

## EDUCATOR GUIDE



**Marwa Arsanios:**

### **A Letter Inside a Letter**

September 18, 2021 - February 27, 2022

## **Welcome!**

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you join us, as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) brings you the work of Marwa Arsanios on the second-floor gallery from September 18, 2021-February 27, 2022.

Arsanios uses filmmaking, sculpture, textiles, drawing, and writing to examine the connections between feminist politics, resistance movements, land struggles, and the natural world. Her collaborative projects evolve from a sustained engagement with specific communities, archives, and ideas, and present alternatives to dominant economic and social systems. Through a research-based practice, she conceptualizes new approaches to living in harmony with the land through collectivism and small-scale forms of resistance.

We invite you to explore, create, immerse yourselves, and discover what stories, connections and lessons can be found within this exhibition.

Enjoy!

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## About the Artist: Marwa Arsanios

- Born in 1978 in Washington DC
- Graduated with her Master of Fine Art from University of the Arts London in 2007 and conducted research for the Fine Art Department of the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, The Netherlands from 2011 to 2012
- Her work is primarily linked to Beirut, Lebanon, and the surrounding area, although she works out of Berlin.
- Marwa Arsanios and her cousin Mirene Arsanios founded an organization called 98weeks, a project space intended to be an outlet to extend their research and artistic practice beyond academia
- Arsanios has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Beirut Art Center (2017); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2016); Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2016); Kunsthalle Lissabon, Lisbon (2015) and Art in General, New York (2015)
- Her work has also been shown in a number of group exhibitions, including *From Ear to Ear to Eye*, Nottingham Contemporary, UK (2017); *Home Return*, Maxxi Museum, Rome (2017); *Let's Talk about the Weather*, Surssock Museum, Beirut (2016); *HERE AND NOW*, Ludwig Museum, Cologne (2016); and Thessaloniki Biennial (2015), among others



## About Arsanios' work

- Marwa Arsanios works with video, performance, and installation
- Marwa Arsanios' work and research revolves around expressing perspectives on contemporary politics—feminism, land rights and assignment, ownership, and authoritarian regimes
- In Arsanios' first installation of this series, *Who is Afraid of Ideology? Part I*, she states that the film revolves around an inquiry regarding what kinds of democracies are enabled without a state and what kind of ecologies are produced under the conditions of war.
- The final installation of Arsanios' *Who is Afraid of Ideology* series is concerned primarily with the issue of land inheritance: What does it mean to inherit land? How are legality and property related to questions concerning nature? How are people involved with the displacement and maintenance of the land?



- Arsanios states that her work is influenced greatly by “new materialism,” and that her *Who is Afraid of Ideology* series is intended to bring together new materialist thinking, historical materialist thinking, and Marxist feminist thinking together. New Materialism refers to cross-disciplinary effort to challenge longstanding assumptions about humans and the non- or other-than- human material world.
- Arsanios has consistently created work with the premise of radical politics, intending to cause viewers to rethink their place in relationship to others, nature, and society.

## Quotes

“You keep on trying. You know that most probably you’re going nowhere. But you keep on trying. This is a strategy – this is being an artist. Trying, trying forever. It’s the opposite of a utopian model. Making a space to think, to take time, to do research, to just talk, sit and talk for hours, over a drink, slowing down everything. This is a way of trying: slowing down every possibility of production. Thinking about the process, thinking about the research. When everyone wants you to just make stuff, thinking is also an artistic act.”

~Marwa Arsanios

“At the moment, I’m working on the fourth part of this series. It’s located in Lebanon, but it has to do more with the issue of land inheritance. The project goes into the question of what it means to inherit land and it goes into questions of legality and property in relation to questions of nature. It also looks at displacement and maintenance of the land- and, you know, the people who are taking care of the land are also involved. It will be a continuation of this series.”

~Marwa Arsanios

“Documentary reduced to a mere vehicle of facts may be used to advocate a cause, but it does not constitute one in itself... Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather empties it, decentralizes it.”

~filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha

## About the Project

For her first solo exhibition at the CAC, Arsanios presents three large textile pieces along side a four-part documentary style film series. To best view this exhibition approach from the end with the small set of stairs. There viewers are first met with the textile pieces suspended from the ceiling. These works highlight the connection to the history of textiles as “women’s work” and nature, based on the imagery. As one proceeds through the space the films are on view in order. Three of the films are placed within a wooden viewing space, while the fourth and final film is

projected on the back wall. Arsanios has been developing these films since 2017. These films take viewers through views of the landscape in Colombia, Mexico, Syria, Iraq and northern Lebanon, interviews from farmers and social activists.

### **Vocabulary/Key words**

New Materialism                  Nature                  Ownership                  Ideology

Marxism                  Land Rights                  Feminism                  Embroidery                  Archive

### **Themes**

**Ownership:** Arsanios has us question the political act of ownership. How does ownership happen? How is it often in opposition to land rights? How has it been impacted by who is in power?

**Ideology:** Arsanios is challenging ideologies in her films. Consider the feminism apparent in the Kurdish Autonomous Women’s Movement, the women in Jinwar; think Indigenous rights and commercialization of crops, Religion vs. Science, etc.

**Interconnection:** Arsanios has a strong theme of the interconnectedness of humans and nature. She wants us to understand that this connection is natural, scientific, and spiritual. And, like Premnath, wants us to consider the life cycle.

**The Void:** Arsanios points out the different perceptions of the void—as a vacuum and something that holds matter and energy. She makes the analogy that it is like a well, seemingly empty, but full of things we can not see. But what can we do with something once we see it?

## **PRE-VISIT DISCUSSIONS**

### ***ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER***

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, “Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I’ll help you.”

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised \$5000 (about \$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their “office” consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, “the best new building since the Cold War.”

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to “open their minds” to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

### ***ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS***

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC's 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid's first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC's former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine's "100 Most Powerful Women," and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

## **RULES AND GUIDELINES**

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.



- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

## **ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION**

- Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower-Level Lobby and the Contemplation Room.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at [sturner@cincycac.org](mailto:sturner@cincycac.org)

## **ARTWORK DISCUSSIONS**

*These discussions can occur prior to, during and after viewing.*

- Does this artwork remind you of anything? If so, what? How is different than other objects you have seen before?
- These films are documentary style. How does this style differ than how we typically think of a film/movie?
- The film series focuses on the connection between feminist str

- How does the idea of land/place relate to home, to identity, and to your own experience?
- In these films, women create communities on re-appropriated public land, others find themselves displaced by dispossession and political or corporate land-grabbing. What does ownership or inheritance mean in these contexts? In what ways can land be owned? How do traditional ideas of ownership conflict with land rights?

## **LESSON PLAN IDEAS**

As a class look at some of the local Cincinnati Land Acknowledgments. By reframing the discussion questions above, ask students to think about how their ideas of the land we live on may be different after reading the Land Acknowledgements. Did they learn anything new? How do they think that new knowledge can be used? Using a pen or pencil, have students underline (if they each have a copy) or write down 3-5 words or phrases that stand out to them within the Land Acknowledgement /s.

Have students do a quick write about various aspects of their identity and how those aspects may or may not pertain to ownership (ownership of personhood, self, land, space, time, objects, ideas, etc.). Have students discuss their quick write in small groups. Using their keywords from the Land Acknowledgement /s and their quick write/discussion, ask students to write a letter to their past or future self. This letter could take the form of a poem, drawing, collage, or an actual letter.

## **ARTWORK AND WALL TEXT INFORMATION**

### **Introductory Wall Text**

Marwa Arsanios uses filmmaking, sculpture, textiles, drawing, and writing to examine the connections between feminist politics, resistance movements, land struggles, and the natural world. Her collaborative projects evolve from a sustained engagement with specific communities, archives, and ideas, and present alternatives to dominant economic and social systems. Through a research-based practice, she conceptualizes new approaches to living in harmony with the land through collectivism and small-scale forms of resistance.

For her solo exhibition at the CAC, Arsanios presents the four films that comprise her master work *Who is Afraid of Ideology* (2017-21)—including one world premiere—alongside a series of textile works. The films knit together portraits of vibrant rural landscapes with first-person testimonies and poetic interludes that reconfigure the relationship between humanity and the environment. Featuring indigenous farmers and organizers in Colombia, Mexico, Syria,

Iraq and northern Lebanon, as well as social activists and guerrilla fighters connected with the Kurdish autonomous women’s movement, the films incorporate original footage and interviews that capture anti-authoritarian struggles and transnational, militarized feminist movements from the perspective of their most outspoken, yet often overlooked, voices.

Paired with the films is a series of textile works that highlights the reciprocal relationship between feminist struggles and nature. Images of medicinal herbs described by the women are embroidered on linen and juxtaposed with renderings of animals, geographical, and architectural phenomena. In one of the textile works, these images are replaced by blue and black circles, as if the flora and fauna have been redacted. Here, Arsanios refers to the attempted erasure of natural resources, land grabbing, and destruction of indigenous knowledge by the exploitative and extractive forces raged against these communities. What is left appears to be a void or vacuum. But new life forms and alternative futures can also take shape in these so-called empty spaces. Arsanios notes: “in quantum physics, the vacuums are where particles are created.”

### Artworks and Object Labels

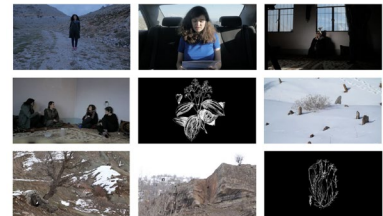
Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978, Washington D.C.)

*Who is afraid of ideology? Part I*, 2017

Digital color video, with sound

18 min., 16 sec.

Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris



Filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan, the first part of *Who is afraid of ideology* profiles the political ideology and daily life of a community of forty women living in harmony with a mountainous and rural land. Arsanios documents conversations with individuals who describe a way of life based on comradeship and cooperation with other living things and the environment. Focusing on the connection between feminist struggle and nature, they draw parallels between how humans defend themselves in the context of war and the inherent protection that nature provides.

Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978, Washington D.C.)

*Who is afraid of ideology? Part II*, 2019

Digital color video, with sound

38 min., 44 sec.

Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris

Commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation



Part two centers on Jinwar, a women-only commune in the Jazira Region region of Syria that provides refuge for individuals associated with the Kurdish autonomous women’s movement. Many of the ideas regarding self-sufficiency, the medicinal power of plants, and the capacity for feminist armed revolt that were introduced in part one are documented here in practice. Occupying a safe haven for women escaping violent patriarchal conditions, the video’s subjects describe how armed members take turns guarding their village and their efforts to foster a permaculture by planting diverse species of trees.

Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978, Washington D.C.)

*Who is afraid of ideology? Part III: Micro Resistencias*, 2020

31 min., 17 sec.

Digital color video, with sound

Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris

Co-commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Center,

Cincinnati, Berlin Biennial, and Kunstencentrum Vooruit, Gent



*Micro Resistencias* documents a village of seed guardians in Southern Colombia, near Tolima. While the geography differs, there are similarities between the ways in which these women and the women of the other villages use their knowledge of nature to resist oppressive state or capitalist agents. For generations, they have protected the diversity of indigenous corn crops. They describe how multinational agricultural corporations have infringed upon their way of life and even murdered members of their communities. Arsanios asks how the tiny, basic unit of the seed could constitute such a threat to state and corporate interests.

Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978, Washington D.C.)

*Who is afraid of ideology? Part IV: A Letter Inside a Letter*, 2021

28 min., 10 sec.

Digital color video, with sound

Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris

Co-commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Goethe-Institut, Berlin, and

Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt

The final chapter of the series features a scripted monologue that poses questions about models of ownership, inheritance, and private property. Stylistic and technical decisions throughout the film undermine the tropes of documentary filmmaking by calling attention to the production itself and emphasizing the fictional and constructed nature of the concepts being described—audio and visuals appear out of sync; the tripod and camera are made visible; and the filmmaker addresses the viewer directly. At one point, Arsanios alludes to the commons as a possible alternative. Citing quantum physics and New Materialist discourse, Arsanios describes how “voids” are also spaces of potentiality, continuity, and new life.

- Read the summaries of the films above—underscore the importance of telling stories and what a documentary is—why are documentaries done?
- Arsanios embeds herself in a community to do these films, taking great care to include herself and the filming apparatuses in the videos to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the storyteller and story.
- Read this article about the Syrian Civil War  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>

- Think about the importance of feminist movements like the women’s autonomous movement, women military and Jinwar—how are their existence acts of resistance?
- Like Premnath, she’s wanting to present ideas, not conclusions—she wants us to accept the spiritual and the scientific
- Another connection to Premnath is the idea of seeds—growth and becoming and the potential that emerges
- Ownership is important to Arsanios—in these films, regimes, colonial powers, and capitalistic endeavors make claims to land that in Arsanios’ opinion should not be owned—just belongs to “god” or should be communal and beneficial to all (think about this idea compared to Premnath’s idea of ownership)

Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978, Washington D.C.), in collaboration with Sama organization  
*Untitled (Tapestry), 2021*

Hand-embroidered cotton on linen  
 Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris  
 Co-commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Center,  
 Cincinnati and Fondazione BTS Miniartextil



*Untitled (Tapestry), 2021,*  
 Hand-embroidered cotton on linen  
 Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris  
 Co-commissioned by the Contemporary Arts Center,  
 Cincinnati and Fondazione BTS Miniartextil

*Untitled (Tapestry), 2020*  
 Hand-embroidered cotton on linen  
 Courtesy of the artist and mor charpentier, Paris

These textile works highlight the reciprocal relationship between feminist struggle and nature that is explored in Arsanios’s films. Made in response to conversations with female activists and embroidered on linen, they contain images of medicinal herbs and weeds juxtaposed with renderings of animals, sites, and buildings. A half circle references the configuration of rammed-earth shelters in the women-only village, Jinwar, demonstrating how structures of community and protection are built from the land itself. In one of the textiles, abstracted blue and black shapes refer to the erasure of natural resources and forms of indigenous knowledge due to the exploitative and extractive forces that organize against these communities.

- Designed along with Kurdish women and created by female artists in Damascus—Sama (embroidery)—when sold, proceeds go to Sama
- Images derive from women’s connection to earth, plants, natural medicine—also images of the plan for Jinwar and topographical drawings of the area
- The circles reference the “void” as well as the erasure of natural resources and history due to exploitation

- Embroidery is “women’s work” and reinforces the importance of women in society
- Scroll-like appears adds “religious” quality
- Rich, blue color is desirable and has art historical roots referencing wealth and power

## **RESOURCES**

<https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/10424/marwa-arsanios>

<http://evenmagazine.com/marwa-arsanios/>

<https://www.frieze.com/article/focus-marwa-arsanios>

<https://glossary.mg-lj.si/narrators/marwa-arsanios/296>

<https://walkerart.org/magazine/guerrilla-landscapes-marwa-arsanioss-who-is-afraid-of-ideology-part-i>

[https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2021/interviews/ecofeminism-with-marwa-](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2021/interviews/ecofeminism-with-marwa-arsanios/)

[arsanios/ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqDc3PtIoLA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqDc3PtIoLA)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2WxVF24ns8>

<https://walkerart.org/magazine/guerrilla-landscapes-marwa-arsanioss-who-is-afraid-of-ideology-part-i>

## **LEARNING STANDARDS**

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Ohio Common Core Links

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards>

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards>

### Kentucky Common Core Links

<https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx>

[https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky\\_Academic\\_Standards\\_Arts\\_and\\_Humanities.pdf](https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf)

### Indiana Standards Links

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts>

### Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>