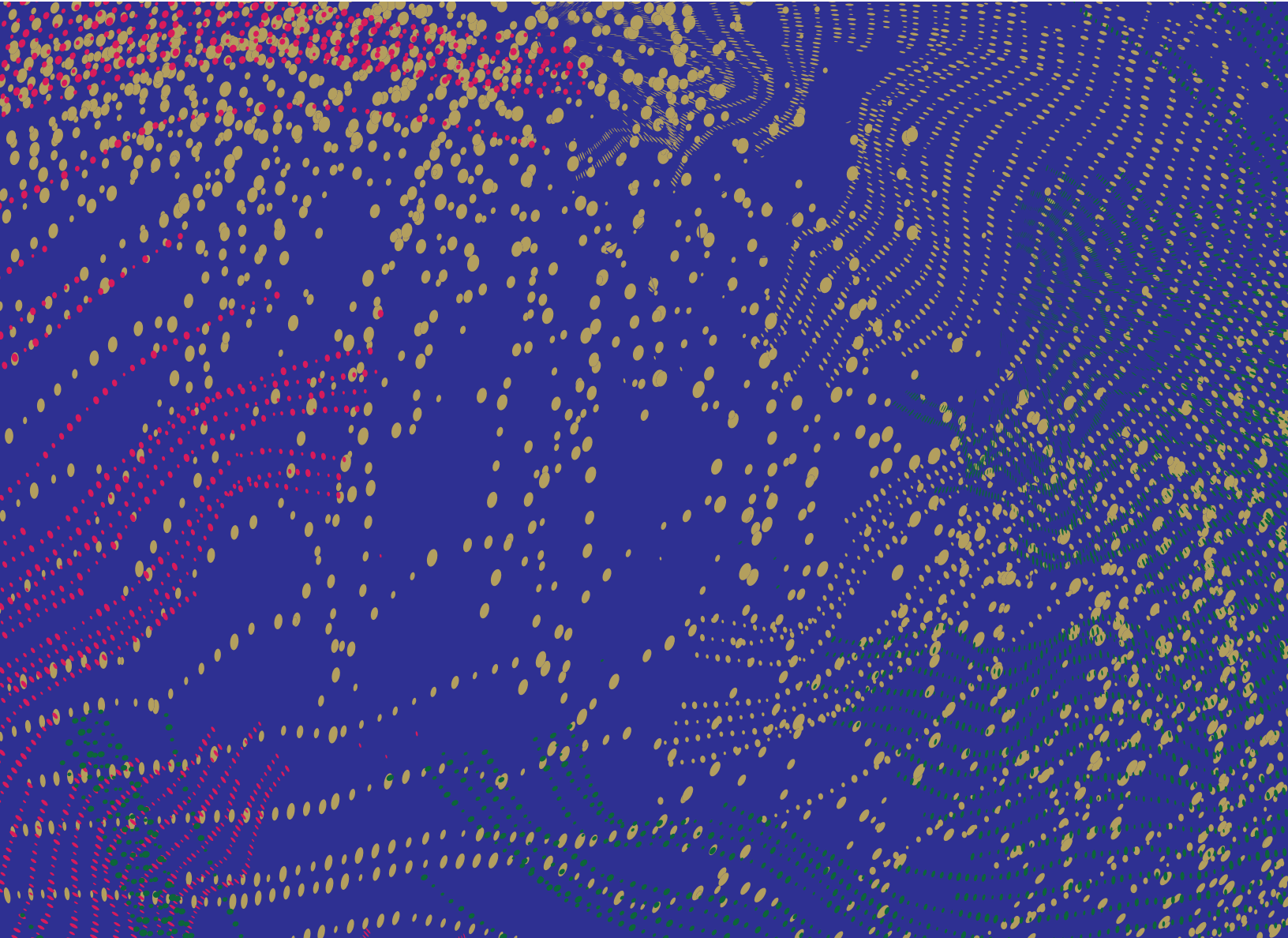


The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution

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Hana Shaltout replace with: Arab Council for the Social Sciences; University of Sussex

Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, founded in 2013 in Lebanon, has been archiving and analyzing Syrian cultural and artistic expressions since the revolution began in 2011.¹ Of primary concern to the founders are the hegemonic narratives misrepresenting Syrian resistance efforts against the Assad regime.

By “writing, recording and collecting stories of the Syrian people, and the experiences through which they have regained meaning of their social, political, and cultural lives,” their “website aims to build an archive of national intangible heritage.” They note that protecting this heritage, which “belongs to collective memory,” is essential.² In the World Humanities Report survey they state: “Our memory is a struggle against denial; it is a form of self-defense; and reaching for justice and proving our existence . . . our work disrupts the ‘narrative of the victorious’ who presents his story as if it is truth.”³

They argue that the “archive does not merely house the past,” “it revives the present and activates the future.” The closed narratives that have dominated accounts of the Syrian Revolution since 2011, which are repeated by media and political elites, block the past from view and prevent the majority of Syrians from anticipating “an alternative future.”⁴

In addition to providing an extensive archive indexed by genre, including a range of content such as comics, graffiti, films, videos, and photos, they provide an interactive map with information on protests, demonstrations, and events in different cities. They have a comprehensive timeline narrating more than a hundred events over the course of the revolution, such as demonstrations, the use of chemical weapons, the fall of different cities, and the emergence of specific legislation. The timeline is grouped into three phases, which are 2011–13, 2014–16, and 2017–19. Their archive is indexed by type, date, producer, and

¹ See <https://creativememory.org/en/>.

² “About Us,” Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://creativememory.org/en/about-us/>.

³ Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

⁴ Muzna Al-Masri, *Witnessing the Emergence of Future Worlds: Ethnographic Research in Turbulent Times* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023).

location (where relevant, such as for the graffiti). They add a note for context to help visitors make sense of what they are seeing.

They mostly republish Syrian artwork gathered from Facebook pages and websites. Although this work has already been published online, social media posts are ephemeral and quickly disappear from public view and access. Creative Memory plays a vital archival role by collecting, storing, and indexing this artwork. Although most artwork created during and in response to the Syrian Revolution is available on the internet soon after its production, this output is dense and brief, and quickly becomes difficult to find, hence the importance of developing this website to gather it in one place.⁵

As John Tomlinson notes, “acceleration rather than deceleration has been the constant leitmotiv of cultural modernity.”⁶ Creative Memory’s projects reflect this acceleration; they are updated daily, almost in real time, as they race to document events and productions they fear will be erased or forgotten.

In a world of too much information, often referred to as a “deluge” or “flood,” labor is increasingly dedicated to making sense of information and knowledge. In this sense, with digitization and rising access to the means of producing knowledge, collecting, categorizing, and analyzing knowledge and information become just as important—or more important—than the content. According to James Gleick, “An unindexed Internet site is in the same limbo as a mis-shelved library book . . . powerful business enterprises of the information economy are built on filtering and searching.”⁷

Aside from the themes of memory, narrative, and digitization mentioned already, Creative Memory raises questions about diaspora. In the survey, they indicated that while they have an office in Lebanon, the team works virtually from Lebanon, France, and Germany. They pointed to the benefits and difficulties of working on this project as diasporic people or communities. On one hand, some work is easier to do because some people have found safety from violence. Yet the practice of remembering is painful; they explained in the survey that their “work is psychologically difficult and depressing.” They bear the emotional, financial, and physical burdens of being displaced. Forced or chosen exile does not protect them from new or ongoing violence in host states. Nor does it necessarily mean they are safe from the institutions, people, or states they have escaped. They still feel sadness and loss or worry about harmed or threatened family members.

⁵ “About Us.”

⁶ John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: Sage, 2007).

⁷ James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

Ultimately, Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution raises some interesting questions around online archives, memory and history, narrative, and diaspora.

Hana Shaltout graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.