Transcript for the panel discussion:

*Technology and conflict in Jananne Al-Ani’s artwork*

Sat, 7th May 3:00PM

**SPEAKERS**

Jananne Al-Ani, Michaela Crimmin, Andrea Wallace

Moderated by Noelle Collins

**Noelle Collins** 13.08

Hello. Good afternoon and welcome to our panel discussion today. My name is Noelle Collins, I’m the Exhibitions and Offsite Curator here at Towner, and I’m just going to go through a few housekeeping notes before we kick off. Our format today is about 45/50 minutes of panel discussion, and then we will open out to questions from the audience, and my colleague Emily Medd will come to you with a microphone if you want to make a contribution. We are also doing an audio recording today so if you want to ask a question but you don’t want to be immortalized in a recording, please do let myself or Emily know and we’ll do some editing magic on that. Also, it’s a little bit peculiar of a set up at the minute because we’re on the cusp of opening our renovated ground floor spaces, so we’re quite privileged in that we’re the first people to have an event in the cinema since that’s been going on, but it means we’ve got an unconventional entrance, and this is also our emergency exit. So if anything’s happening we’re going out here [Noelle points to exit door].

I’d also like to welcome the panel: so, we have Jananne Al-Ani and Andrea Wallace and Michaela Crimmin joining us today and I’m going to give a very brief bio on each of them.

So, Jananne Al-Ani is an artist, researcher, and lecturer working with photography, film and video. Her practice is concerned with the power of testimony, representations of landscapes marked by conflict, and the legacy of British power and influence globally. She has exhibited widely with solo shows at The Hayward Gallery Project Space in London, Beirut Arts Centre, National Museum of Asian Art - Washington DC, Darat al Funun - Amman, and Art now Tate Britain. And we’re adding Towner Eastbourne on to that list as well.

Michaela Crimmin on the end of our panel here is an independent curator and co-director of Culture + Conflict, profiling artists work relating to international conflict. Previously teaching at Royal College of Art and Central St Martins, and Head of Arts at Royal Society of Arts including directing the arts and ecology centre, and the first works on the fourth plinth Trafalgar Square.

And in the center, Andrea Wallace is a senior lecturer in law at the University of Exeter. Her work explores various legal, technological, and ethical questions that arise around art and cultural heritage in the digital sphere. She often uses art and art history to expose how certain legal fictions have impacted the way our society reads, values, and understands cultural heritage, and heritage institutions.

And so, I guess, just to kick off I guess it’s good to know the background to our meeting today. So, over the past two years we’ve been working with Jananne Al-Ani to commission an entirely new work for the Towner Collection, and that entirely new work has taken the form of a panoramic video installation called ‘Timelines’ which I’m sure you will have seen in gallery three. And, I think during those considerations about bringing Jananne’s work into the collection, we were recognizing these parallels, the interests in landscape, aerial views over landscape and looking even further more into areas that are considered contested geographies borders and territories and there’s great parallels between those interests and Jananne’s practice, and the works that form our Collection, which holds about 5,000 pieces. And so, we also invited Jananne to curate an exhibition of works from the Towner Collection, and that’s resulted in the show ‘Bringing To Light’ that’s in gallery two.

And so, we’ve held a couple of public programme events alongside the exhibitions. One has explored the brass tray that’s come on loan from the V&A collection, which features in Jananne’s ‘Timelines’ work and so there was very much a focused conversation on the history around that. And then that followed with an in conversation with the artist Michael Rakowitz as well, looking at how both your [Jananne Al-Ani and Michael Rakowitz’s] works are coming into the Towner Collection and that you’re both artists with dual heritage and a shared Iraqi heritage.

And today I’d like to maybe invite you to introduce some of your early practice, and I would think of your practice as having these two distinct stages, and the first would be what I’d class as the studio stage, your early photography works, spoken word performances to video where you worked with your sister, your sisters and your mother, and then the later stage, the second stage that comes out into the landscape. And Jananne you’ve prepared some slides to introduce that so would you like to talk that through?

**Jananne Al-Ani**

Thanks Noelle, and thanks Michaela and Andrea for joining me, it’s really, really good to have you both here. So, I know we don’t have that much time so what I’d like to focus on in terms of talking about earlier works is this connection between the history of conflict and also the history of photography and thinking about the way in which conflicts that occurred in the real world affected my relationship with photography.

So, when I first started out as an art student, I was actually in the painting department and I was working with photographs simply as a way of making images and I was less interested in the history and theory around photography, and it was only really when the ’91 Gulf war happened, which is why I’m showing this incredibly early work, that my understanding and my engagement with photography shifted really dramatically. And that was to do with the way in which the war was represented in the mass media, either through moving image or through photography, photojournalism, and thinking about how the relationship between the photographic and the real just came into question.

So, this is a very early work where I’m thinking about the different functions of photography and the different ways in which photography can sort of disappoint us as viewers in relation to the real. And what I was trying to do here was to reimagine the sight of this conflict as a space that had a kind of depth in terms of history. It was a space that was being represented in very kind of flattened out and emptied out way in the media and I wanted to kind of refill the space with imagery. So, thinking about photography as a way of recording something in a neutral way maybe for photographing artifacts in museum collections or archeological artifacts, thinking about the family album, thinking about the studio portrait, and then thinking about reportage and news photography.

And then, for about a period of ten years I started working with my family, as Noelle said, so this first series of photographs of the family appears in this work, this kind of motif of these five women. Taking that motif forwards and introducing the voice, I wanted to introduce this idea of time passing and, also, of narrative. So, for about ten years I made a series of multi-screen video installations which featured this kind of chorus of women, it was the same women in each of the works, and most of these works were based on memory games, or word games, and I was thinking about the kind of fallibility of storytelling. And I’ve taken this motif of the talking head from documentary film making.

So, in a way that earlier work was a kind of critique of photography and, specifically of reportage and documentary photography, and this was more thinking about documentary film and the way in which the talking head, you know the voice of the individual becomes so important in the documentary. So, this idea of witness was very significant for me, and I wanted to kind of again undermine that, so thinking about how one might question what’s being said or have doubts about the voracity of what’s being said was sort of played out in these works. And, also, technically, thinking about how these works were constructed so often these were films when I was shooting each person individually and then editing them together as if they were sitting in the space simultaneously, and that creates a kind of strange disjuncture in terms of time and narrative which also undermines the narrative.

And then, the last work I made that featured these talking heads was this work, ‘The Visit’ which was the first time I’d worked outside of the studio. So, as Noelle said, most of the earlier works were made in a way, in the photographic studio. And even the video works were just like animated photographic portraits. And this was the first time I’d moved into the landscape and it’s a work that I made, that I shot. It’s in 2004 so in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war, which was quite a different but had lots of similarities with the ’91 Gulf war. So this is ten years later again, and I was filming in the desert in the East of Jordan close to the Iraqi border, and I have this film of this man who is occupying this space, and he’s just sort of wandering in and out of this space, and time is passing and as time passes the sun sets and his shadow lengthens and at the end of the film his shadow completely fills the frame. And the women in this film are talking about recollections, remembering, and talking about an absent man. And then beyond that I got much more interested in thinking about the landscape and the site, the site of, of the event of the war. So, thinking about the way in which both in orientalist painting but also in contemporary media representations of the Middle East, that the Middle East is always portrayed as a desert landscape which is kind of emptied out of any history or people. That the bodies have disappeared out of this landscape. And the way this happens is by taking an aerial view. So, taking an aerial view is one way of disappearing the population and sort of flattening out, flattening everything out.

So, I made these two works, ‘Shadow Sites I and II’, which were very important for me because this was adopting the methodology of aerial archaeology. So I became very interested in the relationship between camera and the aeroplane, and the history of the development of that relationship and how the aeroplane and the camera where used in the First World War, how that’s shifted in time to where we are now, and thinking about how I might appropriate that methodology in the way that archaeologists did in the 20s and 30s – when they discovered that by flying over this landscape at dawn or dusk, suddenly there was this this amazing exposure of the archaeological sites that no one had seen at ground level. So, it was a kind of revelation. And, also, as an artist thinking about ways to use the technology to do something different. So rather than thinking about the kind of aeroplane and the camera as being used for surveillance and thinking about military tactics, that there could be some redeeming feature to this combination of technologies. And then I wanted to try and think about different landscapes, different desert landscapes, or different contested landscapes, sites that were very charged.

So having made those two films in the Middle East, I then made a series of films in the American southwest, which include ‘Excavators’ which is the film that’s on show upstairs with the ants. And this was thinking about the way which the American landscape has been appropriated, either through industry or military sites. And then lastly ‘Black Powder Peninsula’ which was shot over the north Kent landscape. Again, in an area in which on the ground apparently not much is happening – on the Hooe Peninsula, which is a very flat, marshy, uninhabited space, a kind of strangely uninhabited space considering how close it is to London, but that has all of these military sites, leftover explosives factories, oil refineries, and the Medway Estuary being the sight of great Naval activity and all the rest of it. So, this kind of very potent set of spaces.

And then yeah so that brings us to the tray. So that connection between the First World War and the development of the technologies of flight and photography and thinking about how the airplane was first used for surveillance but then very quickly became apparent that it was a great way to deliver weapons. So you know this relationship between looking, surveying, getting intelligence, and then delivering the ordinance was something that I was aware of post the end of the first world war, and the more research I did the more I discovered about the way in which the British Air force pioneered the use of air force in the Middle East, and in Waziristan, Sudan and Yemen to control what they would have described at the time as recalcitrant tribes. So to try and bring people under British control, it was decided this new technology was going to be experimented with and it was going to be used to attack villages and towns where there was resistant to British occupation. And really that’s the beginning of the story of the work upstairs.

So I should probably stop there, because I’d really like to introduce Michaela and also to think about Michaela as somebody who has been interested in and supported artists who are working in relation to conflict or around sites of conflict, but in really interesting and complex ways, and generating spaces for artists to talk about their practice and make connections, not just with each other but with institutions and with academics, writers, thinkers across the board.

**Michaela Crimmin** 28:53

Well thank you first and foremost for giving us the context and the work, to be here, and to Towner thank you very much.

Yes, I guess Culture + Conflict which is a very small ongoing programme of work was born out of frustration – frustration that we read about war, about conflicts all the time through media, as we know at the moment we’re just talking about Ukraine but ignoring other parts of the world where conflict is going on. And knowing that so many artists were making incredibly interesting work, raising questions, bringing different perspectives, looking back in some restorative ways, and doing this very simple thing of doing research and putting on a couple of little exhibitions. But particularly interested as Jananne says, in perhaps introducing artists to the armed services, and politicians, and indeed the media, and all these other people who have quite loud voices when it comes to conflict. And so, I knew Jananne’s work before, actually, we even started Culture + Conflict. And I see a lot of connections with other artists, and so I bought three examples of other artists to show you a different context as well.

Objects go missing in war, people go missing in war, and whole countries can go totally out of the public eye, and I see art in all its diversity as, as I say restorative, posing, well really just encouraging our curiosity most of all, which I think this work absolutely does. And I know, and I’m sure all of us know, a lot more now having triggered like a very complex history and all those resonances for now.

I just wanted to show this one image by Francis Alÿs, wonderful artist, who said this photograph, I think, makes it very clear, it’s not very easy, I think, for artists to talk about conflict, and that maybe water colours are not, oil is not the only way of talking about it. And, hence, perhaps that’s why, for a lot of artists, different technologies come in, which is after all in the title of our discussion.

So, as part of this series of talks, which we’ve done in all sorts of different places and indeed different countries inviting artists at the centre, there’s one artist, a young Bosnian artist called Adela Jušić who, we saw this work ‘The Sniper’ it’s a four minute video and we invited her over from Bosnia to talk at one of the events, and she had been a child in Sarajevo, and you’d remember now it was a four-year siege in Sarajevo, fourteen thousand people were killed, or just less than fourteen thousand, and about a third of those were civilians. And a decade after the war, Adela, now an adult and an artist, made this four-minute film – which I’m just going to show you four stills from it – called ‘The Sniper’.

So, at the beginning of the film, you see this hand and it’s drawing a little dot of red, and the red dot gets bigger, and then slowly emerges a man and then the figure behind it. And it’s a sort of enigmatic work, and you’re not quite sure what’s behind it, and then when Adela talked at one of these events, she said actually this man, was in fact her father who’d been killed by a sniper. He’d been shot in the eye and hence that red dot, and so, out of this incredibly personal and perhaps in some ways cathartic work, she made various works but just one of them, which I wanted to tell you about quickly, was born out of really seeing an American video war game called ‘Sniper Ghost Warrior’, and amazingly it’s actually set, so this is in 2013, it’s set in Sarajevo, set in 1993 so one year into the siege, and you, the player, are an American and you’re seeking out the main enemy who is finally killed and Sarajevo’s saved. So, a little rewriting of history, which of course we see quite a lot, and clearly a highly offensive video, particularly if you are Bosnian.

So, Adela, in direct response of that, made an installation in three parts. So she showed a version of the war game which is called ‘Ride The Recoil’, which, of course, in itself sort of sparks various thoughts, so if you imagine images of a child playing on one of the gallery walls, and then, and we’ll play you a very short clip of the wargame, on another wall, and then a voice over, which again we’ll play you in a second, which is a soundtrack of a woman’s voice and therefore bringing in women into conflict. And she’s giving instructions on how to kill, sort of mimicking the narrator, and then the same woman who’s in fact Adela’s voice as it happens, goes on to give advice on how to avoid snipers. So perhaps if we just play a little bit, a little tiny clip.

<https://vimeo.com/68765343?embedded=true&source=video_title&owner=2473692>

I think you get the idea.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 35:50

So, these are the Americans who are going to save the Bosnians from the Serbians?

**Michaela Crimmin** 35:56

Yes. And then this little soundtrack.

<https://soundcloud.com/adela-jusic/tactics-guide>

I think that’s fine thank you.

I can’t resist reading you a two-sentence review of the original American war game which says ‘excellent sound effects do a wonderful job of pulling you in, weapon noises, the shouts of enemy voice, the far of rattle of weapons fire in war-torn Sarajevo, and various atmospheric sounds, like the background hum of the Philippine jungle, are all handled extremely well and enhance the tension as you line up each careful shot’. So clearly Adela’s version of this adds up to a critique of the commodification of war, the fictionalization of history. It’s a comment on gender and warfare, and it’s a very personal memory all rolled into one.

So, the second example I wanted to tell you very quickly, we jump now from Bosnia to Syria, and now to… So this was just a detail from a newspaper clipping from Tuesday of a woman in Ukraine showing photographs of her husband who has gone missing, and I wanted just to show a couple of images of a work by Hrair Sarkissian who is Armenian actually but bought up in Damascus and his parents still live there, and one of the works he’s done was a series of fifty images taken in different countries where he met up with people whose loved ones have gone missing and he asked them, ‘where was the last place you saw you brother, son?’ so on, and then he took these images. So very domestic most of them, and with this just little inscription of a name, which you hardly even register, but obviously an account of people who have disappeared.

And that’s another work which I haven’t got an image of, because there are no images of it, a work that he has at The British Arts Show which is touring at the moment, which is simply a soundtrack of the forensic archeology of war graves from the Spanish Civil war this time, and so as people are slowly being dug up, literally, so again I hope you can see the sort of connections with Jananne’s work and in the ways, there is often, in a sense, very little to see, and yet it’s all there.

And then, finally, and very, very quickly the last one, the last project which Jananne and I talked about when we were talking about this panel discussion, was an artist who’s actually become a good friend: Eugenie Dolberg, who was living in Syria, in a very quiet Syria at that time, just as the Iraq invasion was kicking off and, thereafter, and she thought it would be, it was curious that the voices of women and their images of war weren’t really being seen or heard, so she raised the money and with Maysoon Pachachi, who’s an Iraqi film maker, they invited a number of women from different cities in Iraq to come for a week in Syria, to make food, share their experiences, and Eugenie taught them how to use, gave them cameras, taught them how to make high resolution photographs, and the woman then went back to Fallujah and so on, the cities in Iraq, and then finally brought back their images and their stories, and they were edited into a film and into a book called ‘Open Shutters’.

And so, to end, I just want to just read to you, so you get in a series of images and then you get the women’s voices. So, the first image was, I’ll just go through it very quickly, was just actually, was a playground, and the person who wrote about it said ‘everything’s gone, even the palm trees’. And then the next image is from Al Mutanabbi Street, which in 2007 was completely bombed and desecrated but had been where everybody came and sold books and so on, and the, so the, so one of the women called Raya, writes next to this next image, and I’m just reading you the text, ‘Two days before the explosion we were talking to Ahmed. Everything in his house had been stolen including his five thousand book library. We suggested that he go to Al Mutanabbi Street, maybe the thief would try to sell his books there, but they were faster than we were. They burned Ahmed’s books there, burned Muttanabbi’s books, Baghdad’s books.’

And then, and then the last image, which one of the women’s daughters, she bought with her to the two workshops, and the first workshop, this six year old Dima said that she was also a woman, and she would like a camera, she had her own story to tell, and so Eugenie said fine and she’s given a camera, and taught how to use it and so on, and she did a whole series of photos. Quite a few of which are actually of Dima, herself, but this one image I wanted to show you that she called ‘My Sweet’, and this is Dima’s words, age six, ‘This is a picture of my friend Nour in front of Nazaline and Aya’s house. They’re not here anymore. I don’t want to talk about sad things, I don’t want to say whose house this is, or where they went, or why. If I do the picture won’t be beautiful. I feel like Iraq is becoming empty, everything we know and love is going away’.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 43:24

That’s a great place to end actually, this idea of Iraq being emptied out. Because that’s one of things that I talked about with Michael and Rijin when we did our conversation a couple of weeks ago. And thinking about emptying out cultural artifacts, I think that would be a good way of introducing Andrea now. If you can perhaps take the mic and tell us a little bit about your work in relation to objects in museum collections and how, and how they take on a second life when they’re transformed into digital replicas.

**Andrea Wallace** 44:05

Yes, so, my background is in law, and I’m very interested in how an object comes to be in a collection, how an institution cares for it, how an institution reproduces it, makes it available on the website, and all of the things that get replicated in that process, or lost in that process as well. And so, when we’re thinking about - especially like the collections in British institutions - these histories of empire, of legal occupation, or legal acquisition and the imbalances that are built into those, as being very much part of the underlying narrative, but not necessarily part of the context when collections are presented to the public. And in the process, so you can see kind of the image on the left, for which Jananne used the term digital surrogate. I like to think about reproductions as being surrogates for the work, and thinking about how technologies, if and when they exist at whatever point in time, and the person behind the technology has an impact on how we read the object and how its presented to us. And so, you can see on the left-hand side, we have the digital surrogate of the V&A’s image itself. Underneath it, you might also see that it says, you know, ‘Copyright V&A’. And so we have an additional layer of law that would potentially apply to this and that is the copyright that’s claimed in the image, which becomes another way to exclude participation in talking about creating knowledge, critiquing, adding narratives to the object itself, because if you want to use the image you have to get permission from the institution in order to use the image, and sometimes permission will be denied if, if there’s a context in which it’s being used that the institution may not be happy with. And so, all of this kind of creates an understanding of the object, a very object-focused approach to the culture and understanding of the culture, and so much that then gets lost around it.

And so, one of the things that kind of ties this into Jananne’s work and is so interesting about the video itself, is that she uses methods of reproduction in order to create the video, and they’re the exact methods that an institution would be using in order to create the image on the left. So, if you advance just a little bit, so on the left these are kind of some stock photos that I found online of both two dimensional and 3D digitization that occurs within cultural institutions when they’re making their collections ready for online presentation, or even digital libraries through which they can commercialize and make money. And what’s interesting about this is on the right, this is Jananne in the space, in the V&A, taking the video footage, the film, the photographs for the film itself, so we have the exact same technologies being used, but putting, you know, the person behind the camera in the way the technology is used really creates a different experience, in which the person who reads the image becomes an agent in understanding that context, the culture, and that story that’s associated with the work. These are some more images, and even to hear Jananne talk about the reproduction process and the way in which the film itself is made, the moving of the camera, the shooting of the lights, you know all of these, kind of, aspects of technology are used when we create the image that, for some reason is a faithful reproduction. It’s seen as a copy, it’s a specimen of the work.

And something else that is also interesting so, I’m sure you’ve all seen the video by now, towards the end you know we, and there are also kind of instances in which we zoom into a specific kind of aspect and see the tray in detail, and the tray becomes a landscape or the tray has you know different computer generated kind of applications applied to it. And, again, these are the exact same technologies and even softwares that are being used by institutions in order to reproduce a work that then is used as an educational tool. So, on the left is a panel that’s been generated through, whether it’s a 3D scan or photogrammetry and then put into Blender, different layers and textures applied to it that you can turn on and off to understand the work. And on the right, is Jannane’s reproduction and her manipulation of the image in blender.

And so another artist that I kind of wanted to bring into this to talk about because when we’re thinking about reproduction as being a methodology, Rayyane Tabet has been doing a series of work that focus on, and I mean we could talk about this for a long time so to very very very very summarize it, his great grandfather was secretary to Baron Max Von Oppenheim during the digs at Tell Halaf, which are now in Syria, over, you know, a period of years, and part of what Rayyane does, of course when we are thinking about technology, is he uses the technologies of the time, he uses methods of reproduction. So you can see on the left hand side these are actually charcoal rubbings of some of the orthostats that were removed from Tell Halaf, and even the installation of it creates kind of the reproduction of the experience of seeing this kind of in situ. But at the same time, you know some of the image is lost, some of the kind of the display, there are things that we may not know about some of them. And something that’s really interesting about even the collection of these works that were removed from Tell Halaf is kind of the story that unfolds. So, if you continue forward.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 49:50

Is it worth just explaining what orthostats are?

**Andrea Wallace** 49:53

I’m sorry, worth explaining what?

**Jananne Al-Ani** 49:55

What orthostats are?

**Andrea Wallace** 44:56

Oh Orthostats, yes, yeah so they were kind of these carved relief type giant tablets that were along, kind of the, the base of a temple, and they depicted different scenes and kind of different allegories and stories. But these works were from tenth century BC and kind of Assyrian very, very, very valuable works in terms of the breadth, and the amount that was excavated from the Tell Halaf over the course of these thirty years.

And one of the things that Rayyane does with his work as well, so on the left we have his work that’s called ‘Ah my beautiful Venus!’, and what we’ll see is the sort of basalt slabs that are kind of distributed along the floor, and are the exact same weight in total as the basalt rock that’s on the right hand side, and on the right hand side is this androgynous person, it’s a seated figure, they were removed from Tell Halaf at the time, but because of the interruptions of world war one, also the interruptions of world war two, you know different things were being shipped, things were left behind, that had to kind of come back to restart some of the excavations.

The Venus, the face of the Venus was actually damaged during one of the periods when stuff was left behind, and so when Venus, and I say Venus because that’s what Max Von Oppenheim called it, when Venus was then taken to the Tell Halaf museum in Berlin, it was there for a certain amount of years, until of course it was bombed by the allies during world war two. So, on the left-hand side you can see the seated figure, with the facial features reconstructed, and the used surrogates from the exhibition or from the excavation in order to create, recreate the pieces that were lost. Once it was bombed, this is actually the hall in which the seated figure sat, all of the basalt fragments, many of the works themselves, the basalt actually survived the bombing. I think there were limestones and I think some of the orthostats were limestone, they did not survive - they cracked in the heat, but then, essentially what happened is that when the fire brigade showed up and they doused the site with water, the extreme temperature between the hot and the cold made the basalt explode. So, all of this got scooped up and taken to the basement of the Pergamon Museum where it sat for about seventy years before there was a fifteen-year project planned to reconstruct everything. And so, then you can see on the very right, we have you know the Venus reconstructed, and it was even reconstructed using old molds, photographs, you know different kinds of pieces and you can see the facial features, the things that were originally lost, are the only things that really are kind of completed to this fabrication. So then if you go to the next image, actually, actually go back to the beginning yeah, there we go, sorry, ‘Ah my beautiful Venus!’ there we go. Sorry sorry, confusing.

What Rayyane has done with this piece, okay now that you know the story, he has created molds of the actual features that you know were lost from the very beginning, and the way in which they’re kind of distributed as you walk through the gallery space, they kind of align to make the face, depending on where you are as the viewer when you move through it. And in the background if you see the kind of pages that are along the wall, because the Venus, of course, had to have different export licenses, different paperwork, ownership, all of these things, those are actually all of the legal documents for the basalts slabs that are, that the Venus pieces are seated on.

And there are some interesting questions about the legality of this export for this too because, of course, because they had to be taken from Syria, and because there are different EU laws in place that things couldn’t be imported if they were from Syria at that time, they actually had to change the export paperwork so that it left from Beirut. So, all of these kind of, the contexts are replicated through these kind of manual reproduction processes, very much in the way that, you know, Jannane is working with technology and thinking about the viewers being an agent and equipping the viewer with the education, the context, the ways in which they can then make their own decisions and evaluations about the story that it tells.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 54:27

Just to go back to what Michalea was saying right at the end about storytelling, and women’s storytelling, one of the things I didn’t talk about was the voice that accompanies the film and the story that connects what happened in Iraq in 1918, 1919, 1920 when the British tried to, or did occupy Iraq after the first world war, and then the use of air power to suppress the revolt in opposition to British occupation. And all of that sort of story happening in parallel with what was happening at the same time in Ireland, sort of connecting up all those narratives is very important in the work, and really lovely in the way that it’s demonstrated as well through Rayyane Tabet’s work.

But, I think, the figure of the great grandfather’s really interesting because one of the things that’s happened since I made this work and I’ve shown it, is that there was a review of the exhibition in the Art Quarterly magazine, and the V&A were contacted by somebody who’s great grandfather had served in Iraq between 1917 and 1925, and who had a similar tray in their family collection. Yes, so he wrote to the V&A and said ‘Look I have this tray, it’s very similar and I’ve read this article about Jananne’s work and I was really struck by it, would you like me to bring it in and show it to you?’ And we were very excited, and he did, and this is it, and it’s a very similar in the sense of the iconography, so can we just go forwards a touch, but, but this tray is dedicated to his great grandfather, it actually names him in it, and it also talks about what’s going on in the tray.

So one of the things that was interesting for me about the tray when I first saw it was, although the inscription on it says it’s a commemorative tray and it’s marking Armistice day 1918 in Iraq, what actually seemed to be happening in the imagery was that it was recording the events of the revolt because it includes the execution of a man who’s named and identified as the killer of an army major, a British army major, and it also includes the aero planes, which appear to be kind of attacking these crowds of civilians. And, actually, it’s really lovely that there are lots and lots of women, female characters amongst the Arab crowds in the image too.

This tray that has an inscription that says you know, ‘We attacked from the air’, you know, ‘I saw a woman distressed’, and it’s much, much less benign and one of my contentions about the tray upstairs was that, you know, taking this image so I’m not looking at the inscription, I’m looking at what’s going on in the image and I’m saying well maybe this is a record of this very little known use of air power by the British, this kind of pioneering use of airpower to attack civilians in conflict, particularly in areas where it’s difficult for them to get, you know, armored cars or vehicles or whatever.

And so, this tray then, so when we met the guy whose great grandfather had it made for him, he also mentioned that he had some letters that his great grandfather had written to his wife at the time, while he served in Iraq, and would we be interested in reading some of those. And he sent us copies of those and here was explicitly an account of the attack that actually appears in the tray that’s upstairs in the gallery. He names, you know, he names people who are on the ground with him, he talks about how many troops there were, who shot first, how many casualties there were. It’s absolutely extraordinary. So, so I think now and the V&A curators who I worked with are now acknowledging actually that although it appears that this tray is commemorating Armistice Day, it isn’t. It’s recording this, this revolt and this uprising, and this suppression. So, you know it’s, and that’s one of the things I think Rayyane Tabet does, and also Michael Rakowitz, in working with, you know, historic material. I mean this is in a way less significant in terms of, but very interesting that say, the Tell Halaf excavations are happening again in the wake of, during and in the wake of the first world war and the second world war, so the kind of politics that are going on around these excavations and acquisitions of archeological artifacts and cultural objects is really really interesting.

And can I just show, and one other thing that happened simultaneously was that I did a workshop at the National Archives, which was working with the archivists at the National Archives to teach us how to navigate their very complex, what’s the right word, kind of archiving, what do you call it, cataloguing, system. The cataloguing system is very difficult to follow in the National Archives and very complex, and this was specifically looking at material in the National Archives relating to military, British military history. And I had said that I was interested in anything that was related to the British airforce actions in Iraq during the First World War and beyond. And this archivist had found this one album which was actually amazing. So, it wasn’t made public until 1980, so a lot of what ends up in the National Archives is, even if it’s delivered to the National Archives, often you can’t see it for whatever it is, fifty, sixty, seventy years after it’s been acquired. So, the date’s amazing because that’s actually the year that I came to Britain from Iraq 1980, so this is when this item becomes available. And what it is and I’m really amazed, is it’s a very very clear systematic record of this aerial campaign, and it’s not just including Iraq. So as I said earlier, it includes Waziristan which is the area between Afghanistan and Pakistan today, where there were tribes who were resisting British occupation, and British troops, going back into the 19th century. And so here’s a map of Iraq showing particular points where, I’m not sure if you can read the text, but it’s basically explaining that, so the punishment of denying the tribes access to their villages in such country, must bring recalcitrant tribesmen to terms. So this is actually a record of these aerial attacks and this is actually post the revolt, so this is from 1923 onwards. And then there are these extraordinary aerial photographs if we just go through, showing attacks on particular towns or villages. And then sort of, you know, each one is accompanied by a set of notes, this one’s absolutely amazing because this is in the south in the marshes where there are these very very famous reed houses that are made out of the reeds that are harvested from the marshes. These beautiful, beautiful constructions that you know, have been bombed from the air and armed fire and you can actually just see an airplane on the top left corner of that image. So beautifully documented, recorded, written about so, yeah I just wanted to share that with you. This is kind of information that’s still kind of, so it’s there, you know it’s in the National Archives, I don’t think anyone has ever looked at this book, and yet, yeah, these sort of beautiful…

**Noelle Collins** 1:02:15

Sorry, I mean that just brings to mind this idea that we touched upon a little bit in preparation for this panel discussion around what is preserved in the collections, and then also what’s made accessible. And then, furthermore, maybe on to your interests as well Andrea, this idea of what’s digitized, and how that isn’t necessarily neutral in the way that it’s undertaken by institutions or other organizations. I wonder if you might speak to that a little bit? And then just also I think just after that point we may open out to the audience as well for some questions

**Andrea Wallace** 1:02:51

So, I mean thinking about, you know, collecting practices and what gets selected for preservation, for conservation, who has access to it in order to create a reproduction or to study. And then there’s all these curatorial processes that are often quite linked to commodification and monetization, then inform what gets digitized and put online. Because then those images can be used to create commercial revenue for the institution.

So, when you see the online collection, or you see what’s being presented as representative of the institutional collection, there are so many layers of values and decisions that get embedded through kind of a filtering process when we get to the front end compared to the back end. And so, you know even to think about having access to the tray in order to make, you know, your own image, you visit the institution and there are rules around photography and what you can do with the photographs when you leave the institution. So, there are so many layers of access or exclusion that for conservation, for preservation, for these types of purposes, may exist but they also have really concrete impacts around narrative and testimony, and the types of stories that get told around the work as well

**Michaela Crimmin** 1:04:10

Can I just add one thing, which is one of the things that we did with Culture + Conflict in these amazing archives at Kings College for instance, and we talked to the archivists there and said would you be interested in having artists come in and root around for a bit, and they were like ‘Yeah that would be amazing, we’ve had one artist in the last five or ten years’ and they were really welcoming. And Bisan Abu-Eisheh, because we thought it would be interesting to have an artist who wasn’t a Brit basically, coming in to dig through their history basically, and he’s Palestinian, and so the archivists, they put out this whole pile of books that they thought he might be interested in, and then, and then apparently he just picked up the first pamphlet, and just never got any further than that, so it was a bit like the tray, and went on to do a PHD and now it’s all in his work and, because artists are amazing researchers - I don’t know if it’s just must be different methodologies or something to turn things round and so on.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 01:05:23

Well it’s not just that, it’s also the archivists, and the curators, and the carers of these objects who, I mean if it wasn’t for Sussan Babaie who’s here today, and Tim Stanley who were both instrumental in saying ‘come and look at this object in this collection because I think you’ll be interested in it’ you know then those things would never, you know the tray had never been shown at the V&A, it’s always, I think one reproduction of it was included in a publication that Tim Stanley published when the Jameel Galleries were redesigned, and that’s only because it’s the only 20th century object they’ve got from the Middle East in their collection. So it wasn’t included in the show, it’s not on display, it’s never been shown, so you know it’s also that artists, we rely on the archivists, you know if it hadn’t been for the archivists in The National Archives who paid attention to what I said when I said I was interested in this area and found that, I’d never have found that because their system is completely impenetrable and really difficult to use.

**Andrea Wallace** 1:06:20

And just to quickly add something to this which is interesting because it’s kind of the flip side, is you know we’re looking at some of these images. And depending on how old they are the images themselves may no longer be protected by any rights, so if we make a copy of that, the copy itself may not be protected by any rights. So, we would say that these digital assets are in the public domain, but as soon as you upload them and you make these sorts of really rich information available, we all know what’s happening at the moment with machine learning, artificial intelligence, you know, computational processing with these sorts of things as data, that then become harmful or then inform the creative process around video games. Like this happens, right, so some of, I mean, there’s a lack of regulation around how to think about appropriate access and education of these sorts of things too, but there can be very good reasons why some materials aren’t available online, because you cannot actually facilitate the level of care around the information that needs to be taken, because there’s nothing in place to prevent the harm that can follow.

**Noelle Collins** 1:07:27

Okay, I wonder if maybe that’s a good point to see if there are questions from the audience? Come on be brave people, be brave.

**Question One** 1:07:42

I’d be interested to know if you could enlighten me a little bit, or us a little bit, about the technicalities of achieving what you actually did with regards to producing the movie of the plate, how do you go about doing, did you stitch still images together? And how did you go about editing?

**Jananne Al-Ani** 01:08:03

Well, originally, we did a test shoot because we thought we might be able to film the tray conventionally using, I don’t know, an 8K video camera, and using very very very micro lenses, and we, that failed, we weren’t able to get in nearly close enough and we couldn’t really, we could only move the tray on a kind of a mechanical, what’s the right word for it? I’ve forgotten the technical term but it’s like a… yeah and moving incredibly slowly so we could only go kind of forwards and backwards and sideways.

And so, it became very clear it was going to have to be done purely photographically, which is what we did. So, we looked at different ways of doing that, so because it, because it’s a flat surface but it has a relief, it’s not a three-dimensional object, photogrammetry wasn’t appropriate, but we used something called photometry. So, we lit the, we lit the tray from eight equidistant points at about 45 degrees of kind of raking light, camera stayed in the same position, and we photographed areas of the tray that I knew that I wanted to get in closer to. And then we imported all of those eight images for each of those plates effectively, those areas, into Materialise and then created a kind of mesh on which the kind of surface of the object could be mapped, and then it was imported into Blender.

So these are not kind of high end bits of software you know, had we been working with a kind of West End post-production house they would have used something called Maya apparently, which I haven’t worked with before. But Blender is a kind of open-source software.

And then in Blender what you can do is you can kind of position your camera artificially so you’re completely in digital, so it’s a, so you’ve taken your photographic images, you’ve made its landscape, and then what you can do in Materialise and Blender is you can adjust the kind of height of everything, you can adjust the lighting, you can adjust the position of the camera. So we did all sorts of things like you know moving, so we had to then try to emulate the movement of an airplane or a helicopter over the landscape artificially in Blender, so that’s how we did it. And then moving the light as well. And in a way it’s kind of endless, you can do anything, you can sort of do anything. It’s a bit like photoshop, it’s not really very useful in one way because, you can sort of endlessly you know, you need to have a kind of idea of what you want to do with the image and I definitely wanted the tray to start to look like, so rather than taking it from the kind of metallic flatness of the kind of panoramic shots where you see the crowd and you see what’s happening in the scenes and it’s very illustrative and almost cartoon like, to coming in closer and closer and it’s kind of transformed into something that looks much more like a kind of real landscape, even though it isn’t.

So, so in the very last shot what we’re going into this kind of dry riverbed, we sort of added, we actually added texture, so we added the kind of cracked earth that was an aerial photograph I’d shot on a previous project, of you know, a dry river bed, which was very very high resolution so we were able to add detail and texture.

**Question Two** 01:11:38

Do you have any idea how many hours work went in from start to finish? Did you keep a record?

**Jananne Al-Ani** 01:11:45

Unbearably, it was the most painful, most painful process of any of the films I’ve made so far, yeah, unbearably long.

**Question Three** 01:11:57

Thank you, thank you very much, what a wonderful discussion this was. I have a question which the panel might be able to clarify, but I want to preface it by saying the last photograph you showed Jananne of that aerial marsh lands of southern Mesopotamia, is also empty of people, and you know bombing the marsh lands and so forth, its, and I wonder if this is part of the, sort of technology of flying that imposes this sort of detachment? And then coming back to thinking about Sarajevo and the fact that snipers, Sarajevo is like a bowl and the snipers stood all around, no one knew where they are standing and how the shooting took place, so in a way that kind of, people were on the streets running around, but those who killed, like those in the plane, were invisible to the population at large.

And this brings me to think, and I think it’s really interesting to think of the Sarajevo-sort of-siege and 1991 Gulf war as we think the same time more or less, and to think of how we came to see the Gulf war and Iraq through those images, the videos essentially, there were no people on the ground, which as you repopulate Iraq of the day. So you know, in a way my question is, if this is part of the technology of flying that naturally depopulates, and also if, and you all having looked at this carefully, if these war video games precede, or come after, these experiments, especially in the first Gulf war?

**Jananne Al-Ani** 01:13:55

I think war games definitely comes out of military technology for sure. I mean there’s a direct connection between games like, yeah and I mean there is. I mean if you look at Harun Farocki’s work I mean so much of his work focuses on that connection between yeah, real, real theatres of war and the fictions and that’s why I think the Bosnian artist’s work is so interesting. This idea that not only is the kind of, the narratives and the settings, the action, reflected in the games, but the kind of the historic narratives are perverted and transformed. But that’s the idea of, I hadn’t really thought about Sarajevo in the same way, but, yeah, I mean for me the work that I did many, many years ago about the veil was also this similar idea, you know this idea of, if you’re in a position to be able to see then you’re in an empowered position, and actually that’s one of the things I was interested in subverting in terms of the image of the veiled woman, by saying, if you’re veiled, your identity’s protected, you can see and you can’t be seen, and, actually, that’s a very empowering position to be in, and that’s exactly like the sniper.

That’s just made me think of Lamia Joreige’s amazing work. So Lamia Joreige is a Lebanese artist who made work about snipers who were operating inside the archeology museum in Beirut, and sniping through a hole in the wall in the museum, so thinking about the museum itself about becoming the kind of host, host for the sniper.

**Michaela Crimmin** 1:15:43

I’m not sure I’ve got much to add except, you know there’s this kind of ubiquitous thing so, your work, maybe to go back to the British Museum the other day and seeing the Assyrian reliefs as well, and the perspectives that they have, and there’s so much we could talk about, like the landscape and the, I was thinking about Hrair Sarkissian’s work, which I forgot to say, the one that I mentioned, which is about the Spanish civil war, is actually called ‘Deathscape’.

**Jananne Al-Ani** 01:16:19

Oh, and I’ve just thought of the, also Marine Hugonnier, whose work is in the collection show here, that she made this film called ‘Ariana’ which was with Film and Video Umbrella, and that was shot in Kabul which is also a city that sits with mountains around it, yeah.

**Michaela Crimmin** 1:16:35

Well, sorry, and going to Derry and sort of seeing, having never been to Derry but hearing all about Londonderry, Derry on the news the whole time, I had no idea how small it was, how again the soldiers were, you know, were around it and it’s so small it’s like going to the West Bank in Gaza and so on, it’s like, ah it’s so vulnerable.

**Noelle Collins** 1:17:07

Okay I think maybe we’re just about on time. If there are no further questions from the audience, I’d just like to say thank you so much Jananne, Andrea, Michaela, and to our audience today for an incredible, incredibly interesting discussion. And I think that’s it from me. And thanks to Emily who’d just disappeared. Oh, we have one more, I’ll come to you.

**Question Five** 1:17:35

I’m going to take a lot longer to process what you’ve said, but my question will be, will come to me on the train home so I don’t know what I’ll do with that, but it’s been incredibly though provoking and rich, thank you very much for making those connections. My question is actually a request, several of you, particularly Michaela but most of you mentioned many artists, they weren’t all up on screen, is there any way you can, you can Towner, put something somewhere, so that we can explore more of those artists work because they all sounded fascinating, and I know I didn’t spell them right in my note taking.

**Noelle Collins** 1:18:26

Yeah certainly. We will be able to share the audio recording, and maybe we can put some notes of names, because it can be tricky too, yeah.