

Marwa Arsanios: *The Land Shall Not Be Owned*

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Curated by Agustín Pérez Rubio and Gioia Dal Molin

On the far side of the Klausen Pass from Altdorf lies Urnerboden. This high valley is the largest alp in Switzerland and belongs to the Korporation Uri. The Korporation Uri regulates the collective use of pastures, forests, alpine meadows, and paths, and its structures date back to the late Middle Ages.¹ It is the largest landowner in the canton of Uri. Even today, its foundation remains the *Korporationsbürgergemeinden* (the Korporation's citizens' communities), while the *Allmendaufseher*, or common-land wardens (a position no woman has ever held), ensure that the rules of collective land use are observed – such as the three hours of unpaid communal labour that every cattle owner must perform per animal. These forms of land management are rooted in the concepts of the *Allmende*, land collectively used by a village or settlement community (known as *Allmäini* in the Uri dialect),² and of the commons (from the Latin *communis*, meaning shared), a term for self-organised, collectively used resources.

Such ideas resonate throughout Marwa Arsanios's exhibition *The Land Shall Not Be Owned* at Haus für Kunst Uri. The Korporation Uri, as a legal body, is clearly founded on an

¹ See also: Hans Stadler: "Korporationen", in: *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS)*, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/010262/2008-10-30/>.

² Felix Aschwanden, *Neues Urner Mundartwörterbuch*, Altdorf 2013, S. 57.

exclusionary form of citizenship (one that long excluded women)³; and other commons structures that have evolved over time, too, do not simply lend themselves as blank projections for utopian thinking.⁴ Even so, they invite us to reflect on the relationship between the individual and the collective, and between shared resources and private property. Marwa opens this horizon still further. *The Land Shall Not Be Owned* reads like a line from a manifesto, and not by chance. Among the works on view is *Chart for the Usership of the Land*: principles for the use of land, printed on large paper banners. “If one thinks of land as the object of ownership,” Marwa writes, “then the first thing that comes to my mind is the invisible creatures that live in the soil and underground, such as bacteria.”⁵ For the artist, land is not property but a moving, whispering being – an entanglement of human and more-than-human matter and entities. We cannot own land (nor the creatures, roots, and bacteria teeming within it); rather, we are part of it. With her work, Marwa clearly rejects an anthropocentric, or human-centred, view of the world, tracing different forms of life lived with the land. She shows how alternative forms of land use can work in the present, and how the relationship between humans, animals, plants, and land might be imagined differently.

At the heart of *The Land Shall Not Be Owned* are the five films of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* The films are the result of extensive, time-intensive research and travel that Marwa undertook in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, in Lebanon, and in Colombia. Here, the term ‘ideology’ is

³ Korporation citizenship passes down through descent, or by application to the *Korporationsrat* (its council). Women’s citizenship rights were long tied to marriage; and they gained the right to vote in the *Korporationsbürgergemeinden* (citizens’ communities) only in 1991.

⁴ See also: Bettina Dyttrich: “Kompliziert und unentbehrlich”, in: *WOZ*, no. 50 (Dezember 2021): <https://www.woz.ch/2150/commons/kompliziert-und-unentbehrlich>.

⁵ Marwa Arsanios, “Who’s Afraid of Ideology?”, in: Umut Yıldırım, ed., *War-torn Ecologies, An-Archic Fragments: Reflections from the Middle East*. Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023, p. 67.

meant positively, though it also carries a touch of provocation. Who is afraid of world views that oppose the exploitative use of land and resources, and profit-driven agricultural monocultures? Who is afraid of value systems built on sustainable coexistence within fragile ecosystems, on sensitivity to Indigenous knowledge, or on the premise that land cannot be owned?

In the mountains of the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, Marwa shows activists and fighters of the Kurdish women's movement, whose self-defence and struggle for survival – including cultural survival – always plays out in relation to their environment, and to the mountains in particular. “For many young Kurdish women and men,” writes sociologist Dilar Dirik, “the idea of ‘going up the mountain’ presents an anchor in their self-conceptions [...]. It is a concrete option for direct action that, just like the mountain itself, is always there.”⁶ And just as the native plants that open the exhibition as drawings, and that Marwa features in the first part of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*, perhaps the Kurdish women, too, have learned their resilience from living alongside nature. The second part of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* takes us to the village of Jinwar in Rojava, the Kurdish region in northeastern Syria, inhabited exclusively by Kurdish women. Filmed almost ten years ago, Marwa's film shows the women's daily lives, in which the political work of self-administration always unfolds within a wider geopolitical fault line and the region's war-scarred history. Indeed, with the shift in power in Syria in 2026, Kurdish self-administration now stands under immense pressure. In the third film, Marwa portrays Indigenous women farmers in Colombia who resist land management by large landowners and corporations, drawing on centuries-old knowledge of seeds and plants. The fourth part of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* is grounded in an agricultural cooperative's attempt to turn a privately owned

⁶ Dilar Dirik, *The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2022, p. 121.

quarry in the mountains of Lebanon into collectively used land. In the process, it becomes clear just how closely the ownership of land – and any attempt to change it – is bound up with history, and with the administrative, legal, and even geological conditions of a given area. In the fifth, newest, and most fantastical part of the series, Marwa extends her reflections to the right of way (that is, the right to cross land that belongs to someone else) as it applies to animals: through both our dreams and through private land. At the same time, she interweaves the shift from the commons to private property – and the establishment of wage labour bound up with it, both foundational conditions of capitalism – with the history of livestock husbandry, and with the dehumanisation of certain groups of people so often seen in wars and conflicts.

With *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*, Marwa also interrogates film as a medium in its own right. The films are documentary in nature (with the exception of the fifth part), yet they make no claim to comprehensive, objective truth. They stand in the tradition of a critical engagement with photography and film, media whose emergence and dissemination are closely bound up with the Western ambition to document and categorise the world ‘objectively’. In *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?*, we repeatedly see Marwa in the frame herself, and we hear her voice, or that of her interpreter. Questions sometimes have to be repeated, or are misunderstood. Marwa lays bare her own subjective perspective, shaped by her research, her encounters, and her conversations.

Drawings and textile works complement and expand the five chapters of *Who Is Afraid of Ideology?* Taken as a whole, the exhibition opens up a space for possibilities, ideas, utopias, and ideologies that unsettle often Western or imperial understandings of land. Marwa shows us lived attempts to manage land and its use in a radically grassroots-democratic way,

to learn from resilient plants, and to defend age-old ecological knowledge. Together – with all the bacteria and roots and fungi and mice and beetles.

Marwa Arsanios (*1978 in Washington, DC; lives and works between Beirut and Berlin) is an artist, filmmaker, and researcher. Her projects repeatedly explore how spaces – in the literal architectural sense, in the landscape, or as temporary, even conceptual spaces – can emerge within and alongside existing structures. Often working collaboratively, she is specifically concerned with creating new spaces within the art world and experimenting with different forms of collaboration. Building on the history of the commons in the Levant, her thematic focus over the past decade has been on various movements fighting to reclaim their land.

Solo exhibitions include: Taxispalais (Innsbruck, 2026), Fundació Joan Miró (Barcelona, 2025), Artium Museoa (Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2025), Fondazione Sandretto (Turin, 2025), BAK Utrecht (2024), Kunsthalle Bratislava (2023), Heidelberger Kunstverein (2023), Mosaic Rooms (London, 2022), Škuc Gallery (Ljubljana, 2018) and Beirut Art Center (2017); Hammer Museum (Los Angeles, 2016), Witte de With (now Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, 2016) and Kunsthalle Lissabon (2015). Her work has also been shown in numerous group exhibitions, including: Documenta 15 (Kassel, 2022), the Mardin Biennial (2022), the film programme of the Biennale of Sydney (2022), the Autostrada Biennale (Prishtina, 2021), the Berlin Biennale (2020), The Renaissance Society (Chicago, 2020), the Gwangju Biennale (2018), the Luleå Biennial (2018), Kunsthalle Wien (2019), the Sharjah Architecture Triennial (2019), SFMOMA (San Francisco, 2019), the Warsaw Biennale (2019), the Sharjah Biennial (2019); MAXXI (Rome, 2017), Museum Ludwig (Cologne, 2016); the Thessaloniki Biennale (2015), the New Museum (New York, 2014), the Venice Biennale (2013) and the Istanbul Biennial (2011).

Her films have been shown at, among other venues, MoMA (New York, 2023), the Cinéma du Réel festival (Paris, 2021), the Rotterdam Film Festival (2021), the Toronto International Film Festival (2019), the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 2011, 2017, 2022) and the Berlin International Film Festival (2010, 2015).

Marwa Arsanios was a research associate in the Fine Art department at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht (2010–12). She completed her doctorate at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.