

# Engagement ارتباط Beziehung herstellen

By Rina Khatib



Dreamers Among the Rubble

Artist: Ali Al- Jabali

## Engaged Realities

In this photograph from the “Dreamers Among the Rubble” exhibition by artist Ali Al-Jabali, dating back to 2019, we witness portraits and faces that reflect the destruction experienced by Palestinians during the 2014 war on Gaza. The open-air exhibition is situated on the remains of a bombed building, vulnerable to potential collapse or further bombings.

The artist highlights a profound message that everything in Gaza, including art, is constantly under threat and is a target. The underlying idea is that in an environment where destruction is a constant possibility, there is no truly secure space, not even an already bombed building.

This photograph has profoundly influenced my perspective on engagement and how I delve into its understanding. It prompts me to reflect on the authentic essence of engagement. Is its definition fixed? or does its interpretation remain subjective? Varying among individuals, backgrounds, and nationalities?

During my brief exploration of the term I've selected, which is "engagement" throughout the SAWA program and after indulging in discussions, I endeavored to pinpoint its precise meaning in Arabic. The literal translation is "ارتباط", which can be understood as a connection or link. It could also be interpreted as "مشاركة", which literally translates to participation but strays significantly from the subtle meaning of engagement. Another possible translation is "انخراط", which is more closely associated with putting in an effort, although engagement does indeed involve effort, yet this is not what it actually means. I struggled to identify a single Arabic word that perfectly captures the essence of engagement, and I believe it is "الانغماس", which means the act of casual interaction or spontaneous coming together, resulting in an impact that might not be immediately seen.

Embarking on a journey to explore the profound essence of engagement was a transformative experience, accompanied by real-life experiences magnified by my encounters in numerous exhibitions and museums. These visits sparked internal reflection on the diverse ways one can be engaged. For instance, the lasting healing experience etched into my memory occurred while immersed in the installation *Hum II* by Hajra Waheed, during the Sharjah Biennale 2023. It was an engagement so profound that it could only be fully grasped while seated within the installation.

Conversely, leading a tour through the Palestinian Museum’s exhibition “A People by the Sea: Narratives from the Palestinian Coast” revealed another aspect of engagement. The emotionally powerful narrative behind Amir Zoubi’s artwork “Cold Floors”, displaying tile fragments from the destroyed houses in Jaffa in 1948, moved some people to tears when shared verbally during the tour. However, surprisingly, the written text did not generate a similar level of engagement. This paradoxical experience unfolded at the Palestinian Museum, emphasizing that engagement manifests in diverse and unexpected ways.

As the journey of exploration continues, we confront the harsh realities of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. During this war, unsung heroes emerge, freelance reporters, influencers turned reporters, often without experience in official news agencies, navigating the chaos with an unfiltered lens. Their narratives, delivered with a profound impact, possess an authenticity that resonates more deeply than the polished reports. These individuals transcend the role of mere narrators; they are integral threads woven into the fabric of our lives.

As they skillfully craft stories that go beyond conventional news headlines, offering touching glimpses into a reality that knows no borders, their voices become a symphony of connection in our daily existence. The unease we experience in their absence underscores their pivotal role in bringing the unvarnished human side of the struggle directly into our homes.

This reflection leads us to a compelling assumption: just as these reporters and influencers immerse us in the stark realities of Gaza, museums, when closely connected to the lived experiences of people, possess the transformative power to evoke a similarly deep engagement. The parallels between the unfiltered narratives from Gaza and the potential for museums to bridge the gap between art and reality highlight the profound impact that authenticity and connection can have on our understanding of the world.

In conclusion, the journey proved fulfilling, yet it left me pondering: Can I find engagement in realms beyond the harsh reality of Palestine? Is engagement, perhaps, intricately tied to specific contexts? When engagement is desired as an outcome in the museum context, what role does the storyteller play, and what specific elements does the storyteller aim to evoke engagement with?

Nevertheless, once certainty emerges – engagement is a personal symphony, a diverse range of connections weaving individuals together in shared experiences, irrespective of the surroundings. As we traverse this expansive spectrum, we unearth its transformative potency, recognizing it not as a confined concept but as a dynamic force intricately woven into the fabric of everyday interactions. Amongst struggle, these storytellers everywhere emerge as treasured voices, their absence keenly felt and their presence serving as a comforting reminder of our shared humanity.