses the role of the author, stating that writing can only begin when "the author enters into his own death." (142) Once the author has been detached from the work, assigning a piece to an "Author" would consequently limit the work; ultimately, the death of the Author leads to the "birth of the reader." Barthes therefore argues that the reader (or, viewer in the case of artwork) needs more agency than the author. This concept of the relationship between the author and reader (or, artist and viewer) will come up again in my discussion of Chantal Mouffe's arguments that identity is the result of a discursive process.
Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977): 113-138.
Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 142-148.

personally remembers the flood; everyone knew someone, whether an immediate relative or friend, who was affected by the event.[70]

**Displaced Sites**

While the physical location of the work is fixed, the context of *viewing* the work can change. Claire Doherty, an academic who looks at the situations surrounding artistic reception, contrasts the "originating" context of a work (the performance) with the "displaced" context (a video or photographic reproduction of the performance).[71] Both of these circumstances imply a different audience. The primary audience experiences the work firsthand, whereas the secondary audience views the works' documentation in the gallery space and must rely on background information to add meaning. Gharem's performances all occur outside of the gallery and he specifically ensures means to document the performances, planning to have at least a photographer present for the events; only later are the photographs displayed in the gallery space. One does not have to visit the site to see the work, but it is readily available through other means of viewing. However, this does not suggest that the primary site is unimportant. During my conversation with Gharem (May 15, 2013), he mentioned that many people within Saudi Arabia have asked him, after seeing the photographs, how they can see the work, wishing to travel to the site.

Doherty notably argues that the concept of "site" as a physical location has shifted to encompass a site which is socially, economically, culturally, and

---

[70] Skype conversation with Abdulnasser Gharem, May 15, 2013.

[71] Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists," in *Contemporary art: from studio to situation,* ed. Claire Doherty (London: Black Dog Pub., 2004), 8.

politically formed.[72] In the context of *Siraat,* Gharem transforms the physical,

destroyed bridge into a site referencing a specific history and endows the site with

a cultural significance; he questions the morality behind blindly following

instruction. Formerly, site-specific art was seen through temporal installations,

exemplified through Earthworks in which artists wanted to distance their artwork

from galleries which "were deemed to be coded mechanisms that actively

dissociate the space of art from the outer world."[73] Gharem's exhibitions in

galleries, however, contest this notion. Instead of simple rejection of the gallery,

he often exhibits photographs or video of the site-specific performance; these

exhibitions compliment the original, site-specific work and merely add a

multiplicity of sites through which the works can be viewed. Gharem takes a local

concept and extracts a more global meaning, which he then exhibits to an

international audience to similarly reflect on in conjunction with their own life

which creates a new, dynamic notion of "site". Situating Gharem's works within

social practice allows me to draw a parallel between Gharem's works of art and

issues which transcend national borders.[74]

Siraat carries an overt political and social commentary which Gharem

initiates. The artwork is not merely an aesthetic experience, but a social one as

well (as exemplified through the political action that Gharem further takes such as

---

[72] Ibid, 10.
[73] Kwon, *One Place,* 13.
[74] This is exemplified through Gharem's acknowledgement of pressing ecological concerns. Apprehensions of an environmental crisis permeate contemporary discourse, evident through discussions in the media, academia, and popular culture. Gharem faces the challenge of stimulating such dialogue in the nation which is among the world's largest producers of oil. While this topic is pertinent to a global society, I am particularly interested in the way that it is addressed at the community level in Gharem's works.
Val Plumwood, *Environmental culture: the ecological crisis of reason,* (London: Routledge, 2002), 239.

in *Flora and Fauna*).  While merely seeing pictures of the site removes the

environment in which the event actually occurred in 1982, the work's significance

does not lie in its physical location. Rather, the work draws meaning from

Gharem's social commentary which is illuminated by the goats which

unassumingly follow their goatherd. Furthermore, the reproduction and

dissemination of images allows Gharem to reach a wider international audience,

and the social issue of blind acceptance extends beyond this site. Ultimately,

despite the arguments for (or against) mechanical reproduction of images,[75] both

the physical site of the work and the virtual space in which the images can be seen

are part of *where* the work can be viewed.

---

[75] Though the original photographs of the piece are taken by Gharem, the process of mechanical reproduction can remove the artist from the work. Photographs can be mass produced: they are found in books and on the internet, and, according to Kwon, "the re-creations are inauthentic not because of the missing site of its original installation but because of the absence of the artist in the process of their (re)production." (98) Not only is the work removed from its original and intended environment, but through the reproduction of photographs, the artist has been detached from the works. Moreover, the reproduction of the work, as German philosopher Walter Benjamin says, "is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space [which] includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years." The work is removed from its original context, thus also removing it from its historical significance, Benjamin would argue. However, I do not fully agree that Gharem is removed from the works. An interesting aspect to site-specific works is their ephemeral nature. This is an intriguing component for me, but which does not directly factor into Gharem's works. The irony of the issue is that the site was impermanent (though being a concrete and supposedly stable structure), as were the people who were on the bridge. Craig Owens, who studied allegorical elements within art, states that, "site-specific works are impermanent, installed in particular locations for a limited duration, their impermanence providing the measure of their circumstantiality. Yet they are rarely dismantled but simply abandoned to nature; Smithson consistently acknowledged as part of his works the forces which erode and eventually reclaim them for nature. In this, the site-specific work becomes an emblem of transience, the ephemerality of all phenomena; it is the memento mori of the twentieth century."[75] The consideration of memento mori is interesting given the subject matter of the artwork which can also serve to remind the viewer of their own mortality. However, I would not consider this to be one of Gharem's aims in making the artwork.
Walter Benjamin, "Extracts From 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,'" in *The Photography Reader,* ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43.
Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October*, Vol. 13 (1980): 71.

**Public and Private Spaces**

Whereas the physical location of the work demonstrates *where* the art occurs, I must also consider the social space in which the work exists. Carol Becker delineates contemporary art in the public and private spheres in her article "Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere." She states that human interaction cannot be replaced by technology, and that change occurs in spaces where people are gathered (as seen through, for example, the Arab Spring in which people congregate over issues such as voting).[76] Becker further states that artists tend towards illuminating what is absent or missing, and consequently, many aim to connect people and ideas within the public sphere.[77] This can lead to the blending of public and private spheres with a common notion that public space is void of public discourse.[78] Abdulnasser Gharem's artworks occur within the public sphere and serve as a means to bring people together. This gathering is not revolutionary, but one which rather creates a space for people to learn about a problem in the area. Gharem's artworks serve to raise societal issues within public space which is a site for the exchange of ideas. Becker's theory allows me to consider how Gharem achieves social practice within a real and tangible space

---

[76] Carol Becker, "Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere," in *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012), 66-67.

[77] Ibid, 67. Although this shares similarities with Kester's orthopedic model in that the artist could see the viewer as being intrinsically flawed, here Becker could also be referring to something which is absent from the wider community itself. Becker's notion differs from Kester's in that it does not necessarily have to forcefully seek to impact the viewer, but as in the case of Gharem's works, gently creates a space in which people can gather.

[78] Ibid., 68.

and not an imagined one. The physical space is one which is open to the public, and that brings publics together.[79]

Alongside Becker, French theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud is helpful in examining this issue of artwork dependent on the production of local "publics". To help him think through contemporary work grounded in the social, Bourriaud coined the term "relational aesthetics". Relational aesthetics can be seen as a precursor to social practice and provides a wider framework to consider public and private spheres. Bourriaud states that art must no longer build a world based on history, but strive to occupy it in a better way,[80] which is similarly aligned with Gharem's objectives as he examines society and attempts to improve a situation. *Siraat* can be seen as a means to scrutinize previous events to see how we can change and better inhabit our community, beginning with the local community (and extending from there to the national and international community). Gharem does not attempt to build a new world based on the historical event that occurred, but rather to examine what went wrong and explore how change can happen.[81] Relational art encompasses a sphere of interactions which provide a theoretical model for examining social relations in the public

---

[79] Michael Warner very aptly distinguishes "*the* public" from "*a* public." He delineates three different types of "publics": the first as the common use of the term referring to "people in general;" the second signifying "a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public;" and lastly, "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation." (49-50). Gharem's artworks, then, can be considered as a means to bring these different "publics" together.
Michael Warner, "Publics and Counter Republics," in *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 49-90.
[80] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics,* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 13.
[81] This concept draws similarities with activist art which aims to impact the real world (as discussed by Gonzalez and Posner). Gharem, in searching how change can occur, takes the initial steps needed for action.

sphere instead of an individually inhabited space.[82] Bourriaud encourages human relations by proposing an artistic push to counter a trend in which people have become isolated from each other. Bourriaud's theories are fundamental in considering social practice, and can be exemplified through Gharem's works. Gharem endeavors to make his works accessible and consequently, he raises societal issues and keeps them within the public sphere for discussion.

Bourriaud similarly examines the relationships between people, but from within a consumerist context, stating that anything which cannot be marketed will disappear. Forming relationships outside of a trading situation would thus be difficult to maintain; social bonds between people would become mere artifacts of culture as relationships would no longer be "directly experienced", but rather "blurred in their 'spectacular' representation."[83] Gharem's works, along with contemporary art in this scenario, create an opportunity and space for relations to occur;[84] contemporary art can provide a means to prevent social estrangement. Social practice certainly uses this idea to form a more cohesive human bond by addressing problems which can afflict a community. Bourriaud calls for a social change in human relations, and Gharem, as a part of the social practice genre, attempts to achieve this goal by creating situations existing within time and space to foster relationships with one another.[85]

---

[82] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 14.
[83] Ibid, 9.
[84] Ibid, 16.
[85] Gharem's work is reminiscent of Joseph Beuys' similar means of making art, which Kristina Lee Podesva outlines. Beuys aimed at using education as an artistic medium, documenting lectures as artistic performances. These works fall under the category of Social Sculpture which is aligned with Beuys' belief that each person can impact society through their participation in the community. Theoretically, in this manner, the viewer of the art creates meaning together with the artist. Gharem's work is a reflection of Beuys' theory by creating these opportunities to bring the

I will end this chapter by further discussing how Gharem creates these

relationships within social space. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues in her

article "Artistic Activism" that art always has a political side, and conversely,

politics has an aesthetic component.[86] Art, she argues, challenges a "symbolic

order" within society and thus must have a political dimension.[87] For example,

*Siraat* has an element of critique of societal pressure to blindly follow instruction.

The work also carried notions of censorship, when a photograph of the piece was

mistakenly circulated with a caption insinuating that Gharem and his team wrote

verses from the Qur'an on the bridge instead of simply the word *siraat*.

Consequently, the work was banned from an upcoming exhibition.[88] This

exemplifies how the work's politicism was manifested and invites a consideration

of the role of what Mouffe calls "agonism" in contemporary social practice art.

Mouffe argues that it is important to democracy and therefore socially grounded

art practices that the conflict between two opposing hegemonic views cannot be

settled rationally, nor does the struggle occur in a neutral space; rather, it seeks to

give voice to those lost within the dominant hegemony of society through

---

people in a community closer together as they are directly involved with his artwork. This idea
will resurface throughout the thesis, and is not only relevant to Gharem's *Siraat*, but to Gharem's
work as a whole.
Kristina Lee Podesva, "A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art," *Fillip 6*(2007).
Accessed December 6, 2013: http://fillip.ca/content/a-pedagogical-turn.
[86] Mouffe, "Artistic Activism," 4.
[87] Ibid. To go back to Gonzalez's and Posner's article distinguishing "political" from "activist" art,
Mouffe's use of the political is similar. The "political dimension" Mouffe refers to, I think, reflects
Gonzalez's and Posner's idea that political art displays social issues in a critical manner. Political
and activist art can have, though, a comparable meaning by both drawing on prominent social
issues, upon which political action can be taken.
[88] Hemming, *Art of Survival,* 117.

discursive practices.[89] The site of *Siraat* brings up a social location in which conflicting opinions can arise, which is important when considering that the issue Gharem comments on is one of blind imitation. In what Mouffe would call an agonistic manner, critical art (such as Gharem's) makes visible what the dominant majority in a given society attempts to shroud.[90] These "counter-hegemonic interventions" exist within a public space so that it can disrupt the smoothly flowing order of society.[91] Thus, Mouffe's view of the use of public space differs from Nicholas Bourriaud: Bourriaud emphasizes the need to foster what he calls "convivial" relationships within public space, while Mouffe suggests that the hegemonic state can be upset in public space. I propose that Gharem, following a Mouffian model, counters the hegemonies of society, but in a means which creates relationships through discord. In *Siraat,* Gharem simultaneously builds relationships by drawing on a commonality held in the community while encouraging individuals to actively think, and therefore potentially disagree, instead of merely accepting what they are told. The space in which all of this unfolds must be a public one because the issue addressed is one to which a large group of people can relate.

  *Siraat* is one means through which Gharem can address a collective identity formed in dissent. He focuses on an event common to the individuals local to the region, himself included. Mouffe comments on identity, stating that

---

[89] Mouffe, "Artistic Activism," 3. Agonism, according to Mouffe, differs from antagonism as it refers to conflict not only between people, but such dissimilarities are moreover *inherent* within the opposing sides. It is a conflict which cannot be resolved.
 Natalie Loveless, "Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD," in *Canadian Journal of Communication,* 37:1(2012):93-108.
[90] Ibid, 4-5.
[91] Ibid, 5.

identity is a result of a process of discourse and is "discursively constructed";[92]
activist art addresses the formation of identity.[93] This can be seen through *Siraat*
in that Gharem's work was a part of a process of identification for the community.
People can see themselves reflected in the work, whether they assisted in its
creation or were affected by the flood. Either way, the people native to that
location could have a different sense of communal identity because of the artwork
which reflects them all. The interesting aspect to this that Mouffe brings up here
is discourse, and how discourse plays a role in creating identity. Together,
discourse and site (whether geographic or social) can help sculpt a dynamic and
ever-changing view of identity. Discourse is an important aspect to social practice
in creating knowledge through language. For Michel Foucault, discourse is a
"system of representation" and "production of knowledge through language."[94]
(44). Stuart Hall further clarifies that "since all social practices entail meaning,
and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a
discursive aspect": it is important to note that discourse does not merely imply
language, but also requires *practice.*[95] In the next chapter, I focus on dialogue,
which can be a product of discourse, but must be accompanied by action
(exemplified through Gharem's social practice works) in order for knowledge to
truly be produced.  I will now further examine how Gharem uses language within
his artworks to create meaning.

---

[92] Ibid, 4.
[93] Ibid, 5.
[94] Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 44.
[95] Ibid.

**Chapter Three:  Dialogue and *Manzoa***

*While driving through the region of Jizan, Saudi Arabia, Abdulnasser Gharem*

*and a photographer passed a shanty town with people sitting outside. The word*

manzoa, منزوع, *was spray painted in red on many buildings,* manzoa *meaning*

*"ripped", or "about to be destroyed". Without any further information, Gharem*

*bought a can of white spray paint from a nearby city. He scrawled* manzoa *on the*

*back of his red shirt and returned to the town, spontaneously joining a football*

*game in the street. The people asked Gharem about his shirt and he explained he*

*was doing a piece of performance art; in return, the people began to tell their*

*stories.*

Figure 9: Manzoa, 2007
Abdulnasser Gharem
Jizan, Saudi Arabia



Figure 10: Manzoa, 2007

Figure 11: Manzoa, 2013
Collage

The white writing on the back of Abdulnasser Gharem's red shirt compliments the red writing on the white, partially destroyed walls of houses and buildings. In all of the images of the performance, the artist's face is never visible; rather, the script on his shirt mimics that found in the village. Gharem surveys the sights in front of him: pieces of wood and other building materials which are on the ground, houses which do not have doors, and makeshift roofing which lies across damaged walls.

In 2007, in the region of Jizan, Saudi Arabia, Abdulnasser Gharem performed an unexpected intervention. While travelling in southern Saudi Arabia, he noticed a town in which most of the buildings had the word *manzoa* written on them, indicating that they were marked for destruction. He stopped, bought some spray paint, wrote *manzoa* on the back of his shirt and joined a local football game. Hemming outlines how, over the course of the next few hours, Gharem learned that the community he had stumbled upon consisted of fishermen who had built the modest houses and buildings without first obtaining permission to do so. Consequently, government officials informed them that their buildings were illegal and had to be demolished. The residents were given monetary compensation for the structures, but a date was never set for the demolition and the fishermen and their families continued to live there for several more years. What Gharem further discovered was that many of the fishermen then spent this money on *qat*, a semi-addictive narcotic from neighboring Yemen which makes the user lethargic.[96] The influx of money had allowed for more *qat* to be brought in, which increased addiction rate in the village. As a result, many residents

---

[96] Hemming, *Art of Survival,* 91.

proceeded to sell piping from their houses once the compensation money ran out, and then turned to selling their roofs to make more money. Still, no date had been set for the town's demolition. Gharem reflected that, "[at dark,] the village became the saddest place I have ever known… On their souls I could have written *manzoa.*"[97] Gharem later exhibited photographs of his action in Jizan, continuing the dialogue with the viewers of the work in art galleries.

*Manzoa* was one of the pieces prominently displayed at Gharem's solo exhibition at the Edge of Arabia Gallery in London (2013). The display featured twenty-six images from Gharem's performance arranged in a collage (Figure 11) and an assembly of house numbers (found objects) Gharem collected, which he also assembled in a collage. Next to this display were six televisions with headphones playing different recordings of Gharem's interactions with the villagers. The videos are diverse, ranging from a group of men talking with each other about their experiences, to a young boy playing a drum, to a group of people dancing in the street. The experience of viewing the different representations of the action initially seemed very disjointed, as there was a lot to visually absorb from the overall work of *Manzoa*. However, it provided a very comprehensive view of Gharem's experience, offering enough visual information to adequately explain the artwork.

Gharem's point in displaying the artwork is to instigate dialogue about social justice. This commitment to dialogue, in fact, one could argue is the very medium of the work. In making this claim, I largely look at Grant Kester's theory of dialogic art, examining his notion of empathy. I pair this with Miwon Kwon's

---

[97] Ibid, 93.

theories which extend beyond site-specificity to include the role of dialogue in art. Finally, I will address Kester's concept of dialogical determinism to study the activism within dialogical art to relate it to social practice. These issues allow me to address *why* the issue matters and *how* change can happen.

**Dialogue and Social Practice**

Before discussing dialogic art, it is important to explore what the word "dialogue" entails. Examining the concept outside an artistic standpoint will help provide a wider context in which to consider dialogic art. William Isaacs is a noted professor and scholar who focuses on dialogue and communication. In his book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, he states that dialogue helps all people, regardless of background. Isaacs immediately sets up dialogue as something which is shared and communal.[98] He states that:

> *Dialogue* […] is about a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do *to* another person. It is something you do *with* people. Indeed, a large part of learning this has to do with learning to shift your attitudes about relationships with others, so that we gradually give up the effort to make them understand us, and come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other. […] Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry *within* and *between* people.[99]

Isaacs mentions how relationships must shift between individuals and emphasizes the affiliations between people which result from sharing dialogue. This is important to keep in mind as I continue to explore *Manzoa* from the perspective

---

[98] William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life,* (New York: Currency, 1999), 10.
[99] Ibid, 9.

of building dialogue. Isaacs further affirms that action must result from dialogue, offering three different "languages" or "voices": firstly, the meaning or concepts which are developed through dialogue; secondly, "feelings and aesthetics", which refers to the cadence and affect which accompanies dialogue; and lastly, that of power, and particularly the power of movement: "dialogue is not in the end merely about talking, it is about taking action. And at its best, dialogue includes all three of these voices: meaning, aesthetics, and power."[100] Isaacs finally proposes that "the intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act,"[101] which reinforces the potential that dialogue has in stimulating change by offering new perspectives. This last voice, action, is particularly significant to consider in conjunction with Gharem's works which strive to bring about change within the community. Gharem's use of dialogue echoes Isaacs' theory. Conversation can serve as a catalyst for change, as Isaacs argues, which makes it entirely appropriate that Gharem uses dialogue as an artistic medium.

Discourse can be used to further examine site. Miwon Kwon states that "[…] the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate."[102] *Manzoa* exemplifies Kwon's "discursively determined site" through the manner in which Gharem engages with the residents. Without language and meaning, the site remains a closed location and the knowledge of the situation

---

[100] Ibid, 13.
[101] Ibid, 19.
[102] Kwon, *One Place,* 26.

remains contained within. Conversation is the means to disseminate knowledge to create a deeper understanding; on the surface, Gharem finds a village marked with spray paint, but discourse between Gharem and the inhabitants revealed the history and cultural background of the site. I agree with Kwon's proposition that the discursive site is the most important because of the embedded narrative that it can reveal. Kwon further states that "the increasing institutional interest in current site-oriented practices that mobilize the site as a discursive narrative is demanding an intensive physical mobilization of the artist to create works in various cities", and that an artist is typically invited by an institution to create site-specific art.[103] Abdulnasser Gharem differs from this paradigm by creating art on his own initiative. In the case of *Manzoa*, Gharem drove around seeking an opportunity to create art. His primary objective with this work was to learn about the community and help them achieve social change, which could have differed if he was commissioned to make the piece.

**Dialogic Art**

Grant Kester, noted scholar on dialogic and relational art practices, postulates that dialogic art engages with an audience in a way that requires a shift in perception.[104] Importantly, for Kester, dialogical art is art in which dialogue is the primary medium, and not a just a byproduct of the artistic act (as in the case of *Flora and Fauna*, in which Gharem engaged in dialogue as the result of his performance). Kester states that dialogic art stemmed from the 1960s and '70s when artwork was no longer a "self-contained entity" but instead something

---

[103] Ibid, 46.
[104] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 12.

which stimulated conversation with the viewer.[105] Kester addresses dialogue

through two approaches: firstly, to regard art itself as a space to ask questions and

offer analyses which would not be accepted in other spaces, and secondly, to

consider what characterizes the artworks and what links these characteristics to

aesthetic traditions; this entails the consideration of both cumulative choices and

events which impact the future.[106] Kester summarizes this by saying, "[…] the

existing cultural construction of art as a privileged realm of free expression

provides a quasi-protected opening onto a broader cultural and political arena

within which these various forms of aesthetic knowledge can be mobilized."[107]

Thus, art can be deemed as a means of expression which allows for political

conversations, and, by extension, actions to occur, resulting from dialogue.

Kester's thoughts are important for me to consider particularly in

conjunction with Gharem's *Manzoa* because the artwork clearly reflects a desire

for action. During my conversation with the artist (May 15, 2013), he outlined the

definitive actions he took as a result of the conversations he had. The artwork

actually occurred over two nights, and the people told Gharem they were

frustrated because they were uneducated and did not know how to take action.

Consequently, Gharem went to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, to file some

paperwork on their behalf after his initial encounter with the community. He

further aided them by giving them phone and fax numbers where they could file

complaints, and encouraged them to continue fighting and to "do something to

move". As a result of Gharem's agitation, journalists even came to photograph

---

[105] Ibid, 60.
[106] Ibid, 68-69.
[107] Ibid, 69.

and document the town. In conversation, Gharem told me he had planned to have a celebration for the village in a month's time, "in order to keep their spirits up, [to] provide a sense of hopefulness, [and] to give the message that even if their houses were destroyed, it wouldn't be the end of the world; they could still do something and still be happy" (May 15, 2013). Unfortunately, however, when Gharem returned a month later he found that the village had already been destroyed and thus his artwork was never completely finished.[108] Gharem endeavored to help the community save their town, but the villagers' story was never resolved as the issue was left open-ended. Dialogue produced actions which originated from a desire to impact the future. Kester proposes that openings to political and cultural borders can be formed through dialogue, and indeed the discourse which occurred in *Manzoa* opened doors to a political arena.

**Dialogic Art and Identity**

Empathy is necessary to dialogic art, Kester argues, because empathy challenges a fixed identity and can lead to a sense of shared identification to create feelings of solidarity.[109] Conceptual artist Adrian Piper uses the term "modal imagination" "to describe our ability to 'extend our conception of reality – and, in particular, of human beings – beyond our immediate experience in the indexical present... this leap is a necessary condition for experiencing compassion for others.'"[110] To apply the modal imagination to *Manzoa*, I would argue that Abdulnasser Gharem made the village's reality his reality by acting on the issue. Without dialogue, the work would not exist, and similarly, without empathy, I

---

[108] Skype interview with Abdulnasser Gharem, May 15, 2013.
[109] Kester, *Conversation Pieces,* 77.
[110] Ibid.

would also argue that the work would not exist: dialogue produced empathy, and empathy led to social action. Kester outlines three types of empathetic relationships: that between the artist and collaborators, between collaborators themselves, and finally between the collaborators and the viewers of the work.[111] I propose that social practice manifests through these relationships. In *Manzoa*, Gharem establishes a connection with individuals and learns about the basic problems of the community; the empathetic relationship reveals why the problem is important. After the first empathetic relationship is formed between Gharem and his collaborators, the individuals in the village, the collaborators form an empathetic relationship amongst themselves. They associate with one another, and in the process, a collective identity is formed.

This shared identity, formed through dialogue, is presented to a wider audience creating another empathetic relationship between the community and viewer. In this manner, Kester states that dialogical artworks "can challenge dominant representations of a given community."[112] Miwon Kwon similarly argues that the artist has a unique role in the process as they can serve to activate the community, and the works should leave the viewers questioning their identity.[113] This identity can refer to one's individual identity, but I contend can also be applicable to a wider, perhaps national identity as well. During *Manzoa*'s exhibition a few years later in London, a Saudi woman approached Gharem after seeing the piece. She told him that this community could not be in Saudi Arabia,

---

[111] Ibid, 115.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 159.

because there is no poverty in the country,[114] exemplifying a shaken national

identity because of the work. This further answers the question of *why* the issue

matters, as it can provide a wider understanding and broader view of a specific

problem. Kwon moreover states that:

> Underlying decades of public art discourse is a presumption that the
>
> artwork – as object, event, or process – can fortify the viewing (now
>
> producing) subject by protecting it from the conditions of social
>
> alienation, economic fragmentation, and political disenfranchisement that
>
> threaten, diminish, exclude, marginalize, contradict, and otherwise
>
> 'unsettle' its sense of identity[115].

Kwon indicates that discourse about art has produced the belief that the work

itself can protect the subject from conditions which threaten its identity. Gharem's

work reveals that this is not the case, as the identity of the community is shaken

with its physical demolition. The artwork can upset the identity of those who hold

such an assumption, or the identity of public art discourse itself.

**Activism of Dialogic Art**

Identity, Kester points out in ways that echo Mouffe, is continually

reformed around political categories (such as class, as seen in *Manzoa*), and each

piece of dialogic art must be considered individually in the context of identity or

history[116] (similar to that of social practice, which must be regarded as issue-

specific). However, Kester warns us to avoid what he calls "dialogical

determinism", or the "naïve" belief that conflicts can be resolved through

---

[114] Hemming, *Art of Survival,* 93.
[115] Kwon, *One Place,* 97.
[116] Kester, *Conversation Pieces,* 175.

openness, and he maintains that this is one disadvantage of the dialogical viewpoint.[117] Another major criticism of dialogic art, Kester states, is that the public sphere is a space in which opinions differ, and dissent is necessary.[118] This recalls Mouffe's agonistic approach: the inhabitants seen in *Manzoa* exemplify those overshadowed within a hegemonic state. Gharem uses discourse to both voice and document their difficulties which are then presented to those harmonious with the mainstream majority. Dialogical determinism moreover glosses over power relations which can impact the artwork ahead of time, and the relationship between dialogue and social change can be underdeveloped, Kester states.[119] Mary Field Belenky, in her book *Women's Ways of Knowing*, offers a counterargument to this, introducing the concept of "connected knowing", which is "a form of knowledge based, not on counterpoised arguments, but on a conversational mode in which each interlocutor works to identify with the perspectives of the others;" it is characterized by the recognition and consideration of others' social background which impacts their argument, and relies upon empathy and the removal of self-consideration from the exchange.[120] Kester states that "some projects use dialogical exchange to enable community participation in a larger political context. In these cases, dialogical interaction is used to ground the forms of speech and agency needed to participate in social struggles involving such coherent entities as […] government agencies."[121] In

---

[117] Ibid, 182.
[118] Ibid, 113.
[119] Ibid, 182.
[120] Ibid, 113.
[121] Ibid, 174.

*Manzoa,* the community was mobilized to take political action through Gharem's intervention.

Claire Bishop questions such forms of dialogic art and the wider genre of social practice in her article "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents".[122] She outlines Kwon's, Bourriaud's, and Kester's arguments and draws attention to them as important figures in the movement, but states that the importance of the artworks merely lies with the works' social significance and *not* in the aesthetic value of the pieces.[123] Specifically regarding Grant Kester's notions of dialogic art, Bishop states:

> Kester argues that consultative and "dialogic" art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward "discursive exchange and negotiation." He challenges us to treat communication as an aesthetic form, but, ultimately, he fails to defend this, and seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art.[124]

---

[122] Bishop makes a similar argument in her more recent book Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship, in which she argues against Kester by asserting that morality is not unimportant, but rather that it does not have to be presented in such a "saintly" fashion. She continues her argument by stating that often, socially engaged artworks do not necessarily prioritize aesthetics and instead favor the ethical component of the work.
Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso Books, 2012): 26.

[123] Claire Bishop, "The social turn: collaboration and its discontents," *Artforum International no. 6* (2006): 180.

[124] Ibid, 181. Kester replied to Bishop in Artforum, May 2006, in which the two theorists responded to each other. Kester counters by questioning Bishop's readiness in critiquing activist artwork. Kester states that the genre, along with discursive practices, do need to be questioned, but also argues that Bishop takes this to an extreme.
Artforum International 44, no. 9 (May 2006).

Bishop's critique of Kester's theory is interesting to consider in light of Gharem's works, namely, the proposition that communication in and of itself is not an aesthetic form. In the context of *Manzoa,* the initial form of communication is written. The word spray-painted on the buildings originally attracts Gharem's attention, who as a result, painted the same word on his back in an aesthetic gesture which was a means of communicating with the community.[125] Communication throughout the work is not limited to verbal communication, though that does play a large role in it. It also combines bodily gestures with a verbal and written exchange of ideas to create the artwork. In Gharem's case, furthermore, the artwork does not remain at the level of conversation, but rather is documented and exhibited in galleries. Thus, a visitor could potentially view the artwork in the gallery and appreciate it for its aesthetic value, with the writing across Gharem's t-shirt complimenting the writing on the buildings. Indeed, the visual experience of *Manzoa* in London 2013 confirms this, as photographs of the event were accompanied by found objects and video; dialogue was only a small part of the aesthetic experience. While dialogue, I argue, was Gharem's primary medium for the piece, the found objects, photographs, and video are important secondary outcomes. Finally, Gharem's aim in creating the work was to stimulate change for that community. Even a physical change could possibly be considered

---

[125] This could also be read in terms of graffiti art discourses, which is an expansive topic in itself, and one which I cannot adequately address in this thesis. It would be interesting, however, to consider Gharem's actions in *Manzoa* (and even *Siraat)* in alignment with the genre. German graffiti artist and author Nicholas Ganz offers a brief history of graffiti art, a discussion of various techniques, and an expansive visual collection of graffiti art in his book *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents.* Ganz touches upon the use of the word "graffiti," stating that often contemporary artists shy away from in, considering the term to be too exemplary of "vandalism and defacement." (10)
Nicholas Ganz and Tristan Manco, *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2004): 10.

for its aesthetic value: Gharem had hoped to work with the villagers to save their buildings before they were destroyed.

When we consider such activist components of socialist works, Nato Thompson warns us to guard against "fetishizing" activism" and urges a turn towards socially engaged artworks which are lasting and community-based, addressing local needs.[126] Irit Rogoff, in her article "Turning", reinforces Thompson's ideas by discussing the pedagogical turn in education, stating that art has become a site of discussion through which we can practically apply knowledge.[127] Fetishizing activism would not be conducive to bringing about change, but rather could lead to activist artworks remaining in the gallery instead of being applied to the community at hand which would remove the agency of social action. In this case, the activism could remain at the level of discussion and not actually translate into a tangible form of change. Activism and the desire for change are formed as a result from dialogue in *Manzoa*.

Ultimately, Abdulnasser Gharem uses dialogue in *Manzoa* as his primary medium which distinguishes the work from other performances. Dialogue allows for the exchange of ideas with the fundamental goal of inducing change, which aligns the work with social practice. Dialogue can moreover help us answer the questions of *why* the issue at hand matters, and *how* it can be resolved: dialogue is

---

[126] Thompson, "Living as Form," 31. Thompson quotes artist Josh Macphee who says he is "tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as though it were their own invention." In this case, Thompson uses this reference to refer to "fetishizing" as an act in which artists can possibly trivialize activism, discussing artists who outwardly display activist sentiment yet "simply travel the world trading in the symbolic culture of activism." (31) Activism in this manner would be devalued and belittled, and not used for its intended purpose of bringing about change.

[127] Irit Rogoff, "Turning." *E-Flux Journal*, 1 (2008), accessed October 31, 2013, http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/3859/1/18.

the means to bring these issues into the open to be discussed. As Gharem exposes the artwork to a wider audience, the removed audience can too examine why the issue matters: the problem of poverty is one which is universal and is not limited to an isolated community. The work also serves to question a sense of identity, both for the community and for the audience viewing the work. Overall, dialogue in *Manzoa* produced concrete actions which aimed to restore hope to a shattered town and Gharem presents this in exhibition form to other audiences to raise awareness and invite other such actions.

**Conclusion**

The underlying theme that runs throughout this thesis is common to performance, site-specificity, and dialogue within social practice: *community*. We saw in the first chapter how Abdulnasser Gharem's spectatorial performance draws support in order to initiate dialogue in the community. We then saw in the second chapter how the particular site is vital to the work, as the history and culture of the community can be reflected. Finally, we saw how dialogue can affect a community as discourse plays a vital role in bringing about change. In an interview recently conducted with Gharem in conjunction with his first solo art exhibition in London (2013), Gharem stated that, "the most important thing for me is [to] produc[e] artwork which will change my society or […] at least which will help them spark to start to talk […] to develop their life and their environment."[128]

I have also argued that many of Abdulnasser Gharem's works can be situated within the social practice genre as they endeavour to produce societal change. Nato Thompson says that "socially engaged art may, in fact, be a misnomer. Defying discursive boundaries, its very flexible nature reflects an interest in producing effects and affects in the world rather than focusing on the form itself. In doing so, this work has produced *new forms of living* that force a reconsideration and perhaps new language altogether" [emphasis added]. [129] I too argue that Gharem helps to introduce new forms of living as his artworks force the viewer to reexamine social issues in their own lives. Likewise, curator Maria

[128] World Video News, "Popular Saudi artist launches his first major exhibition outside the Middle East," accessed October 24, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkeZjDbpqMk.
[129] Thompson, "Living as Form," 32.

Lind similarly suggests that social practice artworks can make another world possible:

> [Social practice] is simultaneously a medium, method, and a genre [...] [It] can loosely be described as art that involves more people than objects, whose horizon is social and political change—some would even claim that it is about making another world possible. [...] Another way of phrasing this is to talk in terms of the collaborative turn in art – the genre as an umbrella for various methods such as collective work, cooperation, and collaboration.[130]



Figure 12: The Capitol Dome, 2012
Abdulnasser Gharem
Installation

---

[130] Maria Lind, "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice," in *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012), 49.

Both Lind and Thompson suggest that something new can be formed as a result of art as social practice. Thompson's new forms of living can lead to the creation of "new worlds" through collaboration. Collaboration in Gharem's works is not merely between individuals, or even between communities. Even one of his more recent artworks, *Capitol Dome* (2012) suggests a collaboration between cultures. For the work, Gharem depicts Tomas Crawford's statue of the goddess Freedom holding up the Capitol Dome; the interior of the Dome looks like a mosque. Gharem's work reflects an Eastern interest in democracy amidst the Arab Spring while merging Eastern and Western cultures.

I recently went to two exhibitions featuring Gharem's works. Upon visiting Gharem's first major solo exhibition in London (October 8 – November 8, 2013), I realized that all of his pieces work together to represent an overall image of community and its challenges. Sometimes, the community is literally represented (as in the example of *Manzoa)*. However, often community is more implicit and the works rather focus on universal issues that seem to transcend a specific community. One good example of this is Gharem's series *The Stamp* (Figure 13), which features a sculptural oversized stamp as well as framed prints of the stamp.[131] Gharem, using it every day in his work with the army, commented on the stamp as a means to determine what is and is not acceptable. He observes how "powerful [it is] in our lives [… It] is the symbol of bureaucracy

---

[131] This work is reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's *Free Stamp* (1991), which is an outdoor sculpture of an oversized stamp measuring 8.8 x 7.9 x 14.9 m with the word "free." According to the artists, the term "free", while having different connotations, can be seen as a reference to the statue across the street of a woman holding the word "liberty."
"Free Stamp," Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, accessed December 8, 2013, http://oldenburgvanbruggen.com/largescaleprojects/freestamp.htm.

[...] I think that's what's killing the dreams of the youth here. [...]So I'm putting that as an artwork which will become kind of a platform where people can come and start to talk about it again."[132] The London exhibition also featured a new artwork in the series entitled *The Stamp – Moujaz,* which, in English, reads "In Accordance with Sharia Law," and is accompanied by the equivalent in Arabic.



Figure 13: The Stamp – Moujaz, 2013
(In Accordance with Sharia Law)
Abdulnasser Gharem
Handcarved oversized wooden stamp with embossed rubber face

Gharem stated that, "if you come to Saudi Arabia, you will see this stamp everywhere, even on bank loans. That's why it's in the exhibition: We are in 2013 and they're still treating us with a 1,400-year-old law without any development in it. And the people, they just believe it. [...] So I'm trying to produce a kind of

[132] NPR Staff, "Saudi Soldier Questions Authority With Art (And Plastic Wrap)," accessed November 29, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/11/08/243492165/saudi-soldier-questions-authority-with-art-and-plastic-wrap

image that will jump from [my mind to] a whole society in a minute."[133]

Abdulnasser Gharem's extended body of work invites us to examine how society is comprised, what spheres of influence exist, and how we can change. They create another imagination in which we can see changes that we make through collaborative efforts. This perspective was underscored for me when Gharem concluded our Skype conversation (May 15, 2013) by stating his ideas always come back to society and how communities can be implicated in art.[134] It is evident in speaking with him, examining his artworks, and situating them within the genre of social practice that his art extends beyond its aesthetic nature to be a practical medium in inducing social change, centered around community, and it is this that I hope I have begun to explicate in this thesis. Gharem's works are aesthetic propositions that come in many forms and can offer a glimpse of another world by encouraging change. His works are particularly powerful because they not only encourage change, but they also encourage the viewer to act: Gharem researches an ecological issue and educates people about it in *Flora and Fauna,* challenges the viewer to confront their own ideas about morality in *Siraat,* takes political action in *Manzoa,* and addresses cultural amalgamation in *The Capitol Dome*. Indeed, Gharem's works encompass the premises of social practice which seek to bring about change in a collaborative manner by engaging with the community.

---

[133] Stephan Heyman, "An Artist Tests Saudi Arabia's Limits," accessed November 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/05/arts/international/an-artist-tests-saudi-arabias-limits.html?_r=0
[134] Skype interview with Abdulnasser Gharem, on May 15, 2013.

# Bibliography

*Artforum International* 44:9 (May 2006).

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*, Roland
        Barthes and Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 142-148.

Bastian, Michelle. "Fatally Confused: Telling the Time in the Midst of Ecological
        Crises." *Environmental Philosophy* 9:1(2012): 23-48.

Becker, Carol. "Microutopias: Public Practice in the Public Sphere." In *Living As
        Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, edited by Nato Thompson,
        64-71. New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012.

Belenky, Mary Field. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self,
        Voice, and Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer." Address at the Institute for the
        Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934.

Benjamin, Walter. "Extracts From 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
        Reproduction.'" In *The Photography Reader,* edited by Liz Wells, 42-54.
        New York: Routledge, 2003.

Bishop, Claire. "The social turn: collaboration and its discontents." *Artforum
        International no. 6* (2006): 178-183.

Bishop, Claire. *Participation.* London: Whitechapel, 2006.

Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells*. London: Verso Books, 2012.

Bishop, Claire. "Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?" In *Living As
        Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, edited by Nato Thompson,
        35-45. New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics.* Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002.

Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction.* London: Routledge,
        1996.

Doherty, Claire. "The New Situationists." In *Contemporary art: from studio to
        situation,* edited by Claire Doherty, 7-14. London: Black Dog Pub., 2004.

Duchamp, Marcel. "The Creative Act." Paper presented to the convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas, April 1957. Accessed December 5, 2013 http://ubumexico.centro.org.mx/sound/aspen/mp3/duchamp1.mp3.

Farah, Nathalie. "Everything I Create Must be to Help People." *Gulf News*, January 13, 2012.  Accessed November 28, 2012. http://gulfnews.com/arts-entertainment/performing-visual-arts/everything-i-create-must-be-to-help-people-1.963940.

Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977): 113-138.

Ganz, Nicholas, and Tristan Manco. *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 2009.

González, Jennifer, and Adrienne Posner. "Facture for change: US activist art since 1950." In *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, 212-230. Maiden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2006.

Hall, Stuart. "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* Edited by Stuart Hall (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997): 13-74.

Heathfield, Adrian, and Tehching Hsieh. *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh.* London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009.

Hemming, Henry. *Abdulnasser Gharem: Art of Survival*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2011.

Heyman, Stephan. "An Artist Tests Saudi Arabia's Limits." November 6, 2013. Accessed November 29, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/05/arts/international/an-artist-tests-saudi-arabias-limits.html?_r=0.

Isaacs, William, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life.* New York: Currency, 1999.

Jackson, Shannon. *Social Works: the infrastructural politics of performance.* London: Routledge, 2010.

Kaprow, Allan. *Allan Kaprow: Art As Life.* Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008.

Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Kuppers, Petra. *Community Performance: An Introduction.* London: Routledge, 2007.

Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002.

Lind, Maria. "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice." In *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, edited by Nato Thompson, 46-55. New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012.

Loveless, Natalie. "A Manifesto on Bitterness as a Foundation of the Social." In *Better Living through Bitter Melon: A Manual*. Edited by Andi Sutton and Misa Saburi. The National Bitter Melon Council (Artadia: Boston): 80-87.

Loveless, Natalie. "Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD." *Canadian Journal of Communication,* 37:1(2012): 93-108.

Marray, Denize. "Soldier Artist with Humanitarian Perspective," *Arab News*, November 6, 2013. Accessed January 22, 2014. http://www.arabnews.com/news/473011.

Miles, Malcolm. "A Green Aesthetic: After Kant the Deluge", in *Ground works: environmental collaboration in contemporary art*. Pittsburgh, PA: Carnegie Mellon University, 2005.

Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Mouffe, Chantal. "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces." *Art & Research, A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods* 1:2 (2007): 1-5.

National Public Radio Staff. "Saudi Soldier Questions Authority With Art (And Plastic Wrap)," National Public Radio, November 8, 2013. Accessed November 29, 2013. http://www.npr.org/2013/11/08/243492165/saudi-soldier-questions-authority-with-art-and-plastic-wrap.

Oldenburg, Claes, and Coosje van Bruggen. "Free Stamp." Accessed December 8, 2013. http://oldenburgvanbruggen.com/largescaleprojects/freestamp.htm.

Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2." *October*, Vol. 13 (1980): 58-80.

Phelan, Peggy, and Jill Lane. *The Ends of Performance*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: the politics of performance.* London: Routledge, 2004.

Piper, Adrian. "Impartiality, Compassion and Modal Imagination." *Ethics* 101 (July 1991): 726-757.

Plumwood, Val. *Environmental culture: the ecological crisis of reason.* London: Routledge, 2002.

Podesva, Kristina Lee. "A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art." *Fillip 6*(2007). Accessed December 6, 2013. http://fillip.ca/content/a-pedagogical-turn.

Rogoff, Irit. "Turning." *E-Flux Journal*, 1 (2008). Accessed October 31, 2013. http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/3859/1/18.

Side by Side Gallery Akim Monet. "Amen Art Foundation". Press release, emailed to me, April 10, 2013.

Stapleton, Stephen A., Edward Booth-Clibborn, Aya Mousawi, Abdullah Al-Turki, and Miriam Lloyd-Evans. *Edge of Arabia*. London, United Kingdom: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2012.

Suderburg, Erika. *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Thompson, Nato. "Living as Form." In *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, edited by Nato Thompson, 16-33. New York, N.Y.: Creative Time, 2012.

Warner, Michael. "Publics and Counter Republics." *Public Culture* 14:1 (2002): 49-90.

World Video News. "Popular Saudi artist launches his first major exhibition outside the Middle East." Accessed October 24, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkeZjDbpqMk.

# Appendix A: Ethics Approval

**Notification of Approval**

Date:                             February 7, 2013

Study ID:                     Pro00036337

Principal Investigator:      Tracey Hilden

Study Supervisor:          Natalie Loveless

Study Title:               Social Practice and Performance in the Works of Abdulnasser Gharem

Approval Expiry Date:      February 6, 2014

Sponsor/Funding Agency:    SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council     SSHRC

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Dr. William Dunn
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*