Mute Melodies

Christine Kettaneh

Abstract. Mute Melodies is a short tour through an artist's work that investigates the boundaries of language and systems in research-based projects that are simultaneously sculptural and performative, and that articulates language as both excavated material and excavation technique. Or, alternatively, an artist's journey through everyday matter: soap on the wash basin, ants in the garden, sugar on the kitchen table, keys in locks—language in the mouth.

1. Introduction

In my practice as an artist, I have an inclination to the conceptual, yet I am unable to forget about matter. As Patricia Berry (2008) puts it, in *Echo's Subtle Body*, matter is both the most necessary and the most lacking, the tangible and the incorporeal, the form and the chaos. Maybe it is this paradox within matter that sustains my interest. My mind cannot make up words for abstract thought just out of thin air; the mind can make use of only what is already at hand: the physical, the concrete, the body, matter… It is actually out of our need to expand our range of expression, that our language flows from the concrete to the abstract through what we commonly know as metaphor. So I would like to think of art as metaphor which means "carry across" in Greek or "transfer" in Latin.

In my practice, the visual, the research and the writing inform each other. When I write and when I work with the visual I feel I am activating the same region in my brain, perhaps the same gnostic neurons that help me make connections and links between the conceptual and the physical space that I would have otherwise not been able to make. The verb 'to essay' means, "to attempt at;" I would like to consider art, as an essay that attempts at metaphor, at what takes place entirely within the fiction of the mind: Art is an attempt at understanding.

Christine Kettaneh   (iD) 0000-0003-4099-9990
School of Architecture and Design, Lebanese American University, Byblos, Lebanon
E-mail: christinekettaneh@gmail.com, Web: www.christinekettaneh.com

2.   Soap Coins: The Economic Metaphors

Clare Whistler invited me to collaborate with her and Chris Drury in one of Clare's Gift series: *Coin—a gift for wealth*, in Seaford, UK (May '14). Aware that I had previously been trained as an economist she asked me if I could make coins that we would set to sea after a ritual. I responded with *Soap Coins*.

Economic reasoning is highly metaphorical but economists are not so conscious of it because they are accustomed to it by daily use. As I stepped back from the field, I found it easier to see the metaphors. So for that project, I considered different metaphors that were commonly used in economics and finally decided on a list of 6 that gave off tactile associations: Equilibrium, Maximizing, Elasticity, Liquidity, Volatility, and The invisible hand. For each of the 6, I designed a coin made up of soap. In each soap, I engraved the word along with simple compositions made up of curves inspired by the metaphor's economic model as well as its literal or noneconomic meaning. Most economic models can be represented by curves and their intersections, the famous equilibrium points. So at every point where the curves would meet recto verso on the soap, I made a hole.

Clare had no prior knowledge of economic theory and she requested that I give her her very first lesson—in front of an audience. Although I had hoped I would not have to teach the basics of economics again that soon and had secretly wished that my memory could somehow va-porize them, the responsibility of the years I had put in acquiring them still burdened me. So I obliged. I explained to her the assumed max-imizing behavior of people… I explained how the consumer made de-

cisions in a way to maximize his utility, how the supplier made decisions in a way to maximize his profit, and assuming that everyone was behaving—rationally—in his own self-interest, how the market reached equilibrium. And then when the equilibrium was not favorable, how government could, by making decisions in a way to maximize welfare, lead equilibrium to an assumed optimal.

Not surprisingly, Clare barely managed to answer any of my economics questions 'rationally.' Instead, she gestured with her hands every time I tried to define a word like equilibrium, elasticity or liquidity. Her gestures gradually grew into more elaborate movements and as soon as the lesson was over, she continued with her dance moving outside the room, outside the house onto a path towards the sea. And the audience followed her in her trance.

When they reached the sea, Clare handed them the coins. She requested they rub them hard with water, exchange them and then repeat. As they did that, the words—the metaphors that launched the ritual—started to effervesce and the coins started to smell and melt. All that remained for Clare to keep were the holes in the coins.

3. Mute Melodies: The Dead Metaphors

Figure 2

Metaphor is not only for the economists, poets or the fancy and sophisticated. Even when we are not conscious of it, we are using metaphor in our everyday language. Metaphors are words that help us cross the realm of the physical to the abstract. When words are used frequently enough in their metaphorical abstract sense we forget their literal physical origins and so the metaphors die. But with their deaths

they form the building blocks of our language. For example, take the most mundane word: the verb "To have". What is it really that we do when we have a hand, a leg, a house, a headache, or a cousin? As Guy Deutscher (2005) explains in *The Unfolding of Language*, 'To have' or more generally the idea of possession is an abstract notion. Actually 'to have' as well as 'to capture' are derived from the same Proto-Indo-European root *kap which means 'to seize.' In other languages, where the word 'to have' does not have an exact equivalent, the notion of possession is expressed through other words borrowed from physical situations of having something like the transitive verbs 'to take, hold, carry or get' or expressions related to images of physical proximity like something being near, on or at you…

As for me, the idea of possession lies in a key. We always obsess about losing or misplacing the key because the key embodies power; with it we control our ownership, our security. The key fosters the separation between "yours" and "mine." It represents our fears from one another or our desire for independence from each other. But I am not interested in the key. I am interested in the bits of the key that get lost when the key is cut. Those cut bits leave a space, but not an absence, because it is in that space that the essence of the key system lies. Every time a key and the right lock do their affair, that space is reactivated. The pins align in one unique mute melody. And then there is an opening, a closing, a sharing, a stealing and an on and off.

So if the cutting of the key activates the idea of possession, the idea of something close to you—at the extreme the idea of you—then that space between the key and the lock reactivates that idea whenever it is occupied. So in response to that idea, I started a ritual. I asked key cutters around London to save all their metal filings—the metallic dust that gets lost when the keys are cut—and I collected them. I also asked friends to entrust me with their sets of house keys and to describe to me the paths they would take every time they entered their homes, from the outermost layer to the innermost. I fancied the idea of retracing the missing bits of their keys and restoring their wholeness.

For some, the retraced bits looked like Arabic or some other script. For others, they looked like waves or ships. It wasn't until you read my text in the book under the installation of bits that you found clues to what they actually were: retraced missing bits of keys. You could also cut your own copy of the text/key along the perforated margins of the book, leaving me again with the bits.

But to me, today, the bits look like little unique gravestones to the dead metaphors of possession: 'To have'.

4.   Smell Me, Touch Me, Kiss Me: The Chemical Metaphors

Figure 3

Synesthesia is a perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to involuntary experiences in another sensory or cognitive pathway. For example, you see colors when you hear words or sounds; you taste food when you see words or shapes; you hear sounds when you smell scents or touch objects; you feel a touch when you see someone else being touched etc.

We actually all have some synesthetic abilities: we instinctively can find, or create, synesthetic patterns. If synesthesia is the result of cross-connectivity among the brain's sensory regions, the same connectivity could explain how our metaphorical thinking can create a kind of conceptual synesthesia, in which the abstract is understood in the context of the concrete or physical. And many of the metaphors we use everyday are synesthetic.

My dad had grown a beautiful garden but passed away just before the trees bore their first fruit. With our bitter hearts and salty tears, we welcomed the remarkable sweetness of that first harvest. After his 10th memo-

rial I went into his garden in search of him. Over two months I prepared and served sweet letters to the garden. The ants responded.

Far simpler but not any less interesting than human metaphors are the metaphors exchanged between ants. Ants communicate mostly chemically through pheromones which are scented chemicals produced by glands found all over their bodies. Those chemicals are detected as the ants feel each other through the tips of their super sensitive antennae. They may relay further messages by kissing, a common practice called trophallaxis, which is an exchange of liquid food regurgitated and mixed with pheromones. Their vocabulary seems crude typically containing only ten to twenty perfumes, each representing a 'chemical metaphor' that could for instance be signaling: Run away! There is food over here! I'm on foraging duty! Attack!

According to Steven Johnson (2004), in his book *Emergence*, many of those signs operate in a relatively simple binary fashion—signaling, for instance, whether another ant is a nestmate or an enemy. But ants can also detect gradients in pheromones, revealing which way the scent is growing stronger. Gradients in the pheromone trail are the difference between saying "there's food around here somewhere" or with more confidence "there's food due north of here."

So when an ant stumbled across one of my sweet words in the garden, it marked a scented trail on the way back to the nest so that more ants might follow. When an ant encountered another ant, it felt the other ant with its antennae; they then kissed as they recited scented liquid letters to each other. If an ant found a shorter path to the words, it secreted a stronger scent indicating more confidence and hence diverting the trail. Successful trails were followed by more ants, reinforcing better routes and gradually identifying the best delivery lines for my letter. After this long sweet affair with the ants, the underground became a mine of smells, touches and kisses.

Emergence

Ants are also particularly good at measuring the frequency of certain 'metaphors', a talent that also broadens the semantic range of the ant language. Ants can sense the difference between encountering ten foraging ants in an hour and encountering a hundred. This local talent is critical to the colony's global ability to adjust task allocation according to colony size and food supply. All the individual ant needs to do is mind its immediate neighbor and the colony would magically self-organize. Pheromones play the central role in the organization of the ant colonies. The key to that intelligence is simple: the ants smell, touch and kiss—literally!

By following simple rules, ants can create a colony; heart cells can cluster into a heart; people can assemble into a neighborhood; and a

software can learn how to recommend new books. The movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication is what we call emergence. I am interested in emergence/complexity/science of self-organization, how a complex organism/system could assemble itself without any master planner. An emergent system experiments, learns and grows by responding to feedback. Through emergence, large patterns emerge out of uncoordinated local actions. The crossing over of metaphor from the concrete to the abstract, or more generally the evolution of language can be also considered as an emergent phenomenon. While each person tries to reach his or her own communicative or expressive goals in various social circumstances, he or she uses a word in a particular way. If enough people use it in that same way, a metaphor is born and later dies; language is changed.

5. Hayat: The Conceptual Metaphor
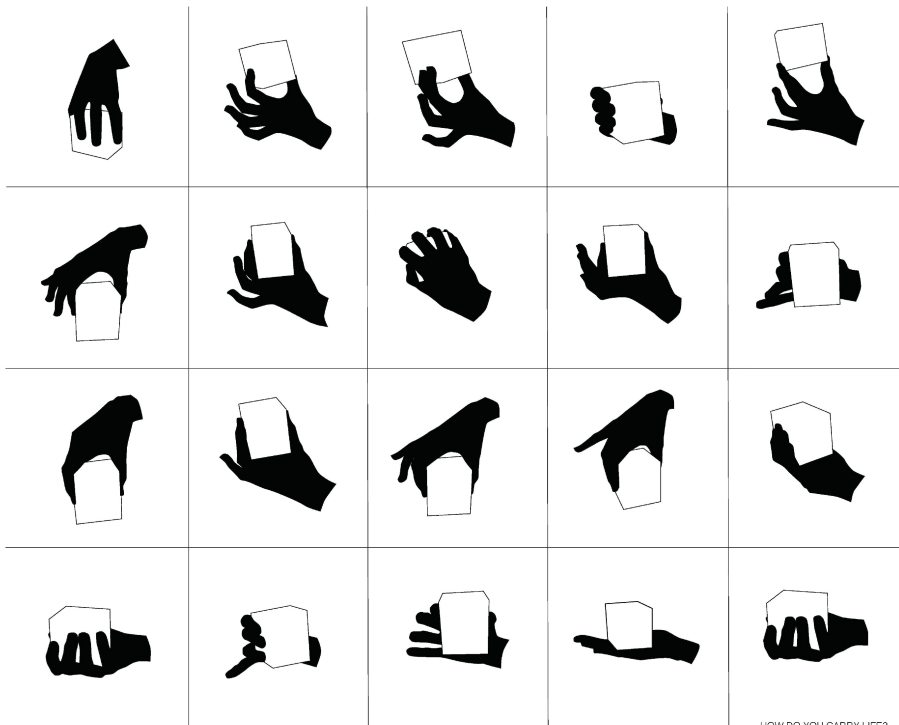

HOW DO YOU CARRY LIFE?

Figure 4

Our 'conceptual metaphors' influence our perception of the world. The images gain independent existence, and through our cultural artefacts, they even shape the world around us. The classic definition of

metaphor is giving a thing a name that belongs to something else. But when we give a thing a name that belongs to something else, we give it a whole set of analogies too. So when I fell upon an old advertisement from the 1950s of a traditional Lebanese bar of soap called *Hayat*, which means life in Arabic, I was very intrigued to investigate.

I discovered that Hayat still existed and was being made in a newer facility in Tripoli, North of Lebanon. I also discovered that Hayat was the daughter of the cook that had originally made the soap. According to some accounts, the cook named the soap Hayat after his daughter and according to other accounts, he named his daughter after the soap. Which story was more true or less true did not matter, I wanted to find Hayat. Excited, I tracked down Hayat's son and met with him. During our encounter, Hayat's son talked extensively about his life and about his dad's life. When I finally asked about Hayat, with a blank look he said: Hayat led a 'normal' life.

How can 'normal' be inspiring?! I thought with a sigh. He suggested I meet her when she was back from her travels. I then asked if perhaps he would share some old photos of her. He explained that Hayat might not approve because she was veiled later in her life. I knew I would not ask about Hayat anymore. I preferred to leave her veiled in the intimacy of her own 'normal' life. I realized I could only try to unveil the 'hayat' in my hands.I went back to the ad: there was a hand holding the soap up with the tips of its fingers. Very elegantly. very lightly, so unlike how you would carry a rough brick-like heavy traditional bar of soap. I wondered whether it had been the name Hayat, life in Arabic, that had allowed that divergence. So I explored the different possible ways of carrying hayat.

According to David McNeill (2005), an expert on the relationship between gesture and thinking, gestures can draw forms or spaces that induce imagery for abstract meanings. Through metaphor and metaphorical gestures, body and mind can be intimately entangled. The body is the most immediate thing in our physical environment, so it is no wonder that there is hardly any part of the body that has not been the origin of a metaphor for spatial and more abstract concepts. For example, words like behind, back, and front are all body-parts marching towards abstraction. The word life itself is derived from roots that refer to the abdomen, waist, or womb but most importantly roots that refer to the whole body.

I think, life is soap. It is made so it is unmade; it is worth all that consumes it; it is the dirt between your hands, the sweat of your body and the stains on your best of clothes. I also think, language is soap. It clears as much as it slips; it is decorative; it is plain; it can take on different forms. Then there must be life in language. And language in life.

According to Ghassan Tueini, Lebanese journalist, politician, and diplomat, there is life in every letter; every day the letter is born both young and old (Fondation Libanaise de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 2010, p. 11). So I think it is possible then that a hand can carry a bar of hayat, a bar of life that is simultaneously young and old, heavy and light.

6.   Conclusion

In *Mourning Sex,* Peggy Phelan (1997) said the words fled because they were sick of our literal faith in them; Healers wanted the words to comfort, politicians wanted them to inspire, and artists wanted them to make magic. We believed so much in the words we made them carry our dreams and histories. Peggy Phelan realized that, like her lover, the words fled because they had been horribly misrecognized. We made the mistake of loving the words for the way they made us feel and behave and forgot to love the words for the "more in-them-than-themselves that made it possible for them to create something we could never control, the more-in-them that made it possible for them to travel to places whose topography we could never map." (1997, p. 7) So the words ran out of our ears, out of our mouths, flew right out of our bodies and rang and clanged high up in the sky and finally exploded in a big cacophony of sounds.

I like to explore the effect on language if we suspend our literalness. We may have to accept the partialness of experience and the fallibility of memory, and then allow both perception and remembering to be tools of invention rather than recording. That way, a new sense may develop not from History alone but also from Fiction—a projection of reality.

Our reality is handed to us at a macro level: at any moment it is the result of a complex historical development. Yet we can only interact or add to this reality at a micro level. Because of that mismatch in scales, between macro and micro, we feel ignorant. And it is that ignorance that makes us feel alienated. We think that by excavating history ever more thoroughly we would be able to ease that sense of alienation. But the truth is our experience, our perception of reality, will always contain more than what we know. To define an object, a person, or a system by its history would only limit it. So a more complete understanding can be achieved in trusting that very sense of alienation in our experience of reality. So that is why I am interested in our most immediate experience of reality, our 'everyday,' like the ants in our gardens, the keys in our hands, the soap on our wash basins, the sugar on our kitchen tables, and most importantly the language on our tongues.

My search involves an enquiry into language. There is a temporary forgetting of meaning as I feed the alphabet to the ants and as I suspend my search for the origin of Hayat. Only to pick up the words again and

use them as triggers for rituals in the hopes of smelling, touching and kissing matter's more metaphorical possibilities.

By bringing together what we know and what we don't know through analogy, metaphorical thinking helps us understand, learn and communicate. Most importantly it opens the door to the greatest discoveries and inventions.
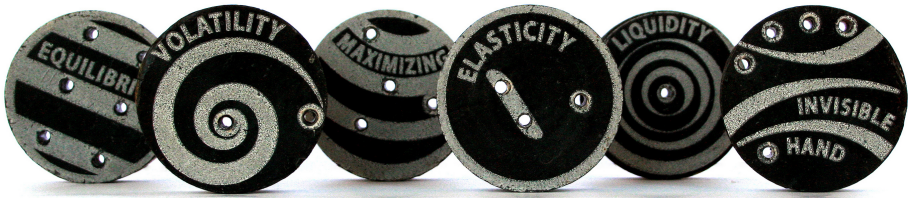
7. Art Exhibition

Soap Coins: The Economic Metaphors

FIGURE 5

FIGURE 6
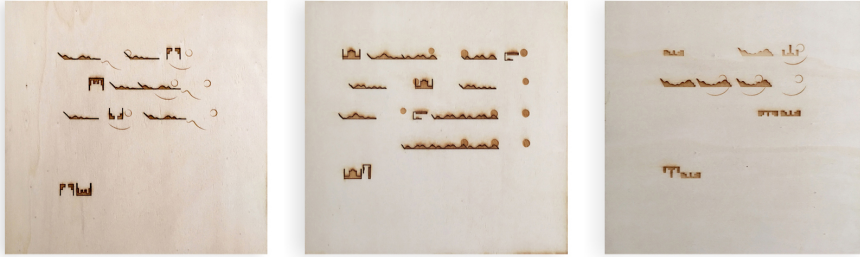
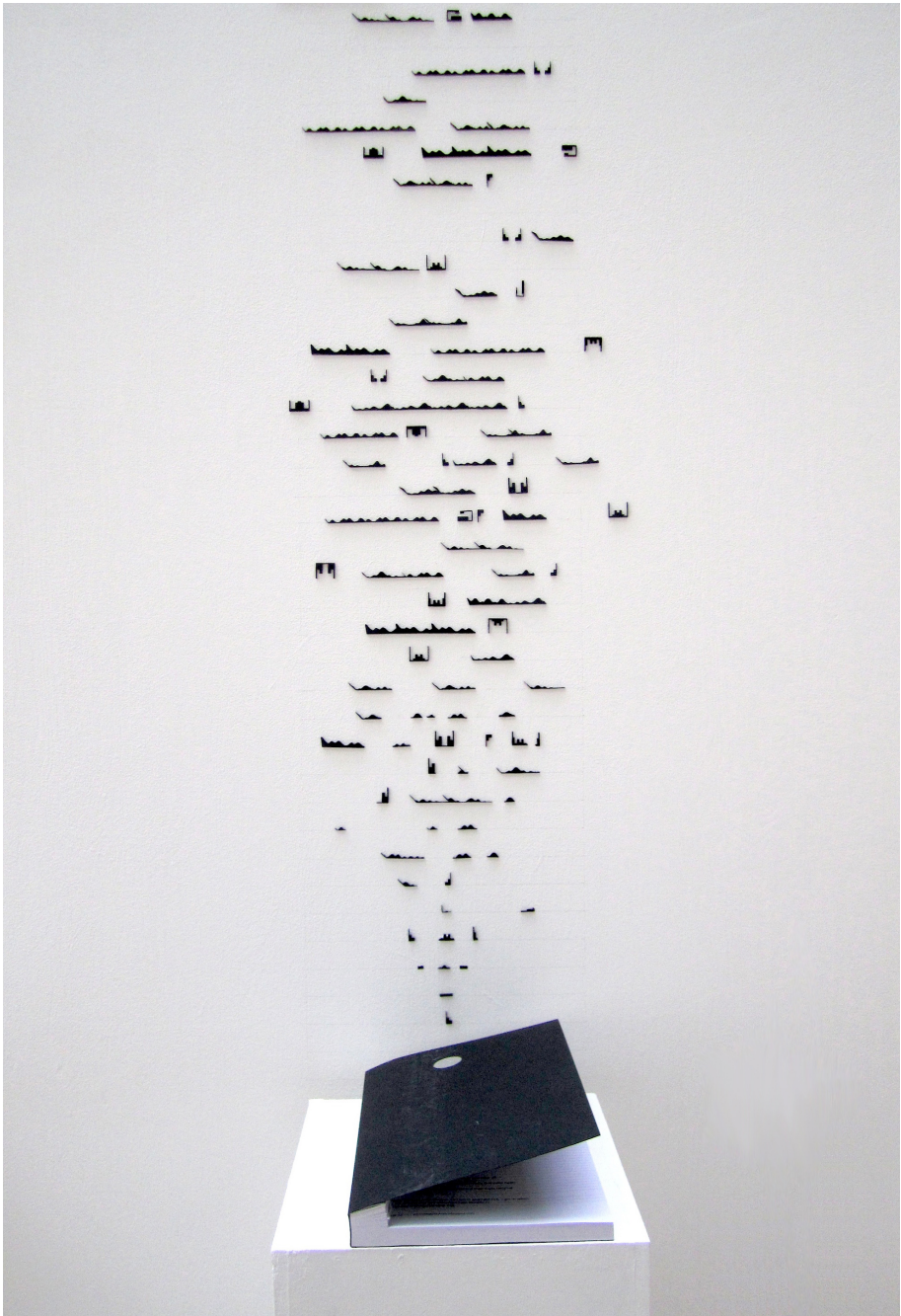## Mute Melodies: The Dead Metaphors

FIGURE 7

FIGURE 8

Figure 9

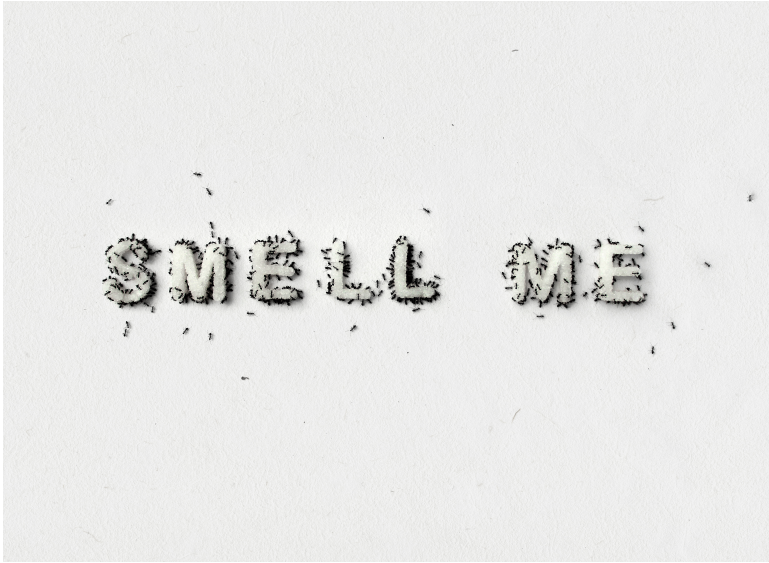Smell Me, Touch Me, Kiss Me: The Chemical Metaphors

FIGURE 10

FIGURE 11

FIGURE 12

Hayat: The Conceptual Metaphor

FIGURE 13

FIGURE 14

Image Details

Figure 1 Designs of '*Soap Coins*', Christine Kettaneh, 2014.

Figure 5 *Soap Coins*, Christine Kettaneh, laser engraving on soap, 2014.

Figure 6 Washing with *Soap Coins* at *Coin—a gift for wealth*, event organized by Clare Whistler and Chris Drury, Seaford, UK, photo courtesy of Kevin Costello, 2014.

Figure 2 Designs of '*Mute Melody to P*', Christine Kettaneh, 2013.

Figure 7 *Mute Melody to C, Mute Melody to P dot, Mute Melody to G*, Christine Kettaneh, 2013, laser-engraving on plywood, 20×20 cm each, ed. 2/2.

Figure 8 *Bags of 'unobsessivenesses'*, part of Mute Melodies project, Christine Kettaneh, 2013, bags of metal filings, Exposure 2013, Beirut Art Center, image courtesy of Roland Ragi.

Figure 9 *time cutting time*, part of *Mute Melodies* project, Christine Kettaneh, 2013, acrylic pieces and artist book, Exposure 2013, Beirut Art Center.

Figure 3 *EMERGE*, Christine Kettaneh, 2016, cold press bright paper, ed. 1/4, 24×32 cm.

Figure 10 *SMELL ME*, Christine Kettaneh, 2016, cold press bright paper, ed. 1/4, 24×32 cm.

Figure 11 Art Installation (artist book, rotating sugar ball & box of sugar letters) part of *Smell me, Touch me, Kiss me* project, Christine Kettaneh, 2017.

Figure 12 *Comma, Semi colon1, & Semi colon2*, Christine Kettaneh, 2016, cold press bright paper, ed. 1/4, 18×24 cm each.

Figure 4 Designs of '*How do you Carry Life?*,' Christine Kettaneh, 2016.

Figure 13 *Hayat old ad*, 40×14 cm, *Hayat old stamp*, 40×53 cm, *How do you carry life?*, 40×48 cm, cold press bright paper, ed. 3/4, Christine Kettaneh Solo Show 2018, Gagliardi e Domke, Turin.

Figure 14 *Proof that there is life in language and language in life*, part *of Hayat* project, paint on soap, 6.5×6.5×4.5 cm each, ed. 3/4, Christine Kettaneh Solo Show 2018, Gagliardi e Domke, Turin.

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