[1]*The End of the Sky* is the title of one of the sections of the Syrian poet Adonis' seminal collection, *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*. Published in 1961 as *Aghânî Mihyâr al-Dimashqî*, it has since been translated by Adnan Haydar and *Michael Beard as Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs* (New York: BOA Editions, 2008).

[2]The group is named after a cat, which itself is named after the heroine of the 1934 film *Zouzou*, whose eponymous character was played by Josephine Baker.

[3]Those protests grew and have since become a multi-sided civil war with estimates of upwards of 570,000 deaths and the internal displacement of 6.5 million people. These figures were compiled by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a monitoring group based in the UK. See: (www.syriahr.com/en). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 6.6 million people have been internally displaced and 5.6 million around the world. See: unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html

[4]Torture has been widely used by Bashar Al-Assad's regime to quell protest and terrorise the Syrian people. The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that 1.2 million Syrian citizens have been arrested and detained at some point. It has been further estimated that from March 2011 until September 2019, 14298 individuals have died due to torture at the hands of the main parties involved in the conflict in Syria. Of these, 14,131 (including 45 women and 173 children) died due to torture by Syrian regime forces. See: sn4hr.org

Artist's talk – ZouZou Group
Saturday 1 February, 5–6pm - £3

This event brings together some of the UK based British and Syrian women who have been critical friends to the ZouZou Group as they made – *door open* – . They discuss the eleven impediments that structure the film. The talk is chaired by artist, writer and curator Lucy Reynolds and the anonymity of ZouZou Group is adopted by the panel, which includes prominent curators, filmmakers and broadcasters, whose identities are disguised with veils.

Drawing by ZouZou Group.

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ZouZou Group
– door open –

4 December 2019 - 23 February 2020

This new 25 minute video, – *door open* – (2014–2019), is by ZouZou Group, who are two artists, one Syrian in Damascus, the other British, living in England, who are anonymous for the sake of the Syrian artist's safety. The work comes from their ongoing dialogue, made possible (and frequently impossible) through online messaging and filesharing mobile phone video footage. The work exposes the constraints and imbalances of working together across the boundary of a war zone and longstanding military dictatorship. Three screens speak to and across each other, exploring, interpreting and finally overcoming the many impediments to making the work. The exhibition is supported by Art Fund.

The End of the Sky
When Conflict becomes Collaborative Form[1]

The professional and personal politics of collaborating on an art project are fraught with practical concerns and repressed disagreements. This is the dual nature of collaboration: it gives artists an insight into their work through the prism of someone else's practice, but it can also prove testing when it comes to surmounting the challenges of shared authorship and agency. Different ways of working and everyday obstacles to communication also tend to compound, if not inflate, any problems associated with collaborative processes. What if, however, these impediments were productively employed to determine the overall enquiry and final form of an artwork? And what if one half of a collaborative duo continued to live in Syria under conditions of civil, political and national emergency? It is precisely this conundrum, alongside other more personal apprehensions, that underwrites and impels the content and overall form of *– door open –* (2019), a work by ZouZou Group, the latter comprising two women artists, one living in Damascus, the other in South East England.

Beginning in 2004, the artists began co-operating on a project through their respective institutions in Damascus and London.[2] When the project was complete, they stayed in touch and met again in London in 2011 during the Syrian uprising, an ongoing conflict that had begun in March of that year with protests against the Ba'athist government of Bashar al-Assad.[3] In 2014, having agreed to work together again, both artists began to develop a project that led to a comparison between the various problems they encountered in their collaborative ambitions. These ranged from the obvious—the different time zones and how each artist organised, as a result, their own time—to less tangible concerns about the power structures involved and, interestingly, a nebulous sense of shame. The question of power and inequality in trans-national cultural practices is a recurring issue when it comes to how artists from, say, Syria or Iraq or Egypt work with artists and institutions in the so-called West. Under such conditions, non-Western artists routinely enter into an economy of production that sees their work packaged as 'other' for institutional and critical concerns. The subject of shame is nevertheless worth pursuing further here as it is a state of being that habitually involves a splitting of the self, a bifurcation of the subject that provokes introspection into an individual's motivations and ambitions. In this instance, when the British artist professes a confused sense of shame about the work in question and its processes, it appears to be directed not only towards the power imbalance but also the fact that she is working from a relative comfort zone alongside—nominally at least—someone who is working in an all too deadly zone of conflict.

The unease of collaboration, and the self-consciousness it arouses, becomes manifest here in an all too real discussion of potential injury, if not fatality, to one member of the group. Add to this the fact that a crucial element of collaboration is based on an open critique of another artist's work and the dilemma becomes more pronounced: how, from your position of comfort and power, do you critique someone who is putting their own safety at risk in order to work with you? It is to the ZouZou Group's credit that none of this disquiet and agitation is suppressed; on the contrary, it is precisely the anxiety-laden process of collaborating with an artist living in a war zone that is foregrounded. To this end, *– door open –* offers a singular and productive reframing of a perennial question: how we represent conflict? Do we do so through images—an increasingly time-worn approach that is not without its own pitfalls—or through registering the effects of warfare on the formal processes of production?

We move here from the more obvious problems associated with collaboration to a discussion of an artwork as a seismograph of sorts, a register of a particular moment in time that, through the very form it takes (or does not take), discloses a state of historical, social, political, cultural and individual crisis. What if the formal production of an artwork, as it develops over time, can impart its own story, one that indexes a historical moment in time—the Syrian civil war—through the vagaries of producing a work in the first place? It is notable, for example, that the Syrian artist poignantly enquires into "how to make art that people will not be bored by", before adding, "we do not want to hear any more about the drama of war". This foregrounds a pertinent discussion about the anaesthetic effect of representing conflict through images of war—a sense that the sheer glut of images has left us numbed and indifferent.

Conflict invariably recalibrates the production, dissemination and reception of images, and *– door open –*, as a formal indicator of the potential to produce anything of meaning under the conditions of war, is a singular example of the artwork as litmus test. When we look closer at the manifest content of the work, which draws upon the artists' ongoing dialogue, online messaging and mobile phone video footage, this becomes all the more obvious. Technology enables the film to come into being but also limits, due to the terms under which it can be produced, the activities of censors, charges levied on internet users, ever-changing digital formats, and the fact that the Syrian artist must access the internet by proxy (to avoid detection), the final form it can assume. These formal restrictions are mirrored in the content of the film whereby surreptitious footage from Damascus reveals nothing more than the pavement and the faceless figures of people passing by the camera. When the camera is momentarily raised it arouses suspicion and fear. We see a young boy, conscious of being observed, covering his face with his coat—his act of concealment conveying that he has already internalised the fear and terror associated with the Syrian regime. This not only recalls the historical restrictions in Syria placed on photography in public spaces, but also the extent to which such acts today are punishable by incarceration, torture and death.[4] The horizon, likewise, rarely appears in these images, leading the British artist to suggest that "if you cannot represent the horizon, then you cannot depict the future."

On the level of form and content, *– door open –* is an artwork that has been shaped from a singular environment and the sheer weight of circumstances beyond the artists' control, but not necessarily (and importantly) beyond their understanding. When we do see the actual effects of war and conflict in the film it is in still images of smoke-filled skies viewed from afar. For the Syrian artist, who has "learned too much from this war", it is a day-to-day fact of life. For us, the viewer, like her collaborator, it is a distant phenomenon and our concerns about how we might misinterpret—or ignore—such realities are echoed in the asides and fears expressed in the angst-ridden communications between the two artists. We should also observe how this film is received in the broader context of the so-called art world, a rarefied space within which conflict is often presented as either a mediated fact or a performative gesture to an audience who, unlike the subjects depicted in the images before them, chose to be there and can always leave.

What, finally, does it mean to show violence without showing violence? What does it mean to deploy the context of collaborative practices to explore how conflict can productively define an artwork? How do we thereafter account for our responsibility when viewing such images? And how, given the apparently intractable force of the events portrayed, do we re-engage with the human level of this conflict without resorting to pity or empty propositions? It is these questions, and more, that *– door open –* explores without, crucially, allowing the overt restrictions that conflict places upon creativity to result in either prescribed images or, indeed, despair in the face of what must seem an insurmountable catastrophe for those living through the Syrian civil war.

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