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Archiving the Absent Nation

Ayman AlAzraq

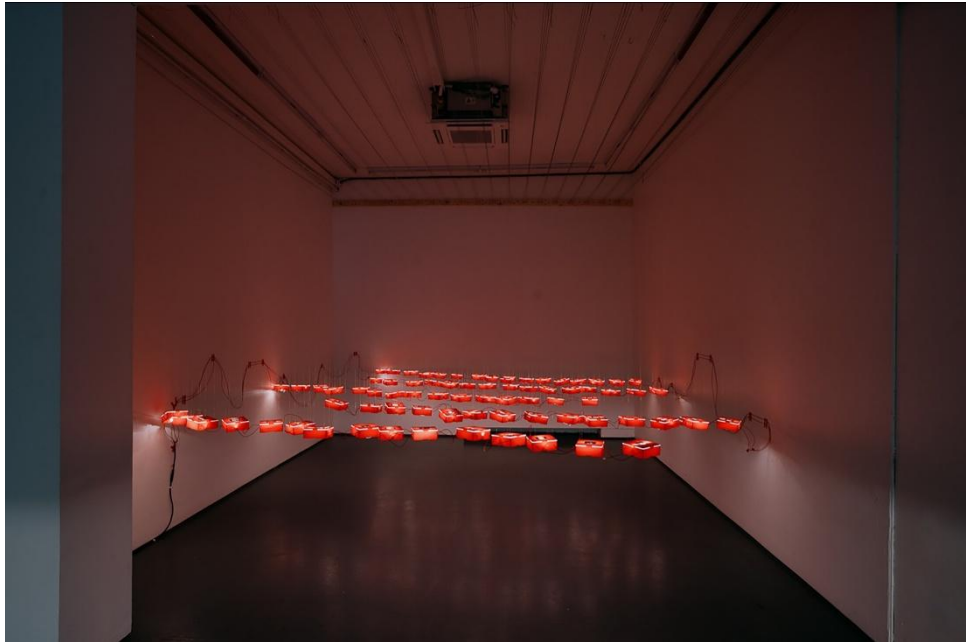


Figure 1: The Lost Tapes of a People's Tribunal: Hanging Memories, Ayman AlAzraq

Introduction

Every Palestinian archive is an attempt to build an alternative homeland within memory. The archive is not merely a cabinet of documents, but a mechanism of survival that quietly resists oblivion. When we open it, we do not simply read history; we touch a pulse that has not stopped beating since the Nakba. In every preserved photograph or piece of paper lies an attempt to redefine Palestinian existence, in a world reluctant to acknowledge what it has lost. From this awareness emerged the Palestine–Norway Archive Unit, not as an institutional archive but as a bridge between memory and exile, a poetic and artistic space asking a painful, yet straightforward, question: who writes history, and who is erased from its lines? In a time when the dream has shifted from establishing a state to recovering its meaning, memory has become the new battlefield. Once, the rifle symbolized identity; today, the document replaced it.

Archiving the Absent Nation

We live a painful paradox: we possess museums and archives preserving Palestinian history, yet we remain without a state to protect or speak for it.

It is a strange existential condition—to live more in the archive than on the land, to safeguard the past while the present is being erased before our eyes. Parts of the homeland are demolished, others are stolen or trapped behind a wall or the sea; the land itself is fragmented, as memory is fragmented, as if Palestine has ceased to be a place and become a series of pauses between two cities that never meet.

Yet the archive is not a graveyard of memory; it is a new form of resistance, giving history a human breath when geography is suffocated, turning documents into testimony of what remains of meaning when landmarks are stripped away.

Every preserved image and every recorded voice is part of another geography—one that cannot be bombed or divided. The archive becomes the body of a torn homeland, carrying its memory, when it is forgotten, and guarding its language, when it is besieged.

Here begins the fundamental question: is returning to the archive an act of resistance or an act of longing? Do we return because we seek a time that was clearer and less broken, or because we are trying to create a new project through which we reclaim our identity—not only as Palestinians, but as beings searching for meaning in this world? Is the archive an escape from reality, or the only reality possible when reality itself is denied to you? Perhaps it is both.

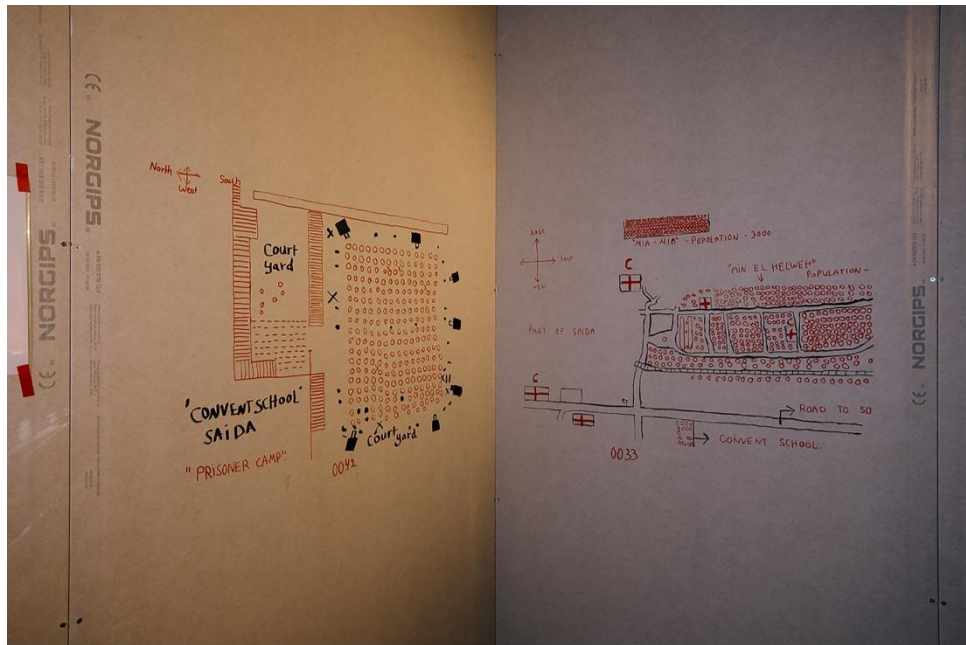


Figure 2: Map of Convent School Saida, from *The Lost Tapes of the People's Tribunal*—1982, Ayman AlAzraq

Every return to the archive is also an attempt to build the present from fragments of the past. Every inquiry into memory is, at its core, a search for a future not yet born. It is not a return to the past but a circling of time, where the past becomes material for reimagining what could be, and memory transforms, from nostalgia into a tool for thinking about the world.

The Palestinian archive is a mirror that both reveals and preserves the wound. It is not merely a system of preservation but an ethical apparatus resisting erasure and false representation. In his historic testimony on the Sabra and Shatila massacre at Oslo in 1982, Mahmoud Darwish said: “I am now both witness and victim, but until recently, my image was that of the killer. Zionism has monopolized tears and suffering to the extent that the very existence of the Palestinian as a victim has become a violation of its sacred temple.” In this passage lies the dilemma of the Palestinian condition: to be a victim forbidden to grieve, to be asked to prove innocence before being allowed to tell one’s story. Thus, the Palestinian archive becomes a tool for reclaiming the right to sorrow in a time when others decide who may suffer and who may not.

Every document recovered is an act of soft resistance, a practice against forgetfulness and the monopolization of human pain.

In 2023, I exhibited my artwork *The Lost Tapes from the People’s Tribunal—1982*, which revisited the Sabra and Shatila massacre through public sessions held in Oslo and testimonies from Norwegian doctors and nurses. Yet official cultural institutions remain silent. No one from the National Museum of Norway attended the exhibition, and no discussion was initiated. That silence was not neutrality but a continuation of violence through polite means—a form of institutional erasure where political refusal is replaced by academic silence.



Figure 3: Testimony, from *The Lost Tapes of the Peoples' Tribunal—1982*, Ayman AlAzraq

The same museum that owns a traditional Palestinian dress, yet refuses to display it, proudly exhibited works by Israeli artist Noa Eshkol, describing her as “born in Israel in 1924”—twenty-four years before Israel’s establishment. This was not a historical slip but a rewriting of history. When the text was later amended to “Palestine under British Mandate” without apology, the silence itself became a language of complicity.

The claim of neutrality is merely a form of bias. A museum that chooses silence before truth participates in the catastrophe within culture. In such cases, silence is not absence but a decision—a decision to take part in symbolic erasure.

Against this silence that seeks to freeze Palestinian memory within closed institutions, smaller and more honest spaces are born. The *Artist to Artist* initiative is one such space, where art begins from the living body, not the white cube. It is not a grand institutional project, but a living initiative grounded in direct human connection—in the bond that forms when one artist reaches out to another, from Palestine to Norway, from Gaza to Oslo, without administrative mediation or curated rhetoric. At a time when major institutions excuse their absence with “closed programs” and “exhausted budgets,” *Artist to Artist* stands as an antidote to this cold bureaucracy, creating its own conditions for collaboration—outside the politics of selection and neutrality that treat Palestinian artists as “difficult cases.” In every letter sent from Gaza, in every meeting through a small screen, art becomes a form of survival. The initiative offers no grand financial support, but something far more precious: mutual recognition, shared reflection, and the ability to work beyond the logic of restriction.

Perhaps this is the new meaning of solidarity—to create together a space that endures even when institutions close their doors, to carry memory on our shoulders, rather than in their files, to rebuild the relationship between art and humanity, rather than art and bureaucracy. In this way, for every museum that erases or contains the Palestinian narrative, artists stand—individually and collectively—to rewrite it, driven by a simple yet stubborn faith: that memory needs no entry permit, and that Palestine can be told from anywhere, even through the small screen that connects one artist to another.

Darwish’s saying: “Until recently, my image was that of the killer”—decades later, that same image continues to reappear in new forms. The Palestinian is still received as a “case” requiring explanation, a voice to be tamed before being heard. Even institutions that claim solidarity often practice this symbolic domestication—inviting the Palestinian artist to be “moderate,” to avoid disturbing the Western narrative of justice and freedom. When the artist expresses full solidarity with Gaza or speaks in anger, he is labeled radical and excluded from the very exhibitions that claim to represent him. Thus, the Palestinian artist becomes perpetually accused of his own existence, expected to justify his humanity before being allowed to speak. But art does not apologize. It is the space where the Palestinian speaks without permission, reshaping his image beyond suspicion. Every artwork is a redefinition of presence, a constant challenge to the idea that others know Palestine better than its people.

The Palestinian archive is not a single entity but a network of ongoing attempts to repair memory. Every artist or researcher working within it opens a new wound in the structure of forgetting and turns it into knowledge. At the Palestinian Museum, Curator Dr. Nadi Abu Sadaa presented her project on “The Arab Exhibition in Madate Jerusalem Before the Nakba,” a visual study reconstructing a forgotten cultural event held in Jerusalem in 1933. His work was not merely historical recovery but a revival of a moment when Palestinians were active in shaping Arab modernity before their narrative was interrupted. Through photographs, correspondence, and posters, Badwan breathed life into a time before collapse, suggesting that memory is not only what survives destruction but also the light that precedes it.

On another front, Mohanad Yaqubi works with the lost Palestinian cinema archive—looted and destroyed after the 1982 invasion of Beirut. Through his films, such as *Off Frame*, Yaqubi transforms the absence of film material into an aesthetic event in itself, reconstructing memory not from images but from their traces, from their absences, from what remains unseen. His work suggests that Palestinian cinema does not end when the reel ends; it begins when we start searching for it.

Similarly, Kamal Aljafari excavates the Israeli archive itself, using images filmed from the perspective of power and rearranging them through montage and disappearance to create what he calls “an archive breathing under surveillance.” In works like *Recollection* and *The Stranger*, absence becomes a new form of presence, and the archive a space for rewriting the image from within.



Figure 4: Untitled, from *The Lost Tapes of the People's Tribunal*—1982, Ayman AlAzaq

Though their methods differ, these practices share one question: how can art restore the pulse of history? How can we preserve what was lost without

turning it into a museum of nostalgia? These are not projects of documentation but acts of continuous writing within the body of memory—writing that never ends because it feeds on the silence it seeks to break.

In a world where geography fragments and faces are erased, memory itself has become a new form of exile. Yet within this exile, another homeland is born—one without maps or flags, whose borders are built on care, attention, and awareness. The archive, in this sense, is a temporary homeland—not because it replaces the land, but because it is the only place where we can rename ourselves. Every document preserved is a promise of return; every recorded voice is an attempt to postpone disappearance. To preserve is to believe that someone will one day read, that someone will open the archive and find us there—still speaking.

Biography

Ayman AlAzraq is a filmmaker, photographer, and mixed-media artist. His short film *The Passport* has screened at the National Museum of Cinema (Turin), Cologne International Video Art Festival, and elsewhere. His work includes *Oslo Syndrome* (Autumn Exhibition, Oslo; Dubai International Film Festival; London Palestinian Film Festival), the collaborative installation WALL-1, and the documentary *Into My Lungs* (Kunstneres Hus, 2022). His mixed-media installation *The Lost Tapes of a People's Tribunal 1982* was exhibited at Fotogalleriet (2023/24). In 2023, he launched the Artist to Artist Project, a digital residency supporting Gazan artists, culminating in the exhibition *For You* at Tenthaus and Podium. He has also exhibited at Nitja Center for Contemporary Art and Rogaland Kunstsenter.