

Under Cerulean Skies or
The What If Film (working titles)

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Humanism is the only – I would go so far as saying the final – resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history

– Edward Said

Under Cerulean Skies or The What If Film

This is a film about a house. Situated in the upmarket Talbiye neighbourhood of Jerusalem it is the house once built and owned by the family of Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. It is also the house that was inhabited for a short while by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Even though the two men's lives didn't overlap directly – they shared an ideological outlook. Both men not only consistently advocated for dialogue but also argued for Israel to exist as a bi-national state.

Fast-forward to this new century. Between 2005 – 2008 I spent time filming – the house as it transitioned from family home to real estate – recording the house's almost secret renovation by Palestinian workers (now officially disallowed to live and work in this area of the city) for the new Jewish owners of the property's luxury flats. Of course, the deconstruction of the house mirrors the larger transformations in the country's political and physical landscape. From the roof of Villa Said, caught on film, you can clearly see the then brand-new Separation Barrier. Already at that time this was a city clearly marking an end to dialogue.

But the documentary image itself testifies to this house's history, however, hidden from view. Now in a time when division has escalated ferociously into war it is the overlapping histories that this house speaks, the promise of other possible futures that these histories gift, that form the inspiration for 'Under Cerulean Skies or The What If Film' – a utopian film for dystopian times.



סכנה
כאן בונים

Background

It all starts in the playground, a real playground. The playground's not far from where I grew up in Jerusalem in the 1970s. I left the city in 1990, but I return periodically to visit the now dwindling family that remains. It was during one of these visits that an old childhood friend reminded me about the playground where we used to hang out as bored teenagers, near a house we knew as 'Buber's house'. Now he tells me, thirty odd years after we stopped going there, that 'Buber's house' is in fact called 'Villa Said' because it was built by a Palestinian family – the Saids – in the early part of the 20th century. 'Go see it' my friend says, 'you'll find it interesting'. I follow his advice. I find that while the playground is still there, the house itself is in ruins. Villa Said is a ghostly hollowed out shell of a house, its windows open to the skies above, the letterbox with Buber's name on it now barely visible. Much of the neglected house is boarded up with a 'danger, building site' sign. The sign rattles on a chained gate in the wind. It's winter and the site is deserted. It's very far from playful. I decide to return another time and bring along my camera.

Villa Said, like countless Palestinian properties around Jerusalem, is protected by a municipal preservation order. Due to their significant 'real estate' value, most of these beautiful buildings are offered up to re-development. Investors get the chance to 'gut' the interiors and if the facades retain their original style, a negotiable number of floors can be added, thereby hugely increasing their value.

For the next two years I returned periodically to document the destruction and reconstruction of the house.

This is the history that I uncovered. The house which was built by Boulos and Nabiha Said – Edward Said's uncle and aunt. It is where Edward Said (1935 – 2003) was born in 1935 while his parents stayed there. In the same year, my father was born in a tiny flat a few streets away that my grandparents, who had escaped Berlin two years earlier, rented from a Palestinian landlord. In his memoir 'Out of Place' – Edward Said speaks of the German immigrant midwife who delivered him. I notice the way my mind imagines how it is quite possible that my father was delivered by the same woman. Of course, I'll never know if that's the case but I'm made poignantly aware of the hope that comes from connection.

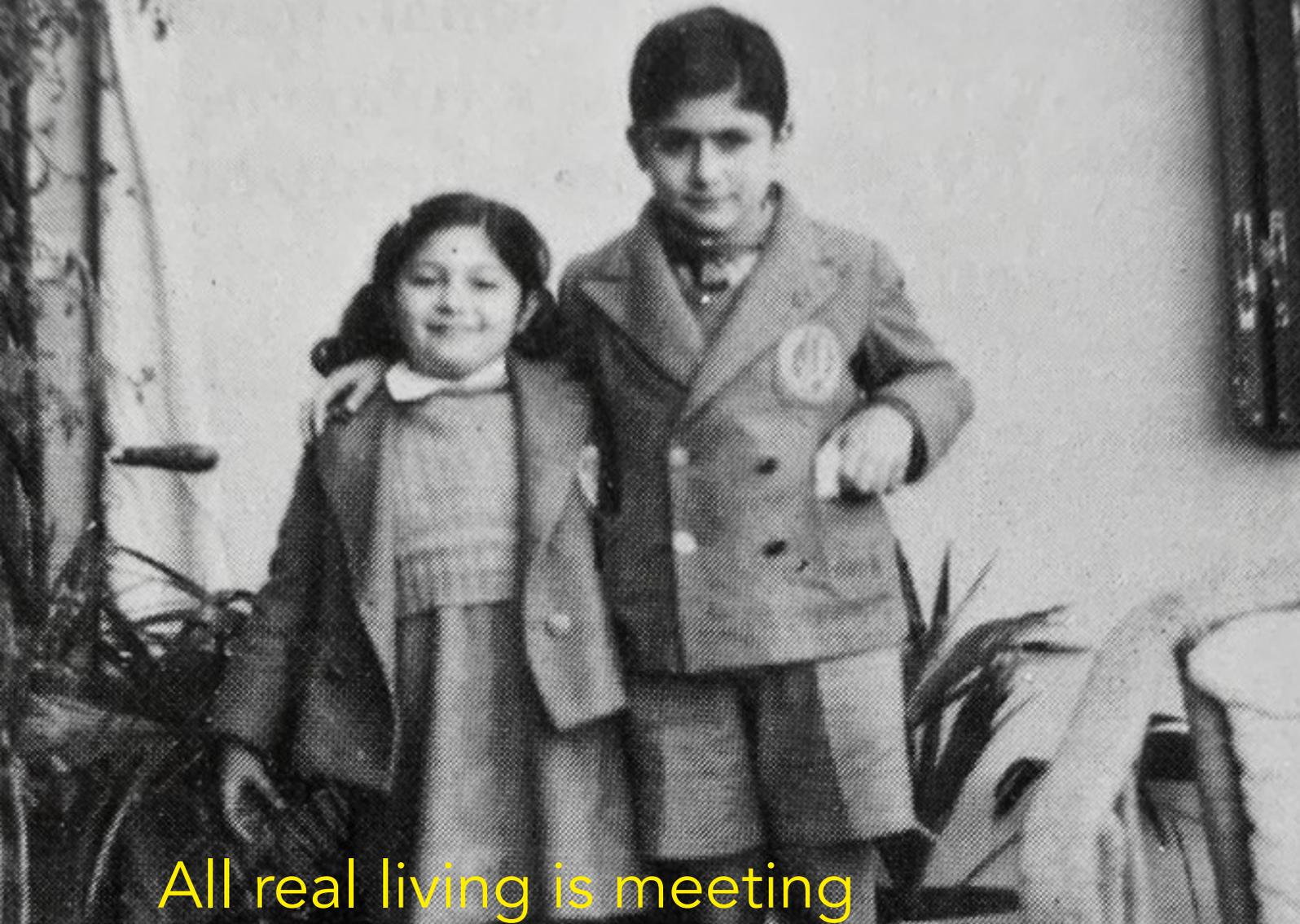
What I do know is that the few photos that survive of my newly arrived grandparents proudly holding up my father, their first-born son, are beautifully lit by the harsh sun. They are just like the still and moving images I find of another first-born son, Edward Said, playing with his siblings and cousins in and around what we knew as 'Buber's house'.

The more I delve into Said's autobiography and listen to his childhood memories, the more connections I find between his life and my father's life. Both grew up with immigrant parents. Said's parents moved from Palestine to Egypt following his father's business. My grandparents escaped Germany in 1933 then moved to London in 1939, where they spent ten years for my grandfather's work.

There is also a striking similarity in Said's descriptions of the way his parents related to the Nakba. He notes that in the years immediately after 1948 the adults only discussed what had happened amongst themselves, in hushed tones – suppressing as much as possible. In my family the Nakba was never mentioned and the Holocaust only abstractly. It was only much later that I learnt that various family members who weren't lucky enough to leave in time had perished at the hands of the Nazis. There is a strong sense of both families' lives being uprooted having narrowly escaped a catastrophe.

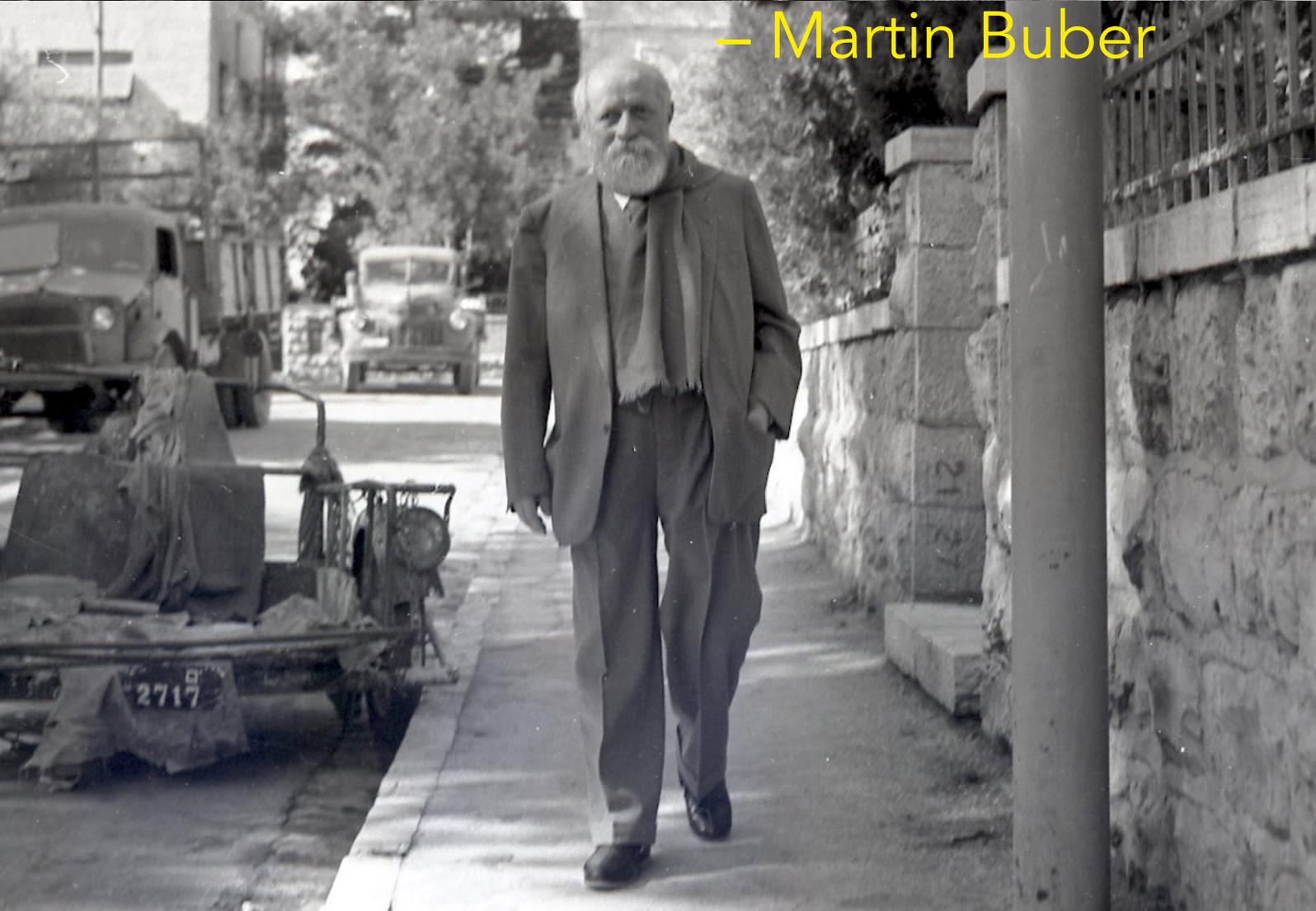
Clearly trauma plays a role in the story of Villa Said and the region more broadly. How is trauma, like its recollection instrumentalised? How does political discourse write and rewrite the history of a place to underpin the political status quo? This inheritance is something my friends and I would return to over and over again as disaffected teenagers as we passed our evenings, hanging out in the playground outside 'Buber's house'.

Martin Buber (1878 – 1965) was an Austrian Jewish philosopher who emigrated to Palestine, settling in Jerusalem in the early 1920s. Buber and his fellow non-conforming Zionist colleagues known collectively as 'Brit Shalom' (which means peace alliance) became our teenage heroes. This happened as we began to find out for ourselves about the history of the Nakba, a history more often obscured from view in family and school conversations.



All real living is meeting

– Martin Buber



By contrast to much of what we were experiencing Brit Shalom's main goal was to pursue co-operation amongst Jewish and Arab people. What's more they believed that a Jewish majority was not as crucial for the creation of a Jewish state as the dialogue between the Jewish organisations and the Arab authorities. Throughout his life Buber advocated a bi-national Jewish-Arab state, stating that the Jewish people should proclaim 'its desire to live in peace and brotherhood with the Arab people, and to develop the common homeland into a republic in which both communities will have the possibility of free development.' Buber's aspirations resonated strongly with those of us who, despite the Zionist education we received, struggled to reconcile our belief in dialogue and a common state with the brutal occupation of Palestine and the embedded violence we saw escalating, despite our elders attempts to suppress it and pretend otherwise.

Like Buber, Said has always fought for co-existence and readily stated that no resolution could be possible without both sides acknowledging the pain of the other. He regarded dialogue as the only way forward, decades after Buber's ideas had been all but erased from Israeli public discourse. These two utopian visions nevertheless meet in Villa Said, now poignantly and painfully transformed beyond recognition.

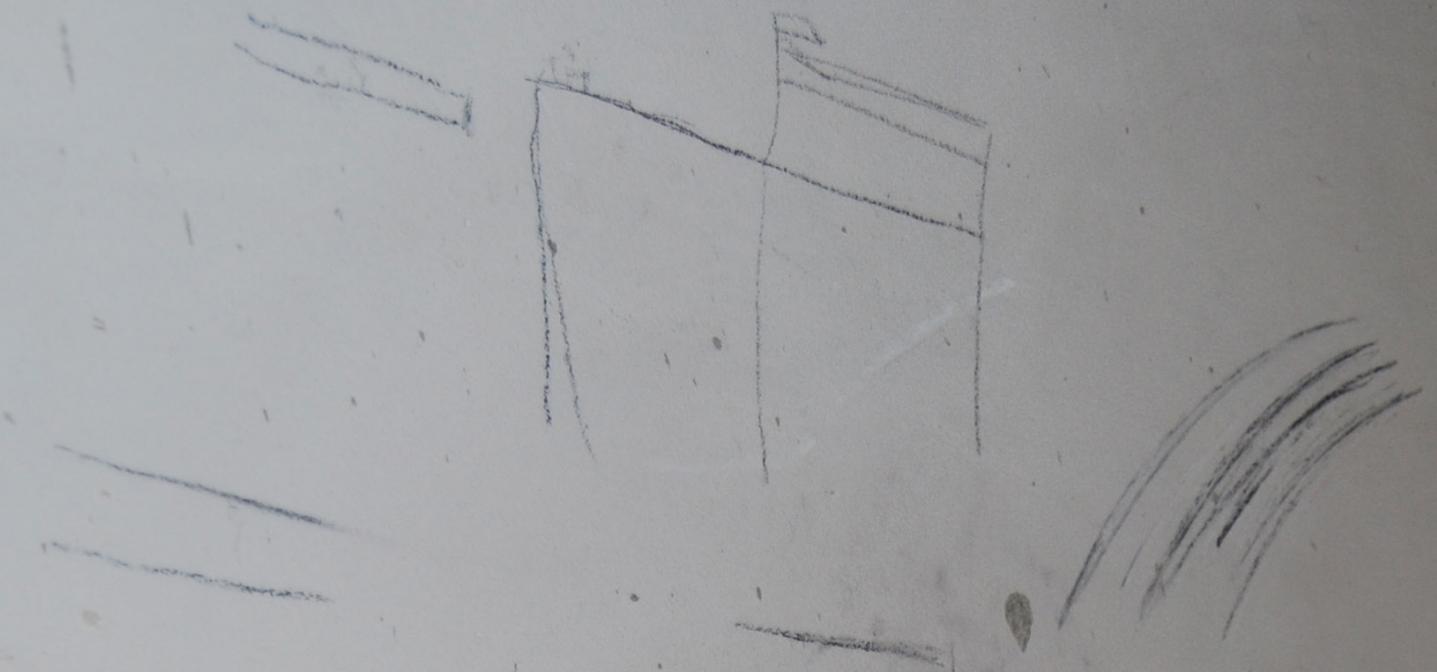
Filming Villa Said (2005 – 2008)

I filmed the building site that was Villa Said during a prolonged stay in Jerusalem between 2005 – 2008. At that time, I volunteered with MachsomWatch – an all-women human rights organisation that monitors and reports Israeli violations at checkpoints and in the military courts. My visits to the Villa Said often followed early morning shifts at the checkpoints where Palestinian workers (on their way to work for Israeli contractors) are obliged to produce work permits. Entry is often refused and the workers get sent back preventing them from earning their daily wage: the Israeli Apartheid system in action. We watched knowing full well that those workers who manage to avoid the checkpoints will stay wherever they can, possibly for weeks at a time, rather than risk getting sent back via this ruthless system. Later, I'm not entirely surprised to find the Villa Said building site is now the temporary residence to Palestinian workers – employed as cheap labour to maximise the American property investors' profit.

What a cruel irony that Villa Said acts as a temporary shelter, a sanctuary for Palestinians who literally couldn't return home due to the draconian restrictions imposed by the Israeli regime. The workers, like thousands on other building sites, lived onsite, out of sight, under the radar. My recordings document the workers' presence and their labour. I intentionally avoided interviewing or even showing their presence so that on film they remain ghost-like. Their presence is evidenced only by their personal belongings, the homely corners they arrange for themselves – a television set perched on an empty barrel, a makeshift clothes hangers, mattresses and a long dining table for communal meals.

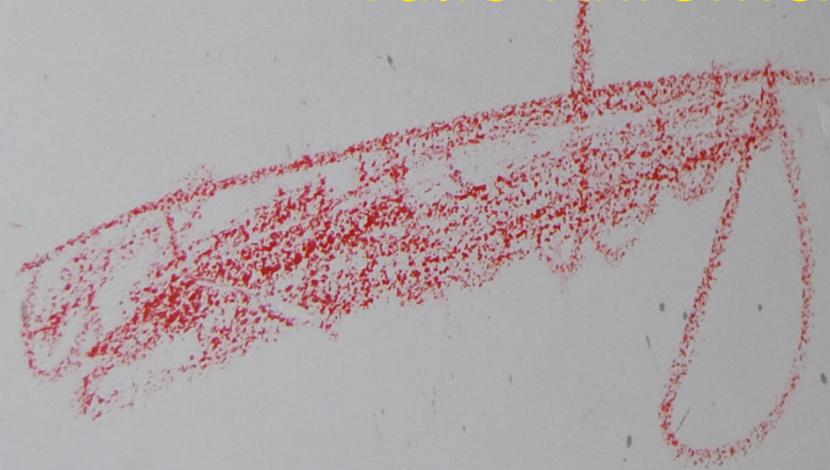
These multi-layered encounters and experiences, constantly shift between the personal and the political. It's all about observation – filming the building site, observing at the checkpoints and military courts, reporting on the often hidden yet highly sinister practices of the Israeli state – all highlight the interplay between visible and hidden violence, that have informed my practice since.

Returning to Villa Said, what did my camera record? Seen and unseen histories overlap in this documentary evidence. Clearly, to use Said's words, 'the personal inflection and the private sensibility' colour the images. What's more, the Villa Said recordings also reveal the way in which the process of historical deconstruction went almost entirely unnoticed.



I've known from an early age that imagination is practical. As I grew up, I became aware it is also political. And now when I am even older, I know imagination is essential for our survival

– Yulie Khromchenko



Approach

Making a palimpsest of personal, family stories, images, voices along with wider cultural and political histories is a recurring strategy in my work. I envisage a collage-like film, that enables new meeting points – where a threading of disparate, yet reminiscent strands can create connection, renew, and new thoughts are made visible and possible.

The Villa Said footage documents the whole process of renovation. It begins with the hollowing out of the interior of the house and continues until new residents move into elaborately decorated flats where the garden is planted with fully grown bushes and trees in bloom.

The short (twenty minutes) single-screen film will primarily be for cinema screening which can also later be easily adapted for gallery installation. The film will begin with the camera circling the outside of the house, gradually working its way in through the windows opening up to the skies, up the stairs, my camera shaking as I tentatively get to know the site. Steadily, two male protagonists voiced by actors, (that spectators will only gradually learn to associate with Said and Buber) will enter an imaginary dialogue, based on my researched script. The film will become a site of encounter and dialogue, historically impossible and yet being shaped in front of an audience's eyes as we hear these two towering figures converse about their shared ideas and passions for a better future.

Once the two male voices are established, my own female voice will also appear, extending their imagined dialogue into a conversation across time, disciplines, gender and ages. I will explain the changes, introduce the evidence of the workers' presence, the Separation Barrier and its significance. Looking back across generations, my female viewpoint anchored in contemporary political conditions, will operate like a Greek chorus –questioning things 'here and now'. What if the two intellectuals had in fact physically met – what would they have made of the Separation Barrier, looming on the horizon? Might the landscape look different now?

The on-site field recordings alternate between the violence of concrete diggers pounding the ground, through rhythmic masonry chipping to pastoral bird song, when the workers were not working. I often recorded the playground, which I later read is where Edward Said also played. Although it wasn't a municipal playground when Edward Said visited, the sound of children playing will also link past and present in my film.

The insistence on children's play in the playground isn't accidental nor is it designed to soften the harsh reality the film exposes. Rather, play, which features highly in my artistic practice, is woven into the story as an antidote to a ruthless present. Play, like my film, is not necessarily linear, allowing an imaginative temporality, where destruction and construction rarely cease to alternate in a bid to explore the very heart of darkness. Communal child play represents agency and its participatory actions also counter inaction and a blind acceptance of how things stand.

Agency and the questioning an existing status quo specifically in relation to the way present circumstances are depicted in our culture have long been preoccupations of my practice as I ask myself what images still work in our horror saturated media? How might we reveal the intricacies of that which is hidden and suppressed? Much of my work, whether games, books or short animations and interactive installations references or depicts the handmade, from 'Hand Made Memory Game' (2005 – 2010) to the more recent 'Out Damned Spot – Out! – Work in Progress' (2024). The analogue human hand gesture signals agency that defies the digital, drawing viewers in. Hence, the film will also include annotations and inscriptions as part of its fabric.

Clearly, the past bleeding into the present and the ghosts that haunt Villa Said are also very much in evidence far beyond the house itself. The specific circumstances of Villa Said with its embodied history, layered as it is with contested, obscured narratives, the seeking of refuge due to restricted movement, resonate with contemporary conditions that tragically plague the Middle East today. They also shed light on Israel's insidious character where all those living in the region as well as both peoples' diasporic communities, are positioned as spectators to a theatre of convenience, encouraged to ignore what feels difficult, crucially allowing them to overlook possibilities for dialogue, for imagining change for the better, especially now. 'Under Cerulean Skies or The What If Film' (working titles) will suggest a re-telling of the story to imagine a possible future.

While I have collected the footage already, to do justice to this extraordinary story, I will need to extend my research further. Writing the script will require not only a close study of Said and Buber's texts but also access to archives (family and public) as well as interviewing those who have either known them personally or professionally. As I develop the film's script, I plan to also collage still images that will add an extra dimension to the textual and existing moving images.

I am acutely aware that making this film, while the Genocide is raging in Gaza and the world as we knew it is collapsing around us might be considered a folly. However, my project has the potential to remind us of long forgotten 'what if' possibilities for the future, so needed especially now. It is hardly surprising that Antonio Gramsci's famous quote about 'the old world [...] dying, and the new world struggles to be born', keeps appearing. 'Now is the time of monsters' according to Gramsci. Maybe, in the 'time of monsters', a film, that appeals to the senses and specifically a humanist 'common sense', is the only way we can make sense of the horror. 'Under Cerulean Skies or The What If Film' (working titles) is therefore not a folly, rather as a utopian project for dystopian times – it is very much needed.

