

Becoming Assemblies in Contemporary Syria

By Anne-Marie McManus

How can the collective exist in a country torn apart by civil war? In *Jamhara/Assemblage* Syrian artist Mohamad Omran and writer Odai al-Zoubi use ink drawings and words to envision unity in the midst of fragmentation.

About: Mohamad Omran, Odai al-Zoubi, *Jamhara/Assemblage*. *Dark Nights Onto Rolling Waves*, Ettijahat Independent Culture, Goethe Institute, 2019.

Jamhara/Assemblage by Syrian artist Mohamad Omran and writer Odai al-Zoubi reflects on collectivity under Syria's Assad regime (1970-present) and current conditions of exile and fragmentation. The book consists of nine ink drawings by Omran, an award-winning sculptor and painter from Damascus who received a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Lyon II. Omran's images are paired with nine short texts, some of which were written by al-Zoubi, an emerging essayist and short story writer with a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of East Anglia. Other texts comprise testimonies al-Zoubi gathered and transcribed. One is taken from Syrian artist Khaled al-Khani's recollection of growing up in Hama after the massacre of

1982.¹ Two are poems by Chinese poet Ai Qing and Polish poet Aleksander Wat. These linguistic translations are untroubled.² In an almost citational mode, *Jamhara* moves from a bus stop outside Hama to a poet of the Chinese Communist Revolution. This ease with the worldly is reflected in the text's bilingual publication, fluidly readable in two directions: one for English, one for Arabic.

Jamhara thus seems to resolve what Syrian novelist Rosa Yassin Hassan dubs the “tightrope” walked by Syrian writers today, between “particularity and worldliness (al-khususiyya wa al-‘alamiyya)”.³ Many of Syria's cultural producers (including Omran and al-Zoubi) live abroad, in proximity with other literary scenes, sociopolitical contexts, and what Hassan calls a worldly movement of “creativity”. Thanks to spikes of academic and popular interest in the 2011 uprising and the war that followed, more Syrian literature dealing with revolution and violence is being translated into European languages. Hassan's pull of the worldly tugs on writers and works alike, using literal and cultural-political translations to make Syrian's recent past and contemporary struggles globally intelligible.

Today, anglophone readers might parse Hassan's claim on the particularities of Syrian literature (and art) through identity, language, or geography—respectively, the other, the untranslatable, the local. In what follows, I read instead across the spaces *Jamhara* opens between text and image to address a different kind of particularity: a restraint that marks a certain privacy, a refusal to put the particular (al-khass) into figurative circulation. This restraint emerges from, but is not reducible to, the contexts of censorship, violence, and trauma that *Jamhara* identifies in nine paradigmatic scenes. I use it to underscore a theme that has animated Omran's work for years and that

¹ In 1982, the regime laid siege to Hama, killing and imprisoning many who survived, to crush the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising against the state.

² Qing's poem was translated into English by Fang Dai, Dennis Ding, and Edward Morin, and Wat's by Czeslaw Milosz. The translator(s) of *Jamhara*'s original texts, as well as the translators of Qing and Wat into Arabic, are not listed.

³ <https://syriauntold.com/2021/01/12/%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%a6%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ba%d9%8a%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%85%d9%8a-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b1%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84/> Accessed Jan. 20, 2020

preoccupies many Syrian activists and thinkers today: the troubled relation between individuals and political collectives.

Words for Gathering

With its title, *Jamhara* breaks contemporary lexical conventions for thinking politics. In classical Arabic literature, *jamhara* titled works that assembled not events, but words: anthologies (e.g., *The Gathering (Jamharat) of the Arabs' Verse* by Abu Zayd al-Qarashi) and dictionaries (e.g., *The Comprehensive Lexicon (al-Jamhara fi al-Lugha)* by Abbasid grammarian Ibn Durayd). *Jamhara* is the gerund of a verb derived from *jumhur*, meaning audience or public, and, in leftist discourse, the masses (*al-jamahir*). More orderly than the mob (it yielded the Arabic for “republic”), *jumhur*'s political immanence pales next to *al-sha'b*—the people—the noun politicians use to interpellate the nation and in whose name the 2011 uprisings spoke their most famous slogan. Both a noun and a verb, *jamhara* names assembly and its formation: becoming-assembly. An earlier, pre-print translation for Omran and al-Zoubi's project suggests this dual process, as well as the semantic novelty their approach invites: “the huddle”.⁴ With its focus on becoming-assemblies, *Jamhara* loosens the representational grip of dictatorship, war, and ISIS on the Syrian society terrorized by them. It is this loosening that gives *Jamhara*, despite its familiar content, a welcome unfamiliarity.

Omran and al-Zoubi use *jamhara* to re-frame stock memories of the Assad regime and the post-2011 decade. These include being forced to march as adoring crowds; the spectacle of ISIS; imprisonment; demonstrations; forced displacement. These experiences are categorized anew as instances of Syrians (and Syrian-Palestinians) becoming assemblies. Crucially, this inventory levels the ground between assemblies formed voluntarily—paradigmatically 2011—and those born passively, in apathy, or through coercion and fear. Its gathering is thus an

⁴ “Meet the Artist: Mohammad Omran” YouTube. December 9, 2018.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R29bT_XltGA

anthologizing gesture, an introduction to taking stock of Syrian collectivities past and present.

This conceptual work risks being lost if readers feverishly translate *Jamhara/Assemblage* into assemblage theory, currently associated with speculative realism and Latour's actor-network theory. Assemblage (*agencement*) was Deleuze's elusive concept for heterogenous "multiplicities" unified only by their "co-functioning"; his examples were "contagions, epidemics, the wind".⁵ Certainly, *Jamhara* is concerned with the becoming, transience, and representation of plural assemblies, yet the vitality of the non-human is out of frame, beside the point, in a work relentlessly focused on the human.

2011

Omran's images are attentive to mediation, including men who stand apart to record two contrasting funerals: one for Hafez al-Assad (president 1970-2000), and one for protestors killed in 2011. An historical mode is also evident, with the text bifurcated by the uprising. Before them lie metonyms of Hafez's reign: Hama, empty rhetoric, ludicrous fanfare. Omran's drawings of security officials and motorcades here tend to the ironic, but the state apparatus is no less ominous for being ridiculous. After the uprising lies the post-2011 contemporary: overcrowded prison cells, cities under siege, mass exile. Omran's faces and bodies are wracked with new torments, stripped nearly naked in the prison scene; eyes closed or absent in exodus from a sagging urban warscape, as though the artist wishes to ward off horrors sensed ahead.

Between these memories of becoming-assembly lies 2011. The individual becomes "a human being among human beings he lives with and for" in al-Zoubi's description of a funeral-turned-protest. Text and image align. Omran's drawing—the peaceful face of the deceased and ecstasy of the demonstrator-mourners—reflects the text's assertion that protest meant putting "his soul on his palm": facing death or

⁵ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, New York, Columbia UP, 1987, 69

torture. This conscious assent to a risk of bodily harm traverses literary and scholarly writing on Syria's uprising, but fades from global theorizations of assembly by figures like Judith Butler and Hardt & Negri, whose works sympathetically cite the "Arab Spring".⁶ That individuals in the Middle East would walk towards bullets—shouting God is great, no less—bolsters views of Islam as a culture of death and Syria's uprising as a quixotic venture that could never escape a choice between dictatorship or ISIS.⁷ The regime of course exploited these neo-Orientalist axioms.

In *Jamhara*, the risk of death is constitutive of 2011's becoming-assembly: not for nation (or Caliphate), but for a proximate, fragile collective. It becomes in so many decisions to face death, knowing others will do the same. A worse fate is letting these others down; letting the protests die; and "then," writes al-Zoubi, being "alone again." One wonders what language beyond the religious might have let protestors articulate such becoming-assembly; recalling Hassan's particularities, what theory of uprising could embrace the frictions in translating *Jamhara's* unruly immanence into global terms of neoliberalism and precaritization. Yet these are not *Jamhara's* questions. When its authors do draw a translational line, it is not between locals and globals or proper languages, but between image and word.

Restraint

Jamhara is a multimedia work, juxtaposing image and text rather than blending their techniques in what media theorist Jürgen E. Müller calls intermediality. The texts do not explain their associated images, nor are the latter, Omran and al-Zoubi caution, "a visual translation" of words. Each medium stands in parallel, with texts exploring themes that shoot like tangents from the event Omran depicts. The juxtaposition does not yield a more complete vision or account but points to lapses in representation

⁶ Hardt & Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford University Press 2017) 293. Judith Butler's *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press 2015) opens with Egypt's uprising as the origin for today's interest in social movements, 7.

⁷ See e.g., Hardt & Negri's alarm at Islamic movements glorifying martyrdom, premised on a distinction between the (good) martyr passively defending "their faith [...] even unto death" and a (bad) martyr who annihilates him/herself when attacking enemies, *Assembly*, 56-7.

(what is not represented rather than what is unrepresentable). These lapses are borne out in each media form, with texts thematizing silence and conversational pretense and Omran's drawings depicting unreadable grimaces and inaccessible eyes. Together, the work sustains irreconcilable certainties of individuals having lived a collective event, yet of standing apart—of fragments not adding up to wholes. Even in the 2011 image, revolution's "peculiar synthesis" of "the many becoming equal to the one, and the one equal to the many" is not achieved.⁸ The protestors (almost all male) look, gesture, and seem to move in different directions. Their faces bear different expressions. They are different sizes; an outstretched hand dwarves a man's body. The most visually unified assembly in *Jamhara* is the state's: security agents, the powerful. They are marked by their robes and sunglasses, their uniformly calm faces and closed mouths.

More than a general ambivalence to totalizing notions of the people, *Jamhara's* care to show difference in collectivity suggests the Syrian individual, in these authors' lifetimes (i.e., since the late 1970s), has been smothered by social and political interdependencies. Enmeshing individuals, interdependence is a form of assembly. It is cherished in contemporary theories of uprising that view street protest as resistance to neoliberalism's atomization of society and its "war on the idea of interdependency" (Butler, 64).⁹ Omran and al-Zoubi remain cautious, noting individuals enter (or fail to enter) assemblies "in the presence or absence of power," by being "forced to assemble" or "prohibited" from it.¹⁰ Seeking escape, *Jamhara* does not give "the individual" a content, but chooses to leave representational space open—between media and in what I am describing as restraint. With the exception of one drawing, Omran avoids the mass-as-object, opting for smaller groups and visible faces over the horizon-filling expanse of revolutionary masses. From afar, mourning crowds are indistinguishable from joyous ones. Yet Omran's closeness does not yield intimate portraits. Whether in exodus, protest, or waiting for news of the disappeared, his figures frequently lower or close their eyes, guarding interiority for themselves.

⁸ Jonsson, Stefan, *A Brief History of the Masses: Three Revolutions*, Columbia University Press, 2008, 6.

⁹ Syria has not been spared neoliberalism's reach; see Bassam Haddad's *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Here my translation is from their Arabic.

Al-Zoubi's texts, meanwhile, thematize surfaces and silences as constitutive of communication. Of Hafez's death, he recalls: "the country was deeply divided, with no evidence or results: nothing on the surface at all". This might be dismissed as an effect of censorship, the much-discussed wall of fear. Yet restraint characterizes ordinary relationships in *Jamhara*: fearing social unrest, relatives offer one another reassurance while packing to flee. An anonymized woman, S.S., imprisoned for protesting in 2012 and now living in Paris, writes "I lie to [my family] constantly," and they to her. She does so to spare them pain, but communication is not hindered: "I understand very well what they are experiencing [in Syria]," and they her in Paris. S.S.' restraint extends to herself. Her father wrote her letters every day of her imprisonment, but she did not read them until she was on a plane to Paris. She doesn't need to explain why she didn't read this evidence of her father's grief, an intimate reflection of the imprisonment she survived, until departing for good.

Through these instances of restraint, *Jamhara* suggests a task facing Syrians who take stock of becoming-assembly since 1970: a mourning at once collective and deeply private. Tellingly, writer and artist abdicate their media to depict ISIS in a becoming-assembly that, far from elevating ISIS, conjures the absent gaze of Syrians on their violence: a mediatized assembly. This is why Omran's drawing reproduces the iconic shot of an ISIS member about to behead a prisoner while bearded men brandish weapons and black flags in the background. ISIS is not un-representable but excessively so. Alongside, al-Zoubi inserts Wat's poem on the ceaselessness of evil, refusing to offer a Syrian voice on the spectacle in a parallel gesture to S.S.: some letters are not yet (ever?) to be opened.

It would be convoluted at best to suggest that the restraint traversing *Jamhara* is attributable to the Assad regime's censorship. The work is part of a new drive in Syrian cultural work to remember the past without erecting new sacred monuments: sites of mourning, but also of fetishization and exclusion that can foreclose transformation in the present. *Jamhara* thus participates in a regional, historically and critically reflective current of intellectual production that has followed the 2011 uprisings. Today, on the tenth anniversaries, writers and activists are acknowledging the trauma and despair accumulated over years while fiercely scrutinizing the politics of narrative and commemoration. "How," to borrow Egyptian journalist Lina Attalah's words, "not to remember the revolution"?

Unforgettable, the immanence of 2011 is no lodestar for the present. *Jamhara* ends on a quietly optimistic, everyday note. Omran's final drawing shows an assembly, for the first time in the book, of small groups and individuals. Children play; adults smoke nargileh; a woman has taken off her shoes to eat a banana. They are in a no-place, and no event marks their time. Omran's black background may even be read as a screen, evoking the relevance of digital connections for scattered communities. Whatever the case, the image offers a narrative arc: of the fragmented present as time for mourning, but also for ordinariness, distraction, realignments.

Further reading:

- Lina Attalah, "Things I learned on How Not to Remember the Revolution" *Madr Masr*, 25th January 2021.
<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2021/01/25/opinion/u/things-i-learned-on-how-not-to-remember-the-revolution/>
- Nayla Mansour. "Remembering, not Commemorating, Creates Life" *al-Jumhuriya*, 27 January 2021.
<https://www.aljumhuriya.net/en/content/remembering-not-commemorating-creates-life>
- Lenssen, Anika, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria*. University of California Press, 2020.
- Wendy Pearlman, *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices from Syria*. Custom House, 2017.
- Wedeen, Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Jonsson, Stefan. *Crowds and Democracy: The Idea and Image of the Masses from Revolution to Fascism*, Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Asad, Talal, *On Suicide Bombing*, Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Mazarella, William, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd?" *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2010), 697-727.

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