



Maia Gattás and Francisca Khamis Giacomani met in the West Bank in 2019, where Francisca was conducting a residency in Birzeit and Maia was traveling to film scenes for her documentary *Viento del este* (2023). In this publication, they commit to a letter exchange, wherein they aim to engage in a dialogue that addresses various memories surrounding water in the territory of occupied Palestine.

To carry out this initiative, they draw from heterogeneous archives linked to this territory: historical documents; excerpts from films, such as *Port of Memory* (2009) by Kamal Aljafari, and *The Salt of This Sea* (2008) by Annemarie Jacir; personal archives, which encompass memories of their families in diaspora in the form of letters, photographs, and oral history narratives, among others; and their own records from their travels through Palestine.

They propose to establish a correspondence format that facilitates a process of visual and textual exchange. In this approach, correspondence is not only conceived as an archival technique but also as a tool for engaging in active dialogue with the personal archive, enriched by interaction with memory, exchange with the other, and connection with other sources.

## Letter 1: The Movies

25 January, 2024, Bariloche, Argentina

My friend,

I haven't seen you since 2019. I have a memory that on the day of our farewell in Al-Manara Square in Ramallah, you made me taste a new fruit. I don't remember its name, it was pink and prickly on the outside and white and soft on the inside. You were doing a residency in Birzeit, working with your great aunt Labibe's stories. I think I still have a file with her voice on some external disk from that time.

I also remember going together to the Dead Sea, hitchhiking our way there. I think we hesitated for a long time figuring out whether that piece of beach we went to was a Palestinian or an Israeli area. The images and sounds I filmed that afternoon are today at the end of *Viento del este*, my film. There I say: "Palestine has three seas: the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Dead Sea." In a previous version of the voice-over I said: "had three seas" instead of "has," but it seemed more in line with my political position to be able to say that they still belong to it.

When I screened my film in London in October, a girl in the audience told me that this



ending was in tune with the song that is currently being sung in Gaza demonstrations around the world: “From the river to the sea Palestine will be free,” a phrase that has caused so much controversy and censorship. Here, in Argentina, we don’t sing that in the marches for Palestine, so I didn’t know it, but I was very happy to know that my documentary- which was the result of many years of work and was released in 2023 - echoed with the present.

The first movie I saw about Palestine was in or around 2012; its name is *The Salt of this Sea*. At that time I knew nothing about the country of my ancestors, and I went to see the movie looking for information. Everything was confusing and cryptic to me. I remember that Soraya, the main character, wanted to reach the sea and for that she had to enter Israel illegally with Emad, her Palestinian friend. Annemarie Jacir, the film’s director, generously gave me a fragment of her film to become a part of mine. It is the scene in which Soraya enters the waters of the Mediterranean, in the area of Jaffa, the city where her grandparents’ house used to be. She swims in the sea but at the same time cannot enjoy it because she is angry.





Years later, at a documentary festival in Buenos Aires, I met the Palestinian filmmaker Kamal Aljafari. In his film *Port of Memory* (2010) there also appears a desire and nostalgia for lost water. He also filmed in Jaffa, a place that became a symbol of dispossession and exile for Palestinians.



*There is a place beyond the sea*



Aljafari takes a fragment from the Israeli musical *Kazablan* (1974), where the song *Yesh Makom* (*There is a place*), performed by Yehoran Ga 'om, appears. In that scene the protagonist finds himself trapped between the images of the sea of the past and that of the present. The form of temporal palimpsest always seemed to me to be the fairest way to experience time—perhaps because I read too much Walter Benjamin! When I met him, Aljafari told me something that I treasure and that I will never forget: he told me that he often went to the shore of the Mediterranean Sea to collect debris and tiles from the Palestinian houses demolished by the state of Israel. He liked to keep those remains, those fragmentary material memories that the tidal movements brought back.

From Maia

## Letter 2: To See the Sea

22 January, 2024, Concón, Chile

*Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Because I don't know at what time of day you'll read this. Time passes, but what makes sense of humanity remains the same.*

That's how John Berger begins his reading of *Letter from Gaza* (1956) by Ghassan Kanafani.

I started writing you this letter sitting in front of the sea in Concón. I've always wanted the sea to be part of my landscape, but unfortunately, I was born and raised in Santiago. And the truth is, I'm not aware of when was the first time I saw the sea. How do you feel about something you've never seen? A conch shell in your ear to imagine together what we could never touch.

All this water in front of me and behind me are the wildfires that don't stop growing. I am thinking about the power of water. A stream of water falls from the ravine next to the building, the only space where they can't build. That stream of water prevents real-estate companies from destroying that land; that same stream of water could right now be preventing all those houses from burning in Valparaíso.



I think of water as the archive, as that stream that passes and changes the territory for those who come to inhabit it afterwards.

It's been five years since we met in Palestine, where I arrived eleven years ago for the first time, driven by those stories I heard so much about a territory that didn't feel like I belonged to. My first trip was guided mainly by two photos: The first one, where my relatives appear sitting at what seems to be a lunch in the field, in Al Makhroun. The second, a photo of my grandfather standing on the wall in Haifa next to another person, facing one of Palestine's three seas.





The first time I went to Palestine was in 2014. I crossed through Jordan where I spent about eight hours waiting to be allowed to cross. They asked me everything, in every possible way. At first with some patience and in the end with quite some violence. That's when they recognized me as Palestinian and when for the first time I felt I *belonged there*.

I haven't seen *Salt of This Sea*, but your story about Soraya makes me think of María, during my stay in Beit Jala at my relatives' house. I didn't know them before, but they welcomed me as one of their own daughters. They set up a bed for me next to María's, my younger cousin. At that time she was 18 and had never seen the sea. When I arrived, she told me she had been waiting for a few months for her permit to cross. After a week, the permit arrived, so we planned a trip to Tel Aviv. We crossed by bus, arrived at the station with a first mission: to buy a swimsuit for María. I came with the radical idea of not leaving a single penny there, but life is different when it actually happens. We found a place at the station, she picked out



a couple of swimsuits and went into the fitting room. Then the salesman asked me where I was from and I said Chile and my cousin said Colombia—where part of her family lives today. After a few minutes of silence, I couldn't help but say, "But we're also Palestinians." His expression changed and he started shouting at us saying he would shoot Palestinians. We grabbed our things and ran out of there.

We went to the beach without swimsuits, and this first visit to the sea with a bitter taste made me understand that life in diaspora forms an identity that doesn't always fit with those who still live there. Experiencing the sounds of the sea from a conch shell doesn't always make you understand the dangers of the swells.



Sobhi al-Zobaidi', *About the Sea*, 2007, still. Available from: <https://vimeo.com/94484957>





Returning to Kanafani, the phrase he sends so emphatically to Mustafa in *Letter from Gaza* turns me around: “No, I’ll stay here, and I won’t ever leave.”

*Maia querida*, after reading your letter, I kept thinking about the palimpsest and just yesterday a friend shared a quote from Susan Sontag that made me remember you: “Time exists in order that everything doesn’t happen all at once... and space exists so that everything doesn’t happen to you.”

There are many things left for me to say, more streams of water for the next letters.

Sending you a hug, amiga

Francisca

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## **Maia Gattás Vargas**

Visual artist, audiovisual creator, lecturer, and researcher.

PhD in Arts. Specialized in Latin American Contemporary Art (Universidad Nacional de La Plata).

She graduated with a degree in Communication Sciences and as a secondary and tertiary education professor (UBA).

She works as a postdoctoral fellow at CONICET and as a professor of Media and Culture Theories at Universidad de Buenos Aires.

She is currently developing her research project *Indagaciones atmosféricas* at the Medialab de Matadero, Madrid (2021-2025).

In 2022, she published her first artist book *Diario de exploración al territorio del color*, edited by Biblioteca Popular Astra de Comodoro Rivadavia.

Her first feature-length documentary *Viento del este* (*East wind*) premiered nationally in



August 2023 at the Doc Buenos Aires Festival and internationally at the Jihlava IDFF in the Czech Republic, where it won the Original Approach award.

She has exhibited her visual and audiovisual works in different provinces of Argentina (Río Negro, Buenos Aires, Tierra del Fuego, Córdoba, Santa Fé and Neuquén), and in countries such as Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, Canadá, and the Czech Republic.

She has been awarded the following prizes: Bienal de Arte Joven de Buenos Aires, 2019; Beca de Creación del Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2022. Becar Cultura of the National Ministry of Culture, to attend the IV Encuentro Iberoamericano de Trabajo, Arte y Economía at the gallery Arte Actual of FLACSO, Quito, Ecuador. 2016.

Her artistic work explores the relationships between images, science, landscape, nature, and colonial history. She creates archival installations combining video, collage, photographs, documents, and writing.

### **Francisca Khamis Giacoman**

Francisca Khamis Giacoman is a visual artist and designer based in Amsterdam. Through performances, installations, and audiovisual works, she recalls stories of migration and unfolds them at the boundaries of fiction and materiality. Her research touches upon language, knowledge production, and accessibility through narrative circulation, focusing on different ways of (re)membering ourselves and others.

Actively involved in self-organized projects, Francisca co-founded Museo del Perro \* Honden Museum in Amsterdam (2023); Ediciones Rocas Shop Cooperative Publishing House in Santiago (2017-2022); C.I.A (Centro de Investigación Artístico) in Santiago (2013-2015); and Espacio Estamos Bien, an art cooperative in Amsterdam that curates gatherings, publications, and exhibitions. Currently, she leads the development of a support initiative for non-European students at Sandberg Instituut and Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam.

She has exhibited at Rozenstraat, Amsterdam; Extracity, Antwerp; Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam; Kunstverein, Amsterdam; PuntWG, Amsterdam; Stroom, The Hague; Stadium, Berlin; Bibliotek, London; and Gold+ Beton, Cologne, among others.