

Contextualization of the work of Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie and the historical material from 1988

As part of documenta fifteen, our collective Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie has for several weeks found itself caught up in a polemic related to a digital archival document in our exhibition: a 1988 issue of the feminist Algerian women's journal *Présence de femmes* that deals with Palestine. The artists in question are Burhan Karkoutly (1933-2003) and Naji al-Ali (1937-1987). We regret that their illustrations have elicited misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of journalists and visitors who have detected antisemitism in images critical of the Israeli army, not of Jews as individuals or as a community. Faced with accusations of antisemitism concerning this archival material, we would like to set the record straight and provide some points of clarification with respect to our approach and the historical context in which this document was produced, by a group of Algerian academics and militants at the end of the 1980s.

Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie is an independent research project launched in 2019, amidst the Algerian popular uprising (the *hirak*), with the ambition of constituting a digital, open-access archive of the women's movement in Algeria from the moment of independence in 1962 to the present. By gathering together digital copies of documents produced by women's and feminist associations and collectives, we aim to introduce a history that has long been marginalized and to make available hitherto little-known and inaccessible resources. Our objective is to furnish the documentation necessary for the analysis, understanding, and critique of women's mobilizations for emancipation and equal rights throughout the history of

contemporary Algeria. The project is led by a collective of women archivists and doctoral students in the social sciences, in collaboration with researchers in other fields and in the art world.

In our space at the Fridericianum (*Fridskul*), we chose to revisit a particularly dense and prolific moment in the history of the Algerian women's movement, from 1988 to 1993. To narrate this period, we had recourse to different media: videos and photographs of meetings and demonstrations organized by women in the 1980s and 1990s, filmed interviews, and a table where visitors can consult reproductions of various archives.

The issue of *Présence de femmes* dedicated to Palestine is the only document from the year 1988 that we have so far discovered and presented. *Présence de femmes* was a journal founded in early 1984 by the Atelier de réflexion sur les femmes algériennes (ARFA), a group of Algerian academics and militants that formed part of the association *Hiwar* ("dialogue" in Arabic). The founders of the journal explained that it was the "debates and setbacks during the discussion over the Family Code and its adoption by the National Assembly" that had "provoked the desire to do something concrete." They thereby set out to conduct research on women across the fields of literature, the arts, and the social sciences, and to write and to support the writing of other girls and women.

The 1988 issue of *Présence de femmes* was published the same year as the proclamation of an independent Palestinian state by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which met in Algiers – where it was based in exile – in November 1988. Written in Arabic and entitled *Bells of Return*, the

issue's cover features a drawing by the Syrian artist Burhan Karkoutly of a Palestinian family: a woman, a man, and a child. The issue forthrightly supports the Palestinian people, especially Palestinian woman. It includes contributions from writers and poets on Palestine and the Palestinian resistance, as well as writings on the Algerian cultural and artistic scene of the period. For 1988 was also an important year for the history of independent Algeria, as a revolt that October played a central role in the democratic opening that would follow in February 1989. The authors in *Présence de femmes* affirm their desire to participate in the incipient "cultural renaissance." Like other documents presented to visitors in our exhibition space, this issue was conceived by a group of Algerian women as part of their struggle not only for equality between men and women but against discrimination, racism, and oppression in all forms. It was important for us to display it in the space because it testifies to the transnational and intersectional character that the political engagement of these women's groups could take, and the transnational solidarities that existed at the time. In the same spirit, we exhibited documents and photographs – visible in the slide carousel – of women's mobilizations against the Gulf War in 1991 and in support of the Iraqi people and Iraqi women.

Karkoutly's images are taken from a children's book published in 1969 by the renowned Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani (b. 1936 - assassinated 1972). The book is titled *Atfal Ghasan Kanafani (The Children of Ghasan Kanafani)*. Karkoutly was commissioned to make drawings for what became a famous book in the Arab world. The drawings that are currently being misinterpreted in German press initially accompanied two of the stories therein: the first, written in 1969, recounts a scene prior to the Nakba, in which Zionist

militias detain and brutally kill a group of Palestinians while forcing a child to witness the event. Massacres committed by Zionist militias have been amply documented, among others by Israeli historians Ilan Pappé and Benny Morris. The second drawing by Karkoutly accompanies a story by Kanafani about the exodus of Palestinians during the Nakba. The caricature by Naji al-Ali – who was known to be critical not only of the Israeli military but also corrupt Arab regimes and the PLO itself – depicts the Palestinian popular uprisings leading to 1987. It shows the resilience and strength of the movement in fighting the Israeli military and the importance of Palestinian women's role; it also illustrates the complicity of Arab states with the Israeli military.

As documenta stated, the 1988 issue of *Présence de femmes* was briefly removed from the exhibition about three weeks ago for a more in-depth review, in the course of which it was determined that there are no depictions of Jews as individuals or a community, but rather of Israeli soldiers. The Star of David, while clearly a Jewish symbol, here identifies the Israeli military via its national flag. The child with his hands behind his back next to the woman kicking the soldier apparently refers to a well-known Palestinian cartoon (*Handala*) as a critique of mistreatment by the military. As a result of this review, the material has been reinstated in the exhibition. documenta stated that there will be no further vetting of the exhibition for antisemitic motifs.

The fact that we did not specify the relevant historical context earlier is explained by an approach and commitment we adopted from the outset. We carry out the work of archivists and give access to documents that we digitize in their

totality, in unedited form – that is to say, without any manipulation or censorship of the content, confining our interventions to basic information that allows for each document to be identified. Through these documents, we make available a whole intellectual, militant, and political undertaking of the 1980s and 1990s. These are historical documents that should be understood as such, presented in an exhibition that seeks to give access both to a fonds of digital archives and a method of archival curation. It is out of the question for us to censor or conceal a document due to its content or the political opinions it expresses, which would go against our ethical principles and the values for which we strive: the sharing and free circulation of documents and knowledge. Our project is not only historiographical and documentary, but also pedagogical and critical. The reproduction of the documents presented in our space at the Fridericianum – the originals belong to their owners – allow visitors to peruse them, to flip through them. Everyone is free to pick them up, to investigate them, to reappropriate them. All the same, we provide these pieces of information and contextual background to the public, in the hope that they will edify and help to avoid further confusion and gratuitous mix-ups.

If we can understand that these illustrations have given rise to misunderstanding, we remain troubled by the quantity of articles associating the Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie collective, as well as artists like Buhran Karkoutly and Najji al-Ali and the journal *Présence de femmes*, with baseless and defamatory accusations of antisemitism. The conflation of criticism of the Israeli occupation with antisemitism in connection with the *Présence de femmes* illustrations must cease. Furthermore, we note that none of the media outlets involved in this campaign has ad-

dressed the work that we have been doing for more than three years with Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie, nor the approach of our collective or the history that we are trying to bring to light. This way of going about things not only threatens to harm our initiative and our work; it puts us personally in danger in a context in which multiple artists and collectives participating in documenta have been attacked or threatened (see our collective statement of July 27, 2022, "Censorship Must be Refused: Letter from Lum-bung Community"). We firmly condemn this irresponsible agitation and rush to sensationalize.

Despite everything, we are pleased to participate in this special edition of documenta, and we intend to do so right to the end.

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