آثار الیوتوبیا

إشراف: أنطونیا كارفر

TRACES OF UTOPIA

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"Traces of Utopia" is an exhibition curated by students and faculty participating in the long-term collaboration between AUB Art Galleries/FAAH, and the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts (HGB). The exchange, which is titled "Beyond Orientalism(s)," is funded by the German Academic Service Exchange (DAAD) and was initiated in order to facilitate critical discussion and exchange between students and faculty in the Art History and Curating program at AUB and the Culture of Curating program in Leipzig (HGB). The exhibition "Traces of Utopia," which constitutes Chapter One of this collaboration, was funded by CASAR (Center for American Studies and Research). The following Curatorial Statement was written by students enrolled in the spring semester curatorial courses AHIS-249K and AHIS-385A.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

English	Arabic
Identity	هوية
Return	عودة
Science fiction	الخيال العلمي
Memory	ذاكرة
Modernity, Nahda, Pan-arabism	الحداثة، النهضة، العروبة
Materiality and Immateriality, Contingency, Annihilation	المادية وغير المادية، الطوارئ، الإبادة
Mundane, Rupture, Absurdity	الدنيوية، التمزق، العبثية
Becoming, Liminality	تصبح، الحدية
Fantasy, Virtual	خيالي، افتراضي
Presence and Absence	الحضور والغياب

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Tell me a story of what you cannot tell

How strange it is to ask one of utopia. Where does such a question leave you?

أخبرني قصة عما ما لا يمكنك أن تبوح به

كم هو أمر غريب أن تطرح أسئلة عن اليوتوبيا. أين يمكن أن يتركنا مثل هذا السؤال؟

Rage and Nightmares

Sudden rupture. Hesitating reflection. Impetuous transformation. Tentative exchange.

Night terrors have returned from my childhood, the deafening roars inside. Hypnotic renderings of the otherwise, of things not right, and of the hunger.

الغضب والكوابيس

التصدع المفاجئ. تأمل حائر، التحوّل الأرعن. التبادل المؤقت.

عاد مجدّدا رعب الليالي الذي كنتُ أعانيه في طفولتي، مصحوبا بصرخات داخلية تصم الآذان. والأداءات الغيبوبية لما هو آخر، لأشياء ليست صحيحة، لما هو مُسبِّب للجوع.

Something wider than the sky, carry it in my arms

The day doesn't hold much promise, we wrestle a new sensorial world. From spaces of disorder, a cloud of dust rises.

How does one begin to describe utopia? Larger than one's self, larger than the language of our fables. Does it leave hints in what yanks at us from the past or the not-yet begun? We only grasp the traces it leaves in the wake of our stories.

شيء أشد اتساعا من السماء، أحمله بين يدّي

لا يشي هذا اليوم بأي أمل، إننا نصارع العالم الحسي الجديد. ومن فضاءات فوضوية تنبعث غيمة من الغبار.

من أي يمكن للفرد أن يبدأ بوصف اليوتوبيا؟ إنها تتجاوز الفرد، إنها تتفوّق على لغة القصص الخرافية. هل تترك أية إشارات عما ينتزعنا من الماضي، أو متى يبدأ ما لم يئن أوانه بعد؟ إننا ندرك مجرد آثار أن الوعي باليوتوبيا يرتحل حينما تستفيق قصصنا.

Barzakh

Where can these traces of utopia be located and felt and ingested? What closes off the potential for imagination? How can we perceive the in-between? Does the promise cut off movement elsewhere?

البرزخ

أين يمكن تحديد البقايا اليوتوبية والشعور بها وهضمها؟ ما هو الشيء الذي يغلق القدرة على التخيل؟ كيف بإمكاننا أن ندرك الفضاء البيني، وكيف يمكننا أن نفهم كلنا ما هو ممكن وما ليس كذلك؟ وهل توقُّع ما هو مختلف هو ما يعيق حركتنا نحن هناك؟

Natality

Looking at my hands, my body emerged before me. Only ever staring too close, it had always been blurry. I only catch glimpses in the mirror, through someone else's eyes. I create my body in my image.

الولادة

أنظر إلى يديّ، ينبثق جسدي أمام ناظريّ. وحينما أحدق بشدة، فإن ما أراه يكون على الدوام مشوّشاً. ما أراه فقط هو مجرد لمحات في المرآة، عبر عيون أشخاص آخرين. أنا أخلق جسدي على صورتي

Valleys of Thought

We can no longer simply work in arguments, dialogue or fixed utopias. Always in my dreams, beyond the present and visible, I hover slightly above the earth.

أودية الفكر

لم يعد بإمكاننا العمل ببساطة في مناقشات أو حوار أو في اليوتوبيات الساكنة. إنني أحوم فوق الأرض بقليل، ولكن في أحلامي بشكل دائم وبشكل يتجاوز الحاضر وما هو مرئي.

Eden

Children have more fun playing at someone else's home. What furnishes this space? How have the adults arranged it? Do the children even care? Will they come home?

It takes more than resolve to approach the beyond. Does it demand abandon or to hold tight?

عدن

يختبر الأطفال متعة أكبر أثناء اللعب في منزل الآخرين. ما هو الشيء الذي يمهد الأرضية لهذا الفضاء؟ كيف قام البالغون بتنظيم ذلك الفراغ؟ هل يكترث الأطفال أصلا؟ هل سيعودون إلى منزلهم؟

هناك حاجة إلى أكثر من الإرادة لمقاربة ما هو أبعد. هل يتطلب ذلك التخلي أو التشبّث أكبر؟

Return [...]

Tables are set, rooms furnished, knick-knacks arranged, photographs set forth

sharing a meal; the sounds of a kitchen filled with working hands; the elation of the taste of a garden tomato; the mystery of a rising dough; the sight of a carefully dressed table; the heat of soft bread; the storytelling when plates are empty; the mess when dinner is over.

But the childhood dekkaneh you used to buy snacks from has closed. What remains of the street where you learned to drive is a crater. Someone else sits in your chair.

We have a compulsion to repeat. Flows of thought and emotion disperse and regenerate without prompting.

العودة [...]

الطاولات هي منظومة، الغرف المفروشة، تنظيم مزركش، والصور التي تخبر عن وجبات تم تشاركها، صوت المطبخ حيث تعج فيه أصوات الأيدي العاملة، النشوة المتأتية عن نكهة حبة طماطم مزروعة في الحديقة، لغز رغيف منتفخ،

من تحت أي نهر يتدفق

يتبدى العالم نابضا بالحياة أسفل وجودنا. تحول لا يهدأ: هل من الممكن أبداً الملاحظة في الأوقات الرهيبة؟

الآفاق، الآماد الزرق، العتبة الواعدة، المتواجدة على الدوام واللاموجودة أبدا.

أودّ أن أقودك إلى المأوى، إلى حيث لم تكن هناك أبدا.

The World is Not Yet Finished

Out emerges an autopoietic process driven by the imagining, laboring, creating and producing being driven on by their pains, their hunger and their dreams of overcoming that hunger.

العالم ليس أمرا مكتملا بعد

العملية الشعرية التلقائية تولد عبر أفعال التخيّل والكدح والخلق والإنتاج، عملية يقودها الألم والجوع والأحلام المتعلقة بتجاوز ذلك الجوع.

منظر طاولة مرتبة بعناية، سخونة رغيف طري، إلقاء قصة حينما تكون الأطباق خاوية، الفوضى على إثر عشاء منتهٍ.

لكن دكانة الطفولة التي كنت معتادا على أن تشتري منها أصبحت مغلقة. ما تبقى من الشارع حيث كنت تتعلم القيادة مجرد حفرة. شخص آخر جالس في كرسيك.

نحن مجبرون على الإعادة. دفق الأفكار والمشاعر يتشتت ويعاد صياغته من دون استدعاء.

The Unsettling

Familiar understandings of reality are dislodged. A temporary annihilation, images appear, so different from what we have come to be familiar with. Are we not to look at it strangely, uncomfortable with the sense of something lost?

المُقلِق

يتم إزاحة الفهم المعتاد للحقيقة. إبادة مؤقتة، تتبدى الصور غاية في الاختلاف عما اعتدنا عليه. أليس من الواجب علينا أن ننظر إليها باستغراب، وعدم ارتياح، بإحساس الفقد والخسارة؟

Under which rivers flow

The world comes alive below our being. Ceaseless transformation: is it possible we only ever notice in dire times?

Horizons. Expanses of blue, a promising threshold, ever-present and never there.

I wanted to channel you home, where you have never been.

THE TRAGEDY OF "NO-PLACE": STATELESSNESS AND THE PARADOX OF PALESTINIAN UTOPIA

LIN DABBOUS

What happens to visions of utopia when a nation is constantly struggling against erasure and dispossession? What happens when the implanted memory becomes a critical apparatus to preserve identity? Is it possible to then imagine utopian futures without dwelling on collective memories of the past? When most Western utopian visions were rooted in the future, Arab utopian visions have been mostly preoccupied with how the past is remembered, and in such cases, the compulsion to reiterate is often amplified to maintain a connection with cultural and historical heritage.

In Etel Adnan's poem "Night" (2016), she writes: "Memory sews together events that hadn't previously met. It reshuffles the past and makes us aware that it is doing so".Adnan acknowledges that memories are not fixed or static but are constantly evolving and reshaping themselves over time. She also addresses the implanted part of the memory, a memory that is not formed from experiences one lived but is rather a product created by shared experiences of a generation, meant to be carried and preserved for the future, and sometimes reproduced. So, what happens when memory, as a source of nostalgia or longing for the past, informs and shapes utopia? And what happens when memory is used to justify or perpetuate existing power structures and inequalities?

Since the term "utopia" originated, it has come to stand for a tradition, mostly Western. It often means a "non-existent good place", or "no-place" located "outside history" (Levitas, 1979). In "The Future of

Nostalgia" (2001), Svetlana Boym suggests that the European notion of utopia as future-oriented perspective is rooted in the notion of progress and innovation mostly traced back to the Enlightenment. Certainly, the European colonial dream was part of the utopian vision of expansion and progress, ultimately leading to dominating other perspectives and memories. Thus, utopia could be seen as a justification of colonialism and the exploitation of other cultures and peoples. It is from utopian positions of universal reason that European societies saw themselves as being more advanced and enlightened than other cultures and thus believed that they had a responsibility to bring their ideas and values to other parts of the world. Thus, the "utopian" European dream becomes dystopic when it comes to the colonized lands.

All forms of memory, archival, communal, and hereditary, have heavily influenced Arabs' visions and utopias. In the post-colonial era, Arab artists and intellectuals used cultural nationalism to assert their identity and resist colonial domination. They sought to resist colonial powers in their art by coming up with a new visual language that drew on ancient cultural traditions and expressed their national identity and aspiration for the future. Egyptian artists drew on the rich visual language of the ancient Egyptian civilization to create a new aesthetic and viewed it as a source of national pride and cultural identity. Iraqi artists also resorted to the ancient Mesopotamian civilization, as well as ancient Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations, to feature abstract forms and symbols that referenced these cultures. Thus, the forging of a national identity was rooted in events related to the glorious past these lands have once witnessed. The point of departure to the future was not rooted in the present moment but in a distant past, and the new utopian visions were fueled by the dream of recapturing the past era of greatness and prosperity (Hill, 2022).

Then followed the tragedy, the 1948 Nakba, which tore apart experiences described by such concepts as "home," "belonging," and "identity." This catastrophe left thousands of Palestinians displaced into the unknown, into a "no-place", with nothing but memory and

collective tales to carry on notions of home. Living in permanent temporariness, the utopian "no place" is a dystopic setting for Palestinians. Facing displacement and occupation, the Palestinian utopia would be to leave this place of "no-place" and return home, or to regain the place. In this respect, the Palestinian notion of utopia is a complete reversal of the mainstream definition of this term. Since utopia is also rooted in a collective memory of Palestine as a place of beauty, abundance, and community, it also represents a powerful symbol of resistance against the forces of oppression. In this respect, Edward Said's critical reflection about the Palestinian house interior is very evocative.

> This compulsion to repeat is evident in the interiors of Palestinian houses of all classes...the same displays of affection and objects—replicas of the Mosque of Omar, plates inlaid with mother-of-pearl, tiny Palestinian flags... they authenticate and certify the fact that you are in a Palestinian home. But it is more than that. It is part of a larger pattern of repetition in which even I, supposedly liberated and secular, participate. We keep re-creating the interior—tables are set, rooms furnished, knick-knacks arranged, photographs set forth—but it inadvertently highlights and preserves the rift of break fundamental to our lives. (Said, 1985, p. 276)

Here Said invokes the intense urge for reiteration present in Palestinian societies, as if when one repeats the same collectively inherited narratives, he or she is proving their continuity and existence. He suggests that the repetition of objects and patterns in Palestinian homes is not just a means of creating a Palestinian identity, but it also reflects a larger pattern of repetition that is present in their lives. By repeatedly creating and re-creating their homes and personal spaces in the diaspora, Palestinians attempt to maintain a connection to their cultural and historical identity, but at the same time, they are reminded of the separation from their homeland that is at the root of their experience.

After the Nakba of 1948 and the subsequent loss of Palestinian land,

Palestinian artists faced the challenge of expressing their cultural identity through their art. Up until this present moment, Palestinian artists still turn to their cultural heritage, history, and traditions as a way to assert their identity and resist the forces of occupation. Many Palestinian artists have been affected by notions of nostalgia and by the dream of returning home. This aspect of Palestinian art has led me to raise the question of what happens to the visions of utopia when memory is annihilated. What happens when utopia is no longer rooted in nostalgia but instead uses future fiction for its manifestation? This is the point of departure of this curatorial project Traces of Utopia, to which this text also contributes. The selected artworks represent a rummage through the memory of various Palestinian artists across different points in time. In these artworks, there is no mention of occupation, war, or bloodshed. There are no references to Al Nakba or the displacement of thousands of people from their homes. But they all have attributes that have been almost always present in Palestinian art ever since the Modernist movement (by artists like Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, and others). Heritage symbols like typical dresses, and embroidery in addition to images of the olive harvest, old buildings, and dreamy vistas of Palestinian lands are present in all of them. When viewed together, they do represent a dialogue about a memory of an enchanting place, showing glimpses of home.

Sliman Mansour, born 1947, is a Palestinian artist whose career spans nearly five decades. His works frequently show the rootedness of Palestinian identity, with utopian thoughts of going home to discover relics of the past. Mansour's work conveys a deep sense of attachment to Palestine and the Palestinian people, while also expressing a vision of a future where they can live in peace and freedom. Through his use of symbols and metaphors in both of the selected artworks (Figure 1, Figure 2), he conveys the notion of return and utopic dreams of regaining Palestine back.

Figure 1. Sliman Anis Mansour, *The Daughter of Jerusalem,* 2013. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation).

Figure 2. Sliman Anis Mansour, *Untitled.* Triptych, 1978. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation).

As for Sophie Halaby (1905-1997), the watercolor I chose (Figure 3) depicts the environment of Jerusalem. It is her image of the city's environment as devoid of human presence – not even buildings – and focus instead on the natural elements of the Palestinian countryside. It also bears witness to a vanishing Palestinian environment, which has been immortalized and mythologized in the public imagination. The Palestinian landscape and the olive tree are part of the implanted memory that traverses generations. Vera Tamari's landscapes (figure 4) with the olive tree also invokes the Palestinian roots documenting historic areas that will be obliterated or overwhelmed by dominant colonial narratives.

These artworks call into question the time before the tragedy, displacement, and exile, a time when Palestine was an alluring dream, untainted by anything that might have hinted at its impending

Figure 3. Sophie Halaby, *Untitled.* Watercolor and pencil on paper. Date unknown. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation).

demise. These utopian visions are rooted in nostalgia and pose the topic of return, the reiteration of Palestinian motifs reasserts the cultural identity, but also hint at a futuristic past—a form of futurism that reproduces the lost past into the future. But is it possible to ever return? Can we return to a place we had left as the people we once were? Can we recreate it and still feel at home, or do we become alien to it, strangers, as though we never existed?

It is in the Jerusalem-born film maker, Larissa Sansour's works that questions of memory are articulated. By investigating the power
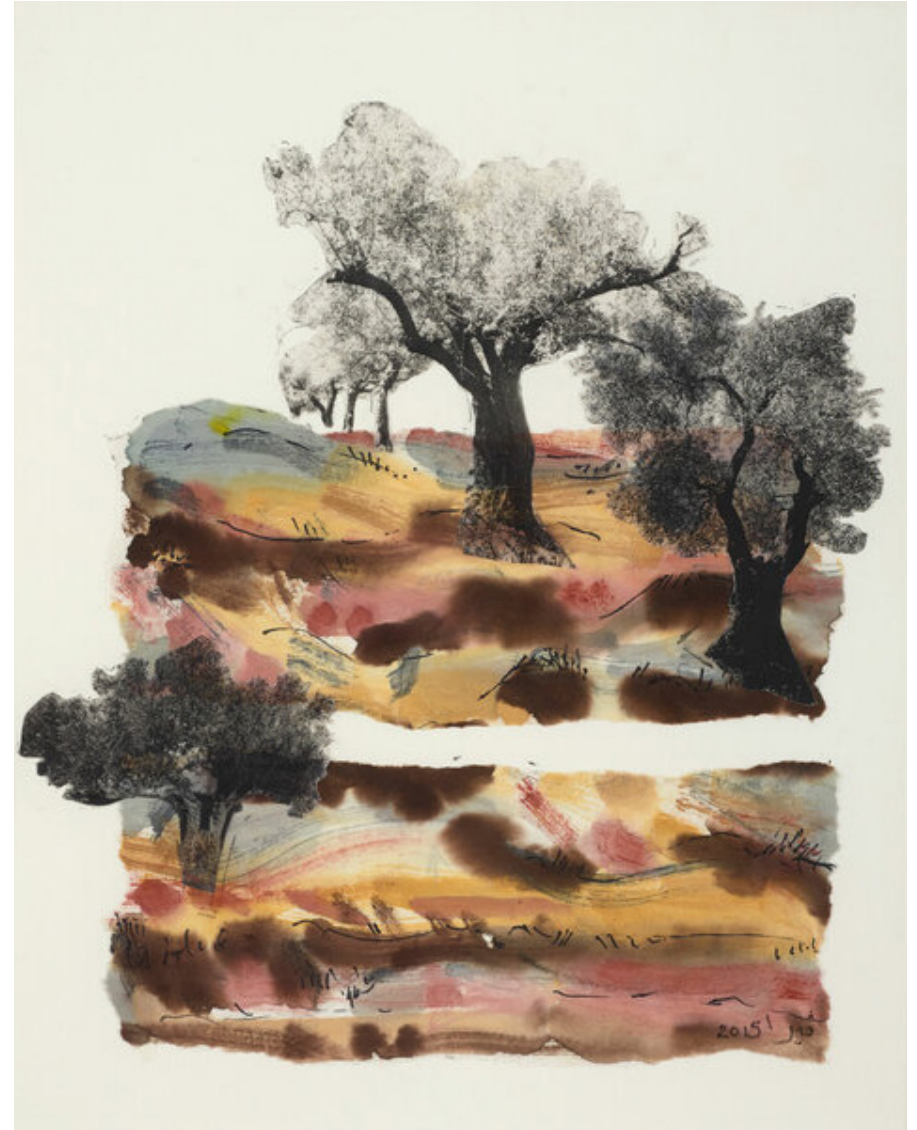

Figure 4. Vera Tamari, *New Olive Tree (2)*. Watercolor, 2015. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation).

of myth and storytelling to build collective memory and cultural identity, Larissa Sansour's film "In the Future, They Ate From the Finest Porcelain" (2016) offers a new take on the concept of utopia in Palestine (Shabibi, 2023). The film is set in a future time when there is no longer a state of Palestine, and the Palestinian people are fighting to regain their history and cultural heritage. A vision that counters the notion of return to the fairy tale setting. The protagonist is a member of a clandestine resistance organization aiming to preserve Palestinian memory by fabricating a complex narrative about the existence of an ancient Palestinian civilization that once ruled the region. Ultimately, the film offers a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on the concept of utopia and Palestine, demonstrating how history can be manipulated to fit certain narratives and how mythology can be exploited to reject cultural heritage and legal rights. The piece's open-ended conclusion finally encourages the viewer to consider where we are going and what we expect when we talk about "return." Sansour's movie mocks the Western (colonial) science of archaeology by criticizing scientific research procedures as well as national historical narratives, highlighting the ways in which these myths are constructed by a range of players. As a result, a disturbingly dystopian utopia has been created. The film targets notions of utopia by presenting a

dystopian vision of the future in which the only way to reclaim power is by constructing a fictional past. The porcelain fragments represent a utopian vision of a perfect civilization that never truly existed.

Viewing these artworks that belong to a different generation invites us to imagine ourselves beyond the boundaries and limitations drawn by colonialism. We aim to move away from the "archive fever" as historian Beshara Doumani (2009) calls it and react toward the oversaturation of archival information mobilized by the nostalgia for a fixed past as well as a utopian, nationalist-dominated vision of Palestine before the Nakba of 1948, which is often taken for granted and as such it closes off the potential for imagination. As carriers of an implanted memory, it makes one doubt if the new world can disentangle itself from the old and create a future, a house, and the memories associated with it. At the same time, the original memory's owner claims that myths, legends, and fictions that have nothing to do with reality are the foundation of entire nations, becoming a critical apparatus to preserve identity.

Figure 5. Video still from Larissa Sansour's *In the Future They Ate From the Finest Porcelain, (2015).* (Used with permission from the artist).

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IMAGINATION AND BARZAKH

RETAJ DARWISH

Al-Khayäl: The imagination; in Sufi writings, an order of reality that lies between the spiritual and the material; simultaneously, a faculty that perceives this reality. In everyday discourse sometimes equated with fantasy (*wahm*).

Barzakh: An intermediary realm, an isthmus; in the Qur´an, the dividing line between fresh and salt water, as well as the thin path that lies between paradise and hell; in everyday language, generally, the space in which the spirits of the dead dwell until Judgment Day; in Sufi discourses the in-between of the imaginary world, the space in which encounters with the Prophet happen (Mittermaier, 2010).

In Sufi and mystical traditions, Barzakh stands for the visible world between the realm of non-material, simple meanings and that of material objects. To Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, Barzakh is akin to the "world of ideas"; it is an intermediate world between the "celestial" and the "material" that shares characteristics with both and is a filter through which spiritual beings enter the material world (Karbassian, 2017).

The imagination is often associated with fantasy as a mimetic representation that is essentially unreal and limited within the psychological dimension of the atomized subject. The imagination is a more expansive space of potential. In her anthropological study of dreams, Amira Mittermaier uses the conception of the imagination by referring to "an intermediary realm between the spiritual and the material, the Divine and the human, the dreamer and multiple Others, presence and absence," (Mittermaier, 2010, p. 3).

To Ibn Al-Arab (d. 1240), the imagination "is the universe's mode of self-disclosure". It is a metaphysical realm, a mode of sight and

space that is rich with knowledge. The dream is an imaginal reality manifested in both the objective and subjective realms of existence (*wujūd*) (Moris, 2021). Through these realms one can tune into the cosmos, into the material and immaterial. This faculty of imagination is what makes the dream possible, but it is also a way to reach outward. Michel Foucault emphasizes a distinction between the image and the imagination. Foucault writes that "the image mimes the presence of Peter; the imagination goes forth to encounter him," (Foucault, 1986, p. 71). If the image is an unreal mimetic representation, the imagination is something that lies further away. The imagination is not simply a subjective fantasy but is seen as a way of engaging with and accessing different dimensions of reality. To encounter not only implies a deeper experience but also an outwardness. In such a way, rituals and social practices such as dream interpretation are valuable places of insight into the social and political realms.

This brings us to the notion of "Barzakh". The term "Barzakh" is central for understanding the connection between imagination and dreams. The imagination occupies an intermediary position, between one thing and another. It is both a space and the faculty of the mind that allows access to it. To elaborate, one of Mittermaier's interlocutors Shaykh Qusi gives the example: "If you imagine a friend, you can bring him into presence, even if he's not here. You have to use your imagination. You have to imagine the Prophet and the Prophet's companions. You imagine what they were like and what it was like to live at their time. Then, through your imagination, you make them real. They're around you." (Mittermaier, 2010, p. 18). The Prophets are simultaneously there and not, present and absent, the imagination allows access to them. It is precisely this presence and absence inherent to the space of imagination, one that "defies the either/or closure", which makes the imagination inherently a Barzakh.

The Barzakh is a space where one is capable of accessing to gain insight both materially and immaterially. Perhaps one way to think of it is through the Deleuzian conception of the real, one that is occupied by the virtual and the actual. The actual is "what exists," whilst the

virtual is what allows for the emergence of the actual. Even within this framework lies a greater meshwork of materiality and immateriality, which Laura Marks poses as infinitely enfolding and unfolding. It is the virtual that is of particular importance to the Barzakh (Marks, 2013). It is both imperceptible, predicated on an absence (individual experiential knowledge, semiotics, negation of presence), as well as being materially present at any given moment. In this way, the virtual is itself the visible world between the realm of non-material, simple meanings and that of material objects, akin to the Barzakh. By using the imagination or the dreams, we are capable of tapping in to the virtual, its immaterial absence and material presence, and actualizing it in the process.

The imagination, dreams, and the Barzakh all then operate through a logic that encompasses intermediaries, materiality, and immateriality. Predicated on an absence and presence, the Barzakh is a space between spaces that allows for the realization and actualization of political and social realities that exist here and elsewhere.

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IN DISTANT ORBIT

AMANDA EL BITAR

[The two astronauts move away with their devices… The third remains motionless… Soon, faint colored lights surround him… Soft, dreamy music flutters around him… Then the sound of voices floating around him… Quiet, melodious, and gentle.]

[…] VOICE 1: he senses us.

[…] VOICE 1: he knows us but cannot see us.

VOICE 3: something in him sees us.

"Poet on the Moon" by Tawfiq al-Hakim p. 99

Questions about utopia strike us so casually, as if a void does not stretch before us at the enquiry, as we are asked to describe what we have not lived yet. They demand of us answers to when and where, neglecting a crucial and arguably more interesting matter of "how." Such questions assume the existence of a utopia that is already complete and finished, simply awaiting our arrival. Turning to the term "utopia" itself, derived from the Greek root *ou* 'not' and topos 'place', it allows us to think of utopia as "not space". Can we not, instead, challenge ourselves to conceive of utopia beyond its spatial implications? Is it a destination to be reached, or rather something that we must cultivate?

In this pursuit of utopia, stories lift our gaze upwards, towards the heavens, where the moon glows distant and enigmatic, adorned with promises of an ideal life made barely secure by its bound orbit of the earth. It was in the pages of Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim's (1898-1987) " مجلس العدل " (*Majles al-'Adl*, Council of Justice, 1972) that

I happened upon one such projection of a lunar utopia – the story of a poet determined to embark on a space expedition. In this book, a play titled " شاعر على القمر " (*Sha'ir 'ala-l-Qamar*, Poet on the Moon, 1972) serves as a glimpse into a utopian vision that exists solely within the realm of the written word. This vision had never been actualized in the form of a staged performance, remaining forever relegated to the printed page, in tension with content made impossible to recreate in sensuous form. Yet it is in these tensions, between the utopia implied and the boundaries of articulation, that offer a provocative framework for reconsidering the very notion of utopia itself. Allow us to let go momentarily of the fables which hide utopia in a destination to be conquered, how can we envision the world otherwise?

Al-Hakim tells us of inhabitants on the moon, "creatures invisible to the human eye", whose presence goes undetectable by the scientists on the space crew but sensed somehow by the poet. This sense however cannot be reduced to conventional modes of sensory apprehension. These inhabitants, first referred to as "voices", possess an otherworldly character. Described as faint light and soft sound, their true state markedly lacks a visual form, at least one perceptible to the human eye. Delicate and inconcrete, they are primarily detected through feeling, as the voices claim *'iinahu "yahisu" bina*, "he "feels" – "senses" – us. To the imagination of the poet, and to my imagination as the reader, the phenomenon of voices remains elusive and opaque. Nonetheless, curiosity and desire remain an overwhelming urge even before the threat of the unfathomable. Could it be so easy, to place such faith in the faculties of our human mind?

VOICE 1: He wants to see us…

VOICE 2: How do we manifest ourselves before him?

VOICE 3: Without driving him to madness…

"Poet on the Moon" p. 101

The experience of encountering the ideal, the divine, is often shrouded in the veil of madness, a descent into a realm beyond human comprehension. To truly behold the ineffable, is to challenge the very limits of our human constraints, to be annihilated. We are led to painful consequences, a blinding realization that we are unable to fully comprehend what we seek. Even then, this encounter is one that is fervently desired and sought after, for it promises a glimpse into a realm beyond the mundane, a taste of the sublime. Annihilation is no longer understood as an end.

The voices know this. They decide to reveal themselves as كائنات (Ka'enat). In the face of a utopian imaginary marked by intangibility, I cannot help but linger on the choice of words. The term كائن (Ka'en) bears an array of meanings along the lines of "creature", "entity", or "organism". What is important to recognize is the etymology of the word كائن (Ka'en), leading back to the root verb كان (kaana), denoting the "act of being" or "existing". This fundamental verb alludes to a sense of existence that is perpetual, constant and infinite, rather than a singular event that has occurred in time. Thus, while كائن (Ka'en) can and has been employed to describe a fixed state of being, its verb root inherently implicates the notion of "becoming"—the process or action that actualizes the state of being.

Beyond these semantics, which offer hints regarding the nature of this lunar utopia, other frustrations are echoed in the language of al-Hakim—the omniscient narrator appearing in the parantheses throughout the text. The account of the poet remains devoid of definitive description of the lunar creatures, the narrator does not fill the gaps, even when this obscure encounter now gains a new account, that of the creatures themselves.

> (... the space around the motionless poet fills with creatures in gentle human form, neither male nor female. They surround him in a kind of dance)
>
> "Poet on the Moon" p. 101

This new account, starkly unified, is resolute in emphasizing the totality of their nature and the moon. They speak of wholeness which resists the constructed disparities of sex, gender, space and time. They are fluid and uncontainable. Birth and death, beginnings and ends, dissolve in their utopia, as they come to describe themselves as "energies of thought and emotion [...] dispersed and regenerated spontaneously." A celestial dance before the motionless human, we are brought to imagine a restless utopia, a transformative process. The question which emerges is no longer where to move, but how to move - how to dance with the dynamism of such a utopian state.

One essential condition of the utopia becomes the impossibility to realize it. The poet, entrenched in his human limitations, cannot experience the moon creatures in their totality at the moment of their encounter, for he is not yet ready. As this lunar utopia propels towards a promising future, the poet assumes a site of possibility, albeit an eternal one, given the unattainability of what is strived for. On the pages of "Poet on the Moon" lies yet another site of possibility: a script unrealized on stage. The very nature of a theatrical script is intrinsically incomplete, always pending performance. Yet how can a utopia "ungraspable by the human eye" take form in visual production complete with actors, props, and stage sets? Like the poet, the script is cast into a ceaseless state of contingency. In a liminality between potentiality and actuality, the script takes on a perpetual state of becoming, its content open to transformation with every reading, always moving towards the horizon, the stage, but never truly arriving.

This tale strikes so differently from those that make their way to us from colonial lips. Their ideals, so firmly rooted in triumphant culmination, construct a utopia so definitive, nothing more than a destination to be conquered with an air of arrogance. A utopia so visible, fixed and unyielding, feeds the appetite to collect, quantify, and categorize all that stretches before the colonial gaze. The room for contingency is stifled, alternative promises dare not to rear their heads.

These moon creatures, which I have read and written much about yet do not come close to understanding more convincingly, are something different altogether. Never static, they evade the gaze that seeks to capture them, to impose upon them finality. They refuse to fall victim to such endings, to any ending, and instead reside in a fluid conception of utopia, embraced by ambiguity and becoming. In the face of this subversion, the colonial desires are rendered powerless. The moon creatures fall not only invisible to the scientist and their devices of data collection, but entirely illegible to the human mind. They remain, always, forever beyond the attempts at categorization and representation. The lunar utopia refuses to take form before the utopian projects which seek to bend it to its will.

Encounters of utopia then become ones which open up the constant opportunity for contingency and transformation. Utopia is not entirely elsewhere or another time but meets us in its fragments carried around us like seeds in the wind—its traces are carried in our tales. It lies in the ephemeral encounters on earth, in the "murmur of the bees wings over orange blossoms" or "the butterflies around the light". It becomes the moment in which we are allowed to believe transformation is not only possible, but constant and surrounding us. Utopia brings us to find the world alive beneath our being, disallowing us to settle. Whether a result of madness or instinct, we are moved to create worlds, creatures, gods so different from us, but fundamentally in our image. The moon in all its distant projection remains tethered to the earth, only barely out of reach.

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DOCUMENT THE PRESENT BY DYSTOPIAN SPECULATIVE FUTURES:

A CONVERSATION WITH PANOS APRAHAMIAN

MILENA GEHRT

Panos Aprahamian, *Odorless Blue Flowers Awake Prematurely,* 2021. Video still. (Used with permission from the artist).

How do utopian ideas inform our understanding of the future? What happens when utopian visions turn negative? When the future no longer holds the promise of a better world, what does the present look like? Is utopia indeed a "non-place," as some of its most common historical definitions indicate, or as proposed more recently by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in his book *Non-places* (1992) in reference to space that lacks social or cultural identity, spaces characterized by anonymity, uniformity, and interchangeability, spaces that become increasingly prevalent in the contemporary world due to globalized, technologically mediated communication and transportation? Have we already found ourselves stranded in this *non-place*? When does reality become a dystopia or a *non-place*?

These are just some of the questions that audiovisual artist Panos Aprahamian explores in his work, which blends science-fiction documentary with historical realities. His artwork, *Odorless Blue Flowers Awake Prematurely* (2021), offers a glimpse into a dystopian future that has already come to pass. The video draws on his personal experiences in Lebanon, including the aftermath of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion. Through his imagery exploration of the city›s peripheral areas, Aprahamian allocates a spatial dimension and representation to the horrors of this dystopian moment, horrors which exists outside of time and carries all temporalities within it. In this interview, conducted via e-mail in March 2023, Aprahamian discusses how science-fiction documentary opens up new possibilities for understanding the present through the past and future.

Milena Gehrt: Your academic background includes studying Audio Visual Arts at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in 2008 and obtaining a master's degree in Documentary Film in London seven years later. How has this academic journey impacted your work and shaped your artistic practice? Specifically, how has your engagement with local discourses and themes in Lebanon informed your work, and has your perception of these themes changed since studying in London?

Panos Aprahamian: My studies at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts were my introduction to filmmaking and adjacent audiovisual practices. The program was geared towards narrative fiction, with the documentary tradition limited to its expository form and television format. My more expanded documentary education came from attending the events of the Beirut-based Metropolis Cinema's and its yearly festivals *Écrans du Réel*. It was in here that I learned from the documentary methods used by local contemporary media artists. My studies in London opened the gates further to other forms, genres, and schools of the documentary cinematic tradition. During my studies at the London College of Communication, this thought process that was already on its way culminated in coming to terms with the documentary as an umbrella term covering a wide range of amorphous and exciting practices that serve as the other side of the coin to experimental cinema. The way documentaries are constructed and the process of how form and content feed into each other is sort of similar. This happens in narrative fiction cinema as well, but normally not through the same process of back and forth as the film is being made. In the case of fiction, some of these things are predetermined before even production begins.

As for local discourses and themes, during my studies in Lebanon, the overall urge was to imagine new possibilities in local film and media production. In London, being away from home, my interest in local Lebanese discourses and themes doubled down. Overall, my artistic practice was shaped by my foundational studies in narrative fiction, my more in-depth studies of the documentary method in its most expanded form, and how contemporary artists and experimental filmmakers, both in Beirut and London, were navigating between the two.

MG: Given that this exhibition is held in relation to a broader program of exchanges between curators, and artists from the Middle East and Germany called "Beyond Orientalism(s)" (a project funded by the DAAD) how have you engaged with the discourse of Orientalism in your own academic pursuits and artistic practice?

PA: Despite the barriers that reveal themselves as limitations and expectations coming from Western institutions and audiences that want to see works from our region that always experiment with the documentary form and engage with political discourse explicitly, I aim for a post-Orientalist paradigm rather than an outright rejection of it. A post-Orientalism that deconstructs and critiques it but also reclaims and uses some of its tropes and aesthetics. I suppose my work touches upon that with a more implicit political discourse inspired by the tradition found in Dystopian Science-fiction packaged as a documentary of the future.

Panos Aprahamian, *Odorless Blue Flowers Awake Prematurely,* 2021. Video still. (Used with permission from the artist).

MG: In August 2020, a year after the explosion in Beirut, you and five other filmmakers from the city were tasked with creating a video work that would reflect on your experiences during and after the tragic event. Your contribution to this project, titled "Odorless Blue Flowers Awake Prematurely," explores how the explosion impacted your life and the broader community in Beirut. What motivated you to focus on the area surrounding the Beirut River, and what does the symbol of flowers represent in your work?

PA: My video exposes my experience during the explosion and the following year on an equal footing. The flowers were inspired by a rumor I heard. The rumor claimed that, after the explosion, Beirut's flowers bloomed early because of the ammonium nitrate. The chemical compound, used for the production of both fertilizer and explosives, I find morbidly fascinating in its duality: giving life and taking it away. As for the flowers' odorlessness, the idea came out of the pandemic and the loss of smell, a side-effect of catching the Covid-19 virus. I chose the area around the Beirut River because it was sidelined in the overall discourse and because Bourj Hammoud, which sits right on the river's eastern bank, is where I grew up.

MG: You stated in the description of your video that dystopia is not just a potential future but an existing historical reality. Could you elaborate on this statement and explain how the past continues to influence the present in the context of your artwork? And how does the past remain immanent in the present in the context of this artwork?

PA: Many of the horrors imagined in dystopian futures have already occurred. Whether they are experienced by colonized people, various minorities, generations that witnessed mass-scale death, non-human animals, etc. Some of those experiences are not only dystopian in their horror, but also in their absurdity and reality-shattering nature. The *Kaiju*, the city-destroying giant monsters of Japanese Science-fiction are already historical realities in the form of two nuclear bombs dropped on two Japanese cities by the US military. In my artwork, this dystopian past is the initiating event of the project, the massive explosion that razed half of my city.

MG: Science fiction can serve as a vehicle to express utopian ideals and to imagine a place that is not yet real, a *non-place*. In contrast, documentary filmmaking aims to capture and document real events to create a factual representation of reality. You have chosen to combine these two approaches in your work. What inspired you to pursue this fusion, and how does it help address political injustices and lack of accountability for crimes, especially in the context of Lebanon? And how do you integrate this unique artistic approach into your artwork?

PA: My work reverses this idea and claims that this *non-place* does exist or has existed in the past, and my practice investigates those spaces, documents the contemporary ones, and looks for traces of past ones that are no more. The banks of the Beirut River and the Karantina district are such *non-places* that not only have historical traces of those futures but also channel them into the present like some time machine showing glimpses of what's to come after, as Winfried G. Sebald says, "...the earth has ground itself down."

MG: You referenced The Otolith Group, a collective that combines poetry and fiction with real-life experiences to imagine speculative and inclusive futures and explore the possibilities of language and transformation. How has their work influenced your own artistic practice and approach?

PA: Here, I would say that my work channels the dark side of the Otholit Group's practice, where I make use of more dystopian speculative futures to document the present.

MG: In addition to The Otolith Group, which artists or movements have influenced your artistic practice? Which local or regional artists have been sources of inspiration for you, and how have you incorporated their ideas and techniques into your own artistic language?

PA: Beyond The Otholit Group, Afrofuturism in general, The Atlas Group's use of the document as form, The Black Audio Film Collective and their ability to show their work in art space and broadcast it on the BBC, the architecture of Nader Khalili, Werner Herzog's unapologetic endeavors in documentary cinema, the writings of Mark Fisher and the CCRU, the work of Anna Tsing, and the illustrations of Jean Giraud Moebus among others. The way they all show up in my work ranges from formal experiments in dystopian and sci-fi aesthetics, hybrid forms that reject the documentary-fiction binary,

and the different ways in which the future and the past are channeled into the present.

MG: My final question is related to your move to Germany. Did you have an idea of Berlin as a heterotopia, and if so, how has this impacted your artistic practice?

PA: I am still figuring that one out. What I can say is that here the dystopia is in some ways a historical reality, as well, whose ramifications are still felt today and loom over the future.

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DESIGNING UTOPIA

YARA JABER

"We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, art directors, and visual communicators who have been raised in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective, and desirable use of our talents. Many design teachers and mentors promote this belief; the market rewards it; a tide of books and publications reinforces it." This is a quote from the First Things First 2000 manifesto, which is an updated version of the original 1964 First Things First manifesto. The 1964 manifesto was signed by over four hundred graphic designers and the 2000 one by thirty-three designers, and both groups protested the increasing exploitation and misuse of their profession for the gains of advertising and increased consumerism. The two manifestos addressed the general state of the profession and its purpose in contemporary forms of visual communication. They highlighted the designers' struggle to engage with urgent issues of visual communication rather than catering to the dystopian ideals of late capitalism with its goal of universal mindless consumption and the glossy allure of packaged commodities.

While linked with the rise of printing and the invention of the printing press in Europe in the fifteenth century, design as a profession and principle truly gained its recognition in the twentieth century. The term "graphic design" was allegedly coined by William Addison Dwiggins (1880-1956) in 1922, following the establishment of the important Bauhaus school in Germany (1919) which drew a sharp line between industrial and fine arts. Granted that the profession arose with the rise of the industrial revolution and manufacturing as well as the need for advertising of the manufactured goods, designers were keen to establish a stark difference between what it means to produce design and what is to advertise. In her essay titled "Calvino's Reality: Designer's Utopia," Johanna Jacob explains that "Advertising

is understood, even expected to be a cultural exploitation – the art of capitalism that persuades the public to consume, dispose and consume again. Graphic designers prefer to see themselves as visual communicators who use a theoretical discourse to reflect, comment and verbalize our cultural world with the goal of communicating 'ideas'." (Jacob, 1998, p. 103).

Many of these ideas were ones of utopian nature, where design was regarded as a tool to create a ideal world. In the Middle East, such utopian ideas included ones which promoted a unification of all Arab nations into a union - something similar to the European Union. This idea had reached its height in the 1950s as Arabs were seeking their independence from imperialist forces. Employing design, the concept of an "Arab currency" has been proposed as a step towards this uniting utopia, particularly in the work of two designers: Hiba Abu Mikdashi in 1999 and Tatiana Bohsali in 2019 (exactly twenty years apart). The dream of a unified Arab world emerged in the twentieth-century following the rising need for a distinguished Arab identity independent from the newly-fallen Ottoman empire and the continuous threat of European colonialism. The joined currency gives expression to the dream of unifying an area lying in chaos after the end of these historical processes. In their currency design, Mikdashi and Bohsali hoped to give visual expression to Arabs putting their differences aside and connecting into one common cultural and economic world. The currency of Mikdashi's project created a unified visual identity which would resonate with the various Arab nations, drawing on arabesque patterns and architecture. On the other hand, Bohsali's currency instead embraced the individual identity of each country while still appearing unified. The designer applied a system in which the overall abstract template would remain consistent while details would draw on local architecture and visual culture which were distinct to each country. While the methods of Mikdashi and Bohsali differed, their message was the same: an Arab utopia where different populations prided their individuality and lived in harmony.

Nevertheless, the two aforementioned designers were not the first to

Hiba Abu Mikdashi, *The Arabic Dinar,* 1999. (Used with permission from AUB Archives).

Tatiana Bohsali, *Currency of the Arab World,* 2019. (Used with permission from the designer).

utilize design in conceiving utopian aspirations. The strong presence of design in the Arab world has been repetitively disregarded, to the point where notable designer Bahia Shehab claims that Euro-centric design has shaped our way of learning in the Arab world (Shehab, 2021). Design school often favor the teachings of Western schools and movements of design such as Bauhaus and Art Deco over that of Eastern schools, such as the Iranian school of design which embraced Eastern features, or the Egyptian School of Fine Arts, which opened in Cairo in 1908, and prided itself on being free and accessible to everyone offering the latest art education and techniques under the Ottoman rule. "In claiming modernity as a Western phenomenon, art histories have defined Islamic art in the twentieth-century as traditional, folklorist, religious and even as an art that no longer exists. Islamic art was set back in time," explains Shehab (2020, p. 44). To claim Islamic art and design as stuck in the past, we ignore the great initiatives which took place in the Arab world even before the emergence of design as a proper principle in our regions. An important example is the development of the Ruqaa' script dubbed as the "people's script" in protest of the gate-keeping of Arabic calligraphy, such as the complexity of the Diwani script in particular, by the Sultan and the elite class during the Ottoman empire. The people wanted a simple script to represent and express themselves and was adopted widely during protests and revolutions. This was a way to bring unity and give people a voice to express their wishes and dreams.

The Iranian school of design in particular is a significant opportunity to study design manifestos in the middle east. This scene is one of many Eastern movements which adopted Western ideologies but adopted them according to local conditions. Admittedly, a significant factor for that occurrence is the shifting political scene in Iran throughout the twentieth-century that has radically changed the Iranian designers' views. The earliest designers of the Persian empire up until the early 1900s took inspiration from the traditions of Persian calligraphy and painting. In the 1940s, the establishment of the Faculty of Fine Arts was founded with a predominantly Western administration as Iran aimed to open up to the global scene. These changes brought about

Western values, ideologies and techniques into Iranian society. The first academic design courses established in Iran in 1959 introduced Western conventions of layout and form in publishing and images. Iranian designers followed these Western principles yet maintained established traditions of Arabic script in regard to lettering and scripts. The 1979 Revolution in Iran saw the resurgence and the prowess of the Islamic state in Iran and subsequently the closing off of the country. The state encouraged Islamic and Persian features and ideologies instead of Western ones, including the preference and the investment and development of the Farsi script as opposed to typically Arabian *naskh* and thuluth scripts, as well as the prevalence of religious and political themes influenced by and unique to the state of the country. Despite the richness of the culture and design, Western movements such as the Bauhaus remain influential today, while Eastern movements such as the Iranian school continue to be absent from the market and education curricula.

With our rapidly changing and ever-convoluted world, skills such as art and design become a way to express dreams, hopes, and desires, beyond what our surroundings try to teach and convince us. With design being viewed as a predominantly Western practice, the movements of design in the middle east are unfairly overlooked. Designers in the region not only created works which composed a distinct local identity but used design primarily as a tool for unifying these diverse identities in harmony. The question that remains, however, is: with all our attempts to bring forth unity, to step closer to it, can we truly achieve utopia?

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SEARCHING FOR THE ARAB UTOPIA

EDWINA NASSAR

For over a century, the Arab region has been plagued by invasion and occupation resulting in civil unrest, war, and an exponential number of emigrants. Generations of Arabs have been forced out of their homelands to search for a better future, hoping to return one day. Sadly, with the collapse of local currencies and political dictatorship, their expectations contrast reality. While the flow of migration from the Middle East to the West continues to increase, their relocation begins to feel more like an exile as they continue to try building a stable, better future in their newly adopted countries. Far, in a place very different from their home, one begins to wonder – is migrating the solution to fulfill the utopian dream? What is the utopian dream?

Commonly defined as a "no-place", utopia is a term used to describe a world that is ideal and perfect. In the case of the Arabs, their utopia would be a world far away from the turmoils of their region, a place with access to medical care, electricity, and education, to name a few. Knowing that this is something they won't be able to find in their home countries, migration becomes a way to find them elsewhere. In 2015 the opportunity to pursue this dream was offered by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who opened Germany's borders to refugees escaping the Syrian civil war. But their problems were far from over despite being welcomed by the German government. New problems brought by issues of displacement, longing, assimilation eagerly awaited them in the new countries. As many Arabs migrate, they are unsure when, or if, they will be able to return to their homelands and they begin to feel exiled. This is one prevalent theme discussed by the Lebanese artist and poet Etel Adnan (1925-2021) in her essay "Voyage, War and Exile" (1995). Forced into leaving Beirut at the start of the civil war in 1975, Adnan describes her exile in the United States as the "violent and involuntary loss of all the living symbols of one's identity".

Figure 1. Raed Yassin, *Self Portrait with Foreign Fruits and Vegetables*, 2009–2011. (Used with permission from the artist).

Being faced with both language and cultural differences, many find it difficult to integrate in their new surroundings. They are discriminated against, marginalised, and soon find themselves nostalgically longing for the home they cannot return to. Lebanese artist Raed Yassin visualises this issue through a series of self-portraits. Living between Beirut and Berlin, his photographic series *Self Portraits with Foreign Fruits and Vegetables* (2009 - 2011) depicts himself posing nude with various fruits and vegetables, positioning his body to complement the shape and colour of the food. Here he attempts to depict the difficulty of integrating oneself into a foreign culture. The food represents the success story of this dilemma, for despite their foreign origins, they manage to seamlessly integrate into the Western diet. This is not the case, however, of human beings as it is impossible to erase one's body and form in an attempt to seamlessly integrate into a new society.

Nabil Anani, *Jerusalem*, 2013. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation).

To cope with their displacement, the Arab migrant begins to search for things that remind them of home, and as the number of Arabs and Arab communities in other countries simultaneously begin to grow, they create their own ethnic community in foreign lands. One example of this can be found in Sonnenalle in Berlin, Germany. Known as the "Arab street", this five-kilometre strip has become a small-scale replica of their homeland, where the smell of *shawarma* and *shisha* fills the air, sheltering them. Unified by ethnicity, the Arabs abroad create an enclave that gives him the false feeling of return to a peaceful home. In this respect Sonnenalle, becomes what Michel Foucault once described as a "heterotopia", a physical or mental space that is both real and imaginary, and where different meanings and functions coexist and overlap (Foucault, 1984).

While the Arab diaspora continues to build a life abroad, they slowly become accustomed to life in a new country. They become fluent in local languages, attain citizenships, and begin to get involved in the politics and society of their newly adopted countries. Although remaining culturally Arab, they start to change and as war and political unrest continues back home, their homeland changes too. If one day they are able to return home, they will not be returning to the place they once knew. The small convenience store or *dekkaneh*, where they used to buy snacks from as children has closed, the street where they learned to drive has been bombed, and their childhood home has been demolished by occupants. It soon becomes evident that their new utopian dream of returning to the home they once

Nabil Anani, *Jerusalem Landscape*, 2013. (Used with permission from The Ramzi and Saeda).

knew is lost. The Arab utopia becomes nothing more than a product of distorted imagination, and the hope for a better future back home becomes more distant and impossible. Utopia then, in the Arab sense, becomes a strategy of resistance, as migrants come to terms with their loss of identity and displacement and begin to wonder, "what if?". What if occupation had never happened? What if war never occurred?

The notion of the "Arab utopia" has been depicted by many artists, such as the Palestinian painter, sculpture, and ceramicist Nabil Anani. Born in Latroun, Palestine, during the British Mandate, he and his family fled to Halhul in the southern West Bank during the 1948 Nakba. His life and artistic practice have both been shaped by the

disappearance of his homeland due to Israeli occupation. His artwork takes inspiration from Palestinian history and visual culture, exploring themes that promote national identity through the expression of collective memory. One example of his work is *Jerusalem Landscape*, painted in 2013. This is one of many paintings that depicts a utopian Palestinian landscape. The use of bright shades of green creates a sense of peace, tranquillity, and a dream-like scene of mountains covered in rows of olive trees. In the distance stands the city of Jerusalem, protected by a surrounding wall. The absence of any signs of Israeli occupation suggests that this painting may have been produced from distant memories. This cityscape is shown in more detail in a second painting, *Jerusalem* (2013). As with the previous work, the city is drawn as if from a memory. Between the buildings with domed roofs and arched windows, green trees stand tall. The city, fortified by a stone wall, is untouched by the concrete walls and barbed wire of Israeli occupation. It shows a historic city with low-rise buildings and no modern technology or architecture. Both paintings represent a peaceful landscape, with no signs of occupation and oppression, representing a moment in time when everything was allegedly perfect. But how long would that moment have lasted?

As seen throughout the text, utopian dreams have shifted. From dreams of escaping to dreams of returning, the Arabs' utopia in relation to their migration has been a process of resistance. In this respect the stories of many migrants from the Middle East, which deal with the notions of "displacement" or "identity loss," has many similarities with Ernst Bloch's elaborations of "utopia" in his various writings, highlighting his theory that humans are driven by their hopes for a better life and utopian desires for satisfaction, no matter how distant they appear (Ernst Bloch, 1995).

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TRACES OF UTOPIA IN FOOD PERFORMANCE

TINA ODERMATT

Hearing the sounds of a kitchen filled with working hands; tasting a juicy tomato; observing the miracle of a rising dough; debating over empty plates and sharing the responsibility of cleaning the mess when the dinner is over: The feeling of cooking and sharing a meal with loved ones is a multifaced experience that involves emotional aspects. It's a passion for the process of creating and preparing food and a pleasure of savouring its flavours and textures. It's a way of passing down traditions, sharing a moment with others and creating memories. It's an appreciation for the cultural and historical significance of different cuisines and traditions that surround them.

Food is also about hope. In *The Principle of Hope* (1954), and other writings, Ernst Bloch searches for traces of utopia in the present. For Bloch these traces become visible through daydreaming, through various banal and mundane actions of our daily lives. It is these little "fairytales" of the present that build up to the promise of the future utopias. Since Bloch is particularly interested in the journey towards utopia, for him the notion of "becoming" is therefore central. This idea of building up towards an ideal future, also resonates with Felix Guattari's assertion that the microscopic attempts, such as communities, neighborhood committees, communes and other congregations have a fundamental impact on the world (Bourriaud, 2010). In other words, if one is only looking at what should be done in the future, utopia becomes synonym with the impossible. Yet when people pull forces together for matters on a micro level, change in society might eventually become a reality.

These communities and neighborhoods might, for example, gather around meals to make future plans. Food becomes a common denominator and an occasion for collective gathering. Food is a pretext to start a conversation towards a longer journey; or an aide to remember where one comes from. In the overwhelming meaning of what utopia is or could be, I found it helpful to hold on to the idea that utopia is closely linked to hope and that these "hopes" are embedded in our day-to-day lives. For me, this feeling of hope reveals itself most strongly during those moments spent around a table with friends while sharing a meal. A meal where you can taste the effort that each of us has put into preparing it. I also like to read the act of cooking as a performance, a daily performance of our bodies in the kitchen, in social environments. Performance as a form of art practice manages to extrapolate this daily action into other realms. Indeed, hope also lies in the feeling I get when watching a performance, when I observe the presence of bodies, feeling involved and part of something bigger.

In the art world, the medium of performance, and more specifically the "genre" of food performance, follows a certain utopian dream in that here the experience of the work cannot be sold. Performance art is ephemeral, which implies also that a performance must also be "lived" (and in case of food art) "swallowed" in order to be properly understood or consumed. Artists usually rebel against the art market and how material artworks are sold, but one cannot sell a digestive experience. The human relations created by a food performance, the discussions around it, the collective moment of preparing it, the digestive awareness—all of this becomes central for the experience in food performances. The latter enable artists to interact with their audiences in various new ways. Artist use food, in a critical way, as a tool to mediate past histories, a medium to transmit cultures and illustrate different realities.

Heather Kayed, *Bread and Circuses,* 2022. Site-specific installation on archeological site Hosn Niha, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Photograph by the artist. Used with permission from the artist.

Heather Kayed, *Bread and Circuses,* 2022. Site-specific installation on archeological site Hosn Niha, Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Photograph by the artist. Used with permission from the artist

Heather Kayed is one of these artists. Kayed expands her research as a food scientist through various culinary performances. *In Bread and Circuses* (2022), the Beirut-based artist made a site-specific installation at Hosn Niha—a Roman archeological site in the Lebanon›s Bekaa Valley. She proposed an installation inside the ruins, where the visitor would walk around reading the history of the expression "Bread and Circuses" (a term coined by the poet Juvenal around the same time as when the Hosn Niha site was built). The history of this phrase was written on paper roles fixed on a stone of the ruins. The text also narrates how the artist linked this term to the Bekaa Valley (as the breadbasket of Lebanon) but also to the Lebanese state politicians who try to win over electors by distributing bread, just like during the Roman times. On the top of the rock, on which the paper roles are hanging, a bread dough is resting on the ground. The visitors are then invited to knit the dough. Here, Kayed not only reacts to the historical place but also uses the analogy of food (bread) to link together different temporalities, as well as political systems.

In another project called *A Tribute to Kusa* (2022), Kayed organized a participatory food performance in a public café in Beirut. She sent out invitations calling for participants to join in the public preparation of a meal. When arriving, the participants would see a big table with ingredients and utensils. Without being given clear instructions, they are invited to start preparing the meal. The lack of instructions creates a space for disorder. This disorder would then form spontaneous "collectives" that perform a task together. The binarism of guest/host, mine/yours are abolished. The dinner party space here stands for a microcosm of broader social relations of production. The collective cooking action, as well, merges political and aesthetic questions.

In another very recent performance called *Amuse Bouche* (2023), Kayed collaborated with Amir Halabi in order to address the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira. Hidden behind a curtain with only their hands and arms visible, the two performers would serve food and drinks to the visitors. Yet, every miniscule bite offered would cost exactly 1000L.L to produce. (Over the past two years the Lebanese

Heather Kayed & Amir Halabi, *Amuse Bouche,* 2023. Performed at TAKEOVER, Beirut, Lebanon. Photograph by Tina Odermatt. (Used with permission from the Artist).

lira has been devalued from 1.500 LL = 1 USD to 150.000 LL = 1 USD.) Kayed successfully manages to illustrate cultural, political, and ecological issues through food performances, enabling encounters, engaging with the audience and transmitting different histories and realities. By creating these spaces of exchange and reflection, she allows in a way, a rupture, a moment where dreaming and hoping are made possible.

Mirna Bamieh, *Potato Talk: Marrakech Edition,* 2016, performed in Marrakech with Maroc Artist Meeting as part of Marrakech Biennial. Photograph by the artist. (Used with permission from the artist).

Kayed's work inscribes itself in an already dynamic context of food activism and art in the region. Her approach recalls the work of Palestinian artist Mirna Bamieh. Through her research project called the Palestine Hosting Society Bamieh studies the lost recipes and eating practices in Palestine. Bamieh retraces the forgotten tastes of a "disposed kitchen". *In Menu of Dis/appearance* (2019-ongoing), the collective The Palestine Hosting Society narrates and recalls stories that are slipping away with time. The audience is invited to "taste" these vanished histories and interact during the dinner performance. Bamieh also plays with the act of cooking. In the performance *Potato Talk* (2016), a number of storytellers sit in the middle of a busy street and narrate stories to whoever wants to sit in front of them, while peeling potatoes.

Christian Sleiman, *The Case of Mediterranean Diet,* 2022. Performed at Castel Coucou, Institut Français, Sarreguemines, France. Photograph by the artist. (Used with permission from the artist).

Hiba Najem, *Fatayer di Banadoura,* 2022. Performed at Zoukak Theater, Beirut, Lebanon. Photograph Art Evolution. (Used with permission from the artist).

Another artist working with food and histories is Christian Sleiman. His work aims at remembering histories of Lebanon through the experience of food. For example, in *The Case of Mediterranean Diet* (2022-ongoing), this Lebanese artist orchestrates a dinner performance building up on a menu based on mulberries and how they are linked to the Great Famine of 1916 in Lebanon. During the days of the Ottoman Empire and in order to compete with China in the silk production, Lebanon dedicated 45% of its agricultural land to cultivating mulberry monoculture. Due to the silkworms' specific diet the decision has led to a famine which devastated peasant communities (Sleiman, 2022).

Another Lebanese performer, Hiba Najem wrote a piece entitled *Fatayer di Banadoura – Full of Tomatoes* (2022-ongoing), which is also the name of a tomato pastry from her mother's village. During the performance, she cooks the recipe on a table with the entire audience around it, who is helping with the chopping, tasting and listening to the stories Najem heard while collecting the recipe.

Like Kayed's *Bread and Circuses*, Barnieh's *Menu of Dis/appearance* and Sleiman's *The Case of Mediterranean Diet* – all of these works research historical, cultural and political practices from the past in order to connect them to current issues. These works highlight the interconnectivity of history. Both Barnieh's *Potato Talk*, and Kayed's *Bread and Circuses* use movements associated with cooking in order to forge a connection with the audience (i.e., peeling potatoes or dough knitting). Kayed's *A Tribute to Kusa* deploys the same strategy that Najem adopted in *Fatayer di Banadoura* by involving the audience in the cooking experiment, which is an essential part of the performance. One major difference however is that Kayed asks the audience to act independently, while Najem is leading the way. Kayed's *Amuse Bouche* also resonates with Barnieh's *Menu of Dis/appearance* in that both artists address the issue of dispossession—the dispossession of land and of culture, or the economic dispossession.

Just like Kayed, these Middle Eastern artists and performers using food in their work all have in common not only the medium of their artistic practice, but also using food as a means to help remember what has been forgotten or made to forget. They contribute to the act of remembrance through the primary senses of taste and smell thus re-creating collective histories. In our mediatic world where the primary senses are those of the eyes and the spectacle of advertising, and were food is reduced to overproduction of processed, snack, street, to-go or convenience food which is to be consumed quickly, sitting at a table and eating a meal becomes a rarity. There is something nearly rebellious in bringing people to think about what they eat and how they eat it. The intimate environments created by the different performances, shape spaces where people can be

challenged, learn about themselves and about each other. In an interview with Mina Stone, Bamieh shares her thoughts behind the Palestine Hosting Society by saying "I started my project because I wanted encounters to happen around food. I think people become better when you present food to them. They open up. They smile. They listen. They accept. (…) I'd like to think between art and food it's possible to save the world," (Stone, 2021). Step by step, bite by bite, new utopian worlds may still be made possible.

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ARAB NAHDA AND THE BIRTH OF ARAB UTOPIA

CHIRINE RASHEED

If the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas sees European modernity as an unfinished project, then what can we say about Arab modernity? Was it sabotaged from the very beginning? Arab modernity began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century and was commenced by various intellectuals involved in different sectors of society: from science, and journalism, to knowledge and industrial production. The historical process which commenced the modernization is known as Nahda or awakening. Nahda was a cultural and intellectual movement that sought to revolutionize Arab cultures and connect them to the world as a whole. With Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in the eighteenth-century, several Arab intellectuals began to ask themselves why the Arab world has been lagging behind Western Europe. They compared their lands to Western countries and concluded that part of the backwardness in the Arab world had to do with issues of colonization, socio-economic stagnation, and political turmoil. Following these conclusions, the Arab intellectuals took two different routes, splitting in roughly two camps. Some favored the path of Western progress over the norms and rules of foreign empires, especially the Ottoman Empire rooted in traditional Islamic forms. They saw the ideas of Western Enlightenment better suited for modernizing their societies. Other Arab intellectuals adhered to traditional religious ties calling for a return to the ancient Islamic roots, believing that the Arab society was defeated because of its drift away from its roots.

In his 2013 online article "The Peculiar Destinies of Arab Modernity" Faisal Darraj suggests that both of these intellectual groups reached an impasse, and this was because they were not able to see an end to their projects. Darraj claims that "the Arab modernity project was in crisis from the outset" (Darraj, 2013). Through this crisis, the Nahda intellectuals fought their first battles, to establish a progressive movement that aimed to revitalize Arab culture, literature, and language. From the outset the supporters of Nahda declared their full faith in the value of learning, liberation through knowledge, as well as a desire to forge a contemporary and innovative identity.

As my contribution to this exhibition I would like to look at the utopian aspirations of some of the early Nahda modernizers. I will talk first about Nahda explaining what it is, and then turn to discuss some key intellectuals and their works: from Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi's (1801-1873) book An Imam in Paris (1834), to Taha Hussein (1889-1973), and Francis Fateh-Allah Al-Marrash's (1835-1873) novel *Ghabbat el Haq* (1865).

From the outset I would like to re-emphasize the division of Nahda utopian thinking into pro-Westerners and those informed by the local traditions. Both groups of modernizers soon faced their own difficulties. For those intellectuals who embraced Western values the main complexity was the lack of institutions and traditions of modernization, and for those who defended the local tradition the problem was that the glorious past laid far behind and could not be restored. In some ways, they were unable to implement the old rules of Islam or create a new one (Darraj, 2013). In his article Darraj states that the Arab intellectuals who adhered to the local traditions provided a reified image of "fundamentalist Islam" that existed outside of history— they did not contribute to establishing a purely Islamic utopia but rather to rejecting the different Western alternates (Darraj, 2013). As a result, the traditionalist intellectuals launched a religious revival project in response to the "imported thought," or Western progress. Some of the Arab intellectuals who dreamt of national-social alternatives attempted to generate a critical dialogue between various traditions of Arab heritage and the Western modern thought. Those intellectuals recognized a universal human culture, to which Islamic thought had contributed, as they opened themselves to new Western schools of thought. Some of these thinkers included Taha

Hussein who was influenced by the seventeenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes; Salama Moussa (1887-1958), an Egyptian writer who became an advocate of Charles Darwin; the Egyptian writer Muhammad Hussein Haykal (1888-1956) who translated the eighteenth-century works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and Sheikh Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi who discovered the eighteenth-century philosophy of Montesquieu.

Questions of regression, weakness, and backwardness occupied a prominent place in the discourse of Nahda. These questions involved a constant comparison between the "weak" East and the "strong" West. It was partially part of such considerations that Nahda intellectuals advocated "new", or "progressive" ways of thinking, or called "to defeat the doomed 'ancients' once and for all" (Darraj, 2013). By the second quarter of the twentieth-century, Nahda became an effective social movement, gaining the support of various political, literary parties, and even from those studying Islam and *fiqh* (legal system based on the Qur'an). Various Arab intellectuals discussed and diagnosed the main problems in the Arab society. For example, Al-Tahtawi defended the rights of women to education, citizenship, and political engagement. At the end of the nineteenth-century, Abd al-Rahman Al-Kawkabi (1855-1902) attacked political hegemony in a book which is considered one of a kind in modern Arab culture, *The Nature of Despotism* (1899). Throughout his book, Al-Kawkabi introduces a political vision and its misapplication, and the way through which the politicians were conducting state affairs. His works begins and ends with politics and the exercise of power, he considers despotism to be a disease and its only solution is *al-shura-al-dasturiyaa* (the constitutional counsel). Despotism, therefore, develops as a result of public generated ignorance and fear; when apathy vanishes and fear dissipates the predicament shifts, and despotism is lifted (El-Haddaji, 2018). Interpretations of Al-Kawkabi's book sparked discussion in Arab literature about nationalism, Pan-Islamism, modernization, and even socialism (Mabon, 2022). In addition, Qasim Amin (1863-1908) dedicated his life to the liberation of women, while Farah Antoun (1874-1922) raised issues regarding civil society. The enlightened

nationalist Sati' al-Husri (1880-1969) advocated for replacing religious association with a nationalist association, building on the ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder and other eighteenth and nineteenth-century German nationalist intellectuals (Darraj, 2013).

Arab Nahda envisioned a better future, a path to progress, and a passage to generate a leading social elite capable of identifying societal flaws and coming up with solutions while believing in the power of new knowledge. This belief made the Nahda thinkers more skeptical of traditional religious norms, hence, to accomplish such tasks they had to recreate the original religious foundations. Enlightenment thinkers spoke of the future using the power of knowledge while questioning traditional forms of knowledge. This new way of critical thinking had a radical impact on Nahda intellectuals, leading traditionalists to see enlightenment scholars like Taha Hussein as an "agent of the West." The concept of a unified human culture was central to the debate of Arab Awakening intellectuals, who emphasized the importance of interaction and dialogue between civilizations. Nahda intellectuals believed in the progress of their society as being part and parcel of the progress of universal humanity. It was knowledge belonging to the entire humanity, and therefore translation became an essential component of the Nahda as Arab readers were introduced to modern European and classical Ancient Greek literature, art, and philosophy. As a result, the Nahda's goal was to free the people from a restricted culture into an advanced one, as articulated by Ameen Rihani in his novel *The Book of Khaled* (1911) and by Al-Tahtawi in his book *Imam in Paris* (1834). Here, Al-Tahtawi notices that non-Muslim French people were more generous than Ottoman Muslims, and therefore he presents one of the earliest records of the Muslim encounter with enlightened European notions. Through his book Al-Tahtawi introduces modernity to his land and offers an insight into misconceptions about Europe as the "Other". This showcases the lean toward a universalist culture, where Al-Tahtawi defined nationalism as geography and history, and Taha Hussein distinguished between writing history and religious allegory (Darraj, 2013). Therefore, the Nahda intellectuals tried to connect the future with the

golden past in order to produce a superior Arab Islamic civilization (Darraj, 2013).

Regardless of the modernizers' efforts, the confined religious awareness shared by conservative clerics turned into a major obstacle for the advance of modern thought. The clerics equated modernity with blasphemy, denouncing the newspapers and considering the press language a dialect and a conspiracy against the Arab language of the Holy Qur'an. They also condemned theater as a cheap form of entertainment, along with painting, sculpture, and music considered tools for moral deprivation. Throughout the entire Nahda period fundamentalist religious thinkers introduced *fatwas* that posed a barrier to modernity. Later in the twentieth-century various religious clerics introduced fatwas on art and literature, as for example the one that motivated a religious fanatic to stab the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) as punishment for his novel *Children of Gebelawi* (1959). Fatwas also condemned the work of Mohammed Abul-Wahab (1902-1991), or the poems by the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) that have been sung by Marcel Khalifeh (Darraj, 2013).

Arab intellectuals who envisioned national-social alternatives attempted from the start to generate a critical overview between the Arab heritage and the universalist thought. Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) built an evolved Islamic discourse on Herbert Spencer's ideas. Along with Taha Hussein, who applied Descartes' method to Arab-Islamic history, and Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006), who incorporated folkloric and Pharaonic heritage into his novels, and rationalist philosophers returned to Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) (Darraj, 2013). Many Nahda intellectuals sought inspiration in the work of philosophers and thinkers who imagined a different social reality, where happiness, justice, and equality co-existed as in Plato's *The Republic*, Saint Augustine's *The City of God*, or Thomas Moore's *Utopia*. The Syrian scholar, publicist, writer, and poet of Nahda, Francis Al-Marrash offers something different in *Ghabat el Haq* (1865).

In *Ghabat al-Haqq* (translated as The Forest of Justice) Al-Marrash presents his "ideal city." Although he follows utopian principles reminiscent of Plato and Moore, Al-Marrash describes his city in a way that also seeks to engage the reader. Al-Marrash was a physician and a poet from a Greek-Catholic bourgeois family in Aleppo during the time of Ottoman Syria. In 1867 he traveled to Paris and the trip left a profound impact on his writings. Al-Marash's work takes the form of an allegory: an encounter between the rulers of the "State of Civilization" and the "Kingdom of Slavery" in a forest of justice. The central character of *Ghabat al-Haqq* is the Philosopher (*al-Faylasuf*) who gives an exposition of *tamadun* (civilization). According to Peter Hill, this is one central utopian concept of Arab Nahda (Hill, 2020). The notion of *tamadun*, which gained popularity in the 1850s, is presented as a guide for human well-being. Al-Marrash saw it as a means of resolving sectarian tensions that erupted in Aleppo, Damascus, and Mount Lebanon during the 1850s and 1860s. The interesting aspect in Al-Marrash's novel is the utopian vision he developed around the concept of *tamadun* (to build, to civilize, to humanize). Al-Marrash embraces this concept in several ways. First *tamadun* calls for a structural reform of the following areas: "political education, the cultivation of the intellect, the refinement of social customs and individual morals, the improvement of cities, and love (*al-mahaba*) as a cosmological unifying power serving social cohesion" (Stephan, 2016, p. 359). *Tamaddun* in Al-Marrash's novel implies ideas about how modern society should be organized, it encompasses the principles of equality, welfare, and moral precision and scientific progress. The author tells of all of these social ideals, which he believed would contribute to the human's ability to live a civilized social life.

Al-Marrash's *The Forest of Justice* is an allegorical narrative where the narrator guides the reader through a dream world that one can only encounter in sleep. The dense forest that appears to be geographically unrelated is a world centered on a conversation between the "king of freedom" and the "queen of wisdom" who meet with a wide old philosopher. *Tamaddun*, as the philosopher demonstrates, includes law (*sharia*) and governance (*siyasa*), to further explain the human

need for law and governance (Stephan, 2016). Al-Marrash's story depicts humanity from its beginnings to the present day, as it began as a rudimentary socially organized community. The leader of this community, by chance, discover a green spot on the horizon that turns out to be a forest. He leads his family there, and in this fertile environment he builds his kingdom, which becomes later civilized. Human society is shown from its primitive stage – in the state of nature – and then by accident change occurs as a result of man's interaction with his environment leading to the progressive phase of *tamaddun* (Stephan, 2016). As a result, this historical process implies a mode of narration that is conveyed through civilization (*tamaddun*) by constructing analogously on the origin of civilization and its tendencies towards advancement from a historical standpoint. In *Ghabat al-Haqq*, God doesn't intervene in the temporal changes of the social structure. *Tamaddun* is implied as the agent of change, and thus, envisioned as an intrinsic stimulus linked to a comprehensive reform triggered by natural surroundings. At the end, before waking up for his dream, the narrator finds himself exiled from the forest, he notices a flood of growing greenery approaching and giving him a sense of relief. Through this image and narrative, Al-Marrash alludes this to his homeland Syria, specifically his city Allepo that is an immense need for Western innovation expressing utopian ideas calling for political and social reforms. By this framework Al-Marrash lets the rulers and readers establish their own "Republic of Justice" while offering an allegory about the conditions necessary for the establishment and maintenance of civilization and freedom.

The Arab Nahda, which was defined by faith in new knowledge and liberation, as well as by the desire to create a new and modern Arab identity, was influenced by the development of various forms of utopian thinking. The latter would then evolve during the latter part of the twentieth-century. By its willingness for a prosperous life for the Arab World, the Arab Utopia mirrored the aspirations of the Arab Nahda. This utopia can be described as having a democratic vision and valuing freedom, inclusivity, and human rights. These aspirations could be interpreted in terms of what Al-Marrash described in his

novel *Ghabat al Haq*. The Arab Utopia was informed by thoughts developed in literature and art, which is to suggest that the Arab world saw art as a means to overcome obstacles and create a better future for its citizens. The Arab Nahda, on one hand, was concerned with universalism and the globalization of the Arab subject as they hold onto their identity, while the Arab Utopia, on the other hand, is shaped in such a way that the subject is in search of freedom, inclusivity, and presence. Since the beginning of the Nahda project in the mid nineteenth-century, these values have emerged in response to the perceived crisis of Arab societies. The crisis included the loss of political independence, economic turmoil, and social decay, along with migration that also played a significant role. It resulted in new opportunities for Arab intellectuals, artists, and writers to participate in new forms of expression they found in foreign countries.

Today the Arab Utopia addresses the problem of migration and economic crisis. Due to persistent conflict and war, poverty, and political unrest, many Arabs had to leave their lands—a process that started in the nineteenth-century and it is continuing to this day. Part of the Arab Utopia is also the dream of a society which is free of these pressing issues, a society where people can live in peace, freedom, and security, with their minimum human rights established. While the Nahda aimed to create a new and modern Arab identity capable of engaging on equal terms with the rest of the world, the contemporary Arab Utopia encompasses a struggle to define what it means to be Arab in the twenty-first century. The latter involves envisioning an inclusive and more diverse society defined along ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious terms. The question is whether the Arab Utopia will be a foreground for a second Nahda.

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GULF FUTURISM: AN AESTHETIC RESPONSE TO HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FORCES

LUBNA RGES

Utopian visions of the future are shaped by multiple factors through time, with it being a powerful force for human progress and imagination. In the Arab world, conceptions of utopia have had a particular importance, despite the Western origins of the concept. Historically, the area has been outlined by the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate states (632-1258), Persian dynasties, the Ottoman Empire (1517-1819), and finally, European rule (1830- 1945). A large part of what connected the region politically was the vision of a unified nation with a shared religion. Even though for the most part Arabs dominated other ethnicities, other ethnic groups still benefited from a certain degree of autonomy. This allows us to consider the internal and external factors that shaped the region and the kinds of futures envisioned. According to Ian Campell's book *Arabic Science Fiction* (2018), some Arab writers were able to produce literary utopias inspired by ancient Islamic cultures, while others imagined utopian worlds outside the Arab realm, which puts it on par with imperial ambitions; given that European utopia has often been explained in light of colonial expansion.

Utopic images were also part of the discourse of Orientalism. A few artistic conceptions were in response to the idea of expansion of geographical consciousness which were linked to colonial thinking. An example of this would be of Europe described as an imagined place by some early Arab thinkers. More recently Michel Foucault introduced the term "heterotopia" in his text "Of Other Spaces" (1986) to discuss a real place (in this case the West) but which is something imagined from outside as a utopia. A more recent interpretation of utopia is that of a new world dominated by the expansion of late capitalism, and various technological advancements. The notion of "Arab Futurism," which I would like to mention in the context of this project, relates to all of these new cultural conditions mentioned above: the other heterotopic place, capitalism, and latest technologies of communication.

Arab Futurism can be seen as a response to the historical and cultural forces that have shaped the region. This very recent aesthetic movement influenced mainly by the critique of Orientalism and globalization, also addresses issues of Arab identity and the post-colonial context. The movement has no single originator, although a notable figure for the development of the term has been the artist and writer Sulaïman Majali. In a magazine article called "Towards a Possible Manifesto/Proposing Arabfuturism(s)" (Novelty, 2016), Majali includes a script of an early discussion introducing concepts which Arab Futurism is concerned with. The first part of the manifesto reads like a conversation imbued with confusion and a sense of revelation. It imagines a post orientalist existence where the Arab is no longer defined in relation to the Western. Even though there is not much information on the nature of the discussion or who the participants were, the manifesto provides an investigation into modalities and systems defined by cultural hegemony. "Indefinable in the emergence of an autonomous hybrid sedimentation of identities that is dismantling the boundaries and expanding the border zones between constructs of culture and civilization that have assembled a contrived European identity in opposition to a historic Other" (Novelty, 2016). The manifesto sets the tone of aspiring towards a decolonial definition of European Arabs and even beyond Arabs. In this sense, Arab Futurism(s), marks a counterculture of thought and action, that aims towards alternative states of becoming.

"Gulf Futurism" is a subgenre of "Arab Futurism" and the two themes often overlap. Nonetheless, Gulf Futurism mainly explores the relationship between tradition and the processes of urbanization

taking place in some countries of the Gulf. It is critical of current structures of investment, architecture, late capitalism, hyper consumerism, and advanced technology. Therefore, it anticipates dystopian realities fed by such structures. Gulf Futurism as a term was coined by Kuwaiti composer Fatima Al-Qadiri and the American-Qatari artist and author Sophia Al Maria in a Dazed magazine article from 2012. The manifesto was used to describe the aesthetic state of the Gulf region, which has been driven into a reality of isolation via technology, environmental collapse, and hyper modernization. It highlights such cultural drawbacks as erasure of local histories, daunting consequences and impact of consumerism on the individual and the environment levels. All of this finds its place in the cultural production of this movement.

The term "futurism," as used recently in the Arab world, is distinct from the program of the Italian art movement founded in the early twentieth-century by the artist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944). Italian Futurism rejected nostalgia for the past and claimed humanity's victory over nature through the triumph of technology. The use of the term "futurism" in the context of contemporary Arab art and culture is different. As Majali writes, Arabfuturism "is not intended to reference Futurism as movement, neither is it an explicit reference to the 'futuristic'. Instead '-futurism' is anticipating a future, it signifies a defiant cultural break, a projection forward into what is, beyond ongoing Eurocentric, hegemonic narratives" (Novelty, 2018). Therefore, Gulf Futurism is concerned with the tension between the Gulf's cultural heritage and adoption of the "new". This friction is visible in the genre of science fiction. It attempts to form a critique of the dystopian turn that is currently taking place in the countries of the Gulf, a tendency by which hasty modernization brings together globalized cultural kitsch and excess of consumerism. Gulf Futurism, consequently, aspires to foster a sense of cultural identity that is critical of the present, and perhaps even the future. The authors of the manifesto, and artists/writers working within this movement primarily ask this question: How will the future look like if the present structures live on?
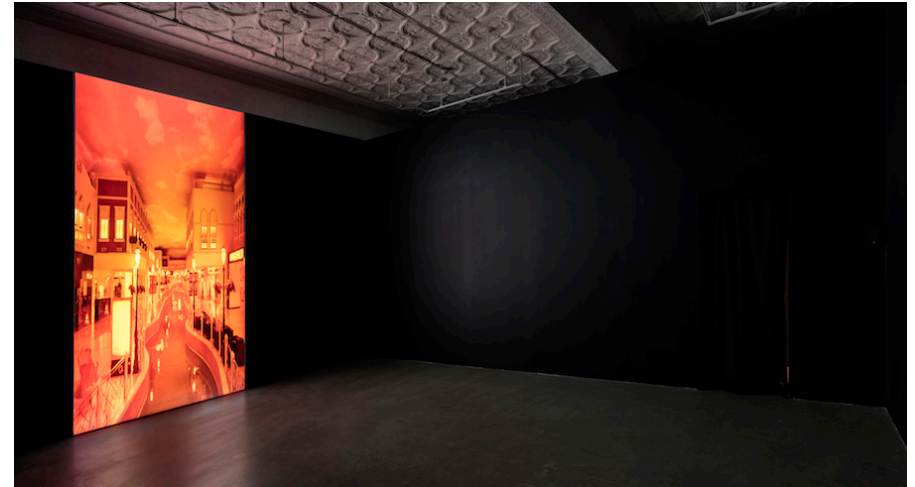
Sophia Al Maria, *Black Friday,* 2016. Installation displayed at Mercer Union, Toronto, 2018. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid. (Used with permission from the artist and The Third Line, Dubai, U.A.E).

Monira Al Qadiri, *Holy Quarter,* 2020. Installation displayed at Haus der Kunst, Munich. Photograph by Maximilian Geuter. (Used with permission from the artist).

A recurring theme of Gulf Futurism is the pervasiveness of the shopping mall as an alien, mediating structure, as seen in Sophia Al Maria's video *Black Friday* (2016). The work is a vertical projected video featuring hypnotic renderings of primarily empty malls in Doha (Qatar), a resonant soundtrack and voice over. It provides an apocalyptic take on malls as a consumer sanctuary and a structure that is inhibited globally, but often lacks geographic and/or cultural signifiers, a space between spaces or a mediating structure. I think the work exemplifies a dystopic vision of possible futures under existing conditions of hyper consumerism, paralleled by cultural re-readings of Gulf culture.

Another work that employs science fiction is *Holy Quarter* (2020) a 20-minute film and glass sculpture installation by the Kuwaiti artist Monira Al-Qadiri. The video shows drone images of the desert and rock formations while the narrator tells the story of a British explorer who roamed through the desert in the 1930s in search of ruins of an ancient city, but instead found a meteorite-formed impact crater. The glass sculptures act as narrators, and take the shape of Wabar pearls, which is the black material created when a meteorite hits the sand. The narrating voice's computer-generated monotony adds to the science fictional character of the work, in addition to the prophetic nature of the script "for the earth grows thirsty and is ruptured by disease," (Frieze, 2020). Here the pearls predict a dystopian future situated in the desert. The desert in this work serves as a place of exploring the future, while encountering traces of the past.

Arab futurism, and consequently Gulf Futurism, gives space to intellectuals and art practitioners from the region to investigate current modes of being, and deliver their criticism of current structures of capitalism, consumerism, and excesses of modernization. The artists often use utopian and dystopian imagery to express their ideas about the impact of these processes on the future. Cultural histories intertwined with commercial practices are erased by ambiguous mall structures, the desert being the dominant landscape caused by environmental collapse, are examples of the ways in which this cultural movement was able to critique existing systems.

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UNCONTAINED MODERNITIES: TRACES OF UTOPIA IN AN EXPERIMENTAL KUWAITI HOUSING BLOCK

IONA STEWART

The two following fragments are part of artists' projects dedicated to the Sawaber Complex.

A Room for The Living

Deema Al-Ghunaim

Deema Al-Ghunaim, *Living Room I.* (Used with permission from the artist).

In January 2013, a number of friends and I visited 15 families living in Sawaber Complex. We were skeptical of all the rumors and news spread about the lack of maintenance, the fire accidents, and the social problems recurring in the complex, until we finally heard of the government's plan to evacuate and demolish the building through a land appraisal system. We wanted to hear it all directly from the residents. In every apartment we visit, I'd ask the family if I can take a photo of the living room. I worked with Dalal Musaed Al-Hashash on a presentation about these families for a PechaKucha Night in February 2013. We included photographs we both took during our visits and tried to shed light on the residents and their stories. We called it "Personal Histories 1989-2013".

The families spoke of their daily problems and about the general condition of the building. Sawaber was the first–and only–vertical housing project offered by the government for young Kuwaiti couples, but over the years some people started buying apartments and subletting for expats while some used it as a second home. Many expressed their reluctance to live near neighbours they didn›t know in the then new suburbia and traded their 500 meter-squared plots for an apartment in Sawaber because it is in the heart of Kuwait City.

Our interviews with the apartments' owners and tenants opened our eyes to a multitude of stories of social and political injustice. That diverse community was the living witness and victim of the aftermath of two urban traumas: the urban renewal in the mid-twentieth century and the Iraqi invasion in 1990. The complex was built in the 1980s in order to cope with the increasing demand for houses as the population continued to rise since the discovery of oil in Kuwait. One year after the people had started moving to the building, Kuwait was invaded which resulted in lack of security and maintenance. The place also became a shelter for the residents of Failaka Island who fled their homes when the war started.

The condition of Sawaber continued to deteriorate after the invasion. After a decade – because of its prime location – people started to buy apartments, rent them out to expats, while pushing the government to demolish the project seeking the sum of money, they would get from land appraisal. What they did not calculate, is that some people will get no compensation at all. For example, there were three ladies who didn't have – and couldn't obtain – ownership documents mainly because female widows and divorcees cannot by law be provided with a house from the government.

In February 1957, the old wall of Kuwait City was demolished. In February 1968, the residential neighbourhoods in Kuwait City were demolished, and in February 2019 Sawaber Complex was also demolished. Up until the day of the demolition, Sawaber attracted the attention of the architectural community in particular and many urban and environmental activists and enthusiasts who find value, beauty and potential in existing buildings. However, the raised questions were mainly about the historical value Sawaber held that can keep it from demolition, and what potential did it have if it were to be preserved.

These questions overshadowed what I see as the core question: Where did the tenants and former owners go now? How did they solve the problem of finding another home? Finally, what did the future have in store for them? The story of Sawaber and my experience as a witness of the demolition process made me think of two values: 1) Excluding expatriates and single women and men from national plans will continue to be an obstacle and a core problem in the managerial and jurisdictional state of affairs. 2) Our generation is now a witness of how Kuwait City was demolished in the sixties, and how it feels even for those who never lived in the demolished building. This made the demands of the public and academic resistance to demolition more concrete and no longer poetic nostalgic claims. Any urban strategy needs to go hand in hand with transparent social, political and economic strategies.

The Ship of Theseus

Jassim Al-Nashmi

Jassim Al-Nashmi, *The Ship of Theseus.* (used with permission from the artist)

The self-portrait I took sitting on a chair in Al-Sawaber was for a magazine article on my urbanist goals as a designer of buildings before continuing studies at ETH Zurich. When I returned, I went to take more photos while they were demolishing with their cranes, billowing smoke from the rubble strew everywhere, the scenes were dramatic. I took a hundred photos or so, and only saved them on my laptop, then when the laptop crashed, they too were destroyed - the last photos of Sawaber before it was dust. One photo survived: of me sitting on a chair like a crooked throne upon the rubble. I wrote of the photo at the time:

> Kuwait, I left you for one year, why did this happen? I trusted that you were in good hands, but I feel partly responsible for this massacre. A part of you is no longer with us, and just like the ship of Theseus we must ask, are you still Kuwait? Or have these erasures of your identity transformed you so far into becoming someone I don't recognize?

What is a country without icons? Without a famous dish, garment, or musical genre? My nation, Kuwait, has repeatedly - and without fail - been carpet-bombing its own architectural history, all in the name of development with a capital D. The Al-Sawaber demolition showed a clear lack of perspective in Kuwait's master planning department; after the 70,000 square metre wipe-out of this urban village (and removal of its residents) it remains a barren desert. With no vision pre-demolition, why the rush? Where did this dream go, and what fuels this destructive propulsion? The problem this creates is just like the Ship of Theseus, where the wooden planks on the hull of the ship kept getting replaced either because they were damaged with holes in them or for cosmetic reasons, the question arises; over the years when every part of the ship is replaced with a new part, is it still the same ship?

Uncontained Modernities: Traces of Utopia in an Experimental Kuwaiti Housing Block

Iona Stewart

On the 30th of March 2019, the first apartment block comes down. The experimental modernist housing block Al-Sawaber, built just four decades earlier had once been heralded as a solution for the urban problems of a 'renaissance Arab city' built from scratch, yet now city workers amble around the adjacent car park seemingly oblivious to the violence soon to be enacted behind the white corrugated barrier. The sound of explosives echoing off the empty shells of hollowed-out apartment blocks nearby does not seem to shake them as they get on with their day. The building drops vertically crushing two floors and the remaining seven floors topple inwards towards the remnant apartment blocks as if kneeling and prostrating towards the twin apartment block opposite. As it hits the ground a cloud of dust rises. In a haunting spectacle of literal and symbolic implosion, the frame disintegrates on impact. No one had come to watch. The complex's architect denounced it. After just 30 years, with no onlookers, Al-Sawaber falls alone, one nineteen-second YouTube video to tell the tale. Abject and abandoned, today the plot is indistinguishable from other vacant lots that dot the city.

Twentieth-century social housing world over has been decried by many as an eye-sore, failing to deliver its utopian promises. However, these narratives have buried the traces of utopia which emerge in the reclamation of space in novel ways, as well as the political and socioeconomic factors which enabled their demise. As Kuwaitis were removed from the old fareej city in order to recreate the city as a symbol of the modern state, modernity emerged and was negotiated as a spatial and material experience. Al-'Imara al-hadith (modern architecture) "possessed the capacity to communicate visually the character and ideals of a new nation and a progressive society" (Al-Ragam, 2017, p. 24); this architectural language enabled a social production of space

Architect sits enthroned above the rubble of al-Sawaber (Used with permission from Jassim al-Nashmi)

as an incubator for the new Kuwaiti citizen, a change synonymous with progress, comfort and privacy. Al-Sawaber provides a case for investigating the utopian aspirations of modernity in the Arab region in material form, allowing us to engage with its social worlds, helping us understand today's rejection of these forms and the promises they brought with them.

Modernism has an inherently utopian impulse fuelled by the belief in the new, in progress, a belief that science and technology will solve our problems creating a new kind of individual and society. For Kuwait the emergence of modernity was tied up both in pan-Arab networks and the

transformation of its built environment. Journals circulating in the late nineteenth-century and the influence of Islamic modernism and scholars like Rashid Rida began a new orientation towards the Arab world and the establishments of new modernists institutions such as the Mubarakiyya school, clinics, a public library and literary clubs. In the first half of the century the influence of pan-Arab reformist merchants was strong in creating this emerging modernity which travelling Arab-nationalist writer Amin Al-Raihani (1876–1940) referred to as "cultural renaissance (nahda thaqafiyya)" built on its schools and its public library. In 1938, reformist merchants formed the Patriotic Bloc and organised a movement demanding parliamentary rule, a welfare state, the modernisation of finance, the state and education. Their aim was to enable Kuwait to "take part in the Nahda": motivated by Iraq's Arab nationalist policies and the Palestinian struggle the merchants sought to consolidate a role in governance and implement a reformist Arab- oriented agenda (Al-Rashoud, 2016) The merchants led the Arab Nationalist opposition in the fifties particularly within the education department, where Arab nationalist educators were hired and Kuwait's first national curriculum in 1956 identified the spread of Arab national awareness as a primary goal.

However, through the 1950s, the Emir began to takeover Kuwaiti's modern project, transforming the built environment for the purpose of societal transformation, and control. In 1946, when Kuwait began to export its oil, profits went directly to ruler Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salim making his power independent of the merchants. In 1951, Abdullah Al-Salim commissioned the first city master plan aiming to make Kuwait City a utopia: "the best planned and most socially progressive city in the Middle East". Just as a powerful state was necessary for modernist planning, centralised planning was required as a defence against social upheaval brought about by oil: "urban planning in particular would make the city and, by extension, the future knowable" (Al-Nakib, 2016, pp. 91, 5-6).

The Development Plan was initiated by the Land Acquisition Policy (LAP) through which the state bought private land from the old town for market value, giving citizens a plot of residential land in a new planned-neighbourhood outside the city walls, auctioned off at nominal

prices in return (Al-Ragam, 2017). The fareej courtyard houses of the old city were razed and replaced by large suburban villas in designated neighbourhoods, as the old city was systematically destroyed and the whole population relocated in order to create this utopic new society. The suburbs became spaces of government services and welfare control, with their own schools, mosques, police stations and clinics provided and managed by the central government (Al-Nakib, 2016). This came to define modernity: "to be modern in Kuwait meant living in a single-family house using modern materials and techniques in segregated neighbourhood units outside the city" (Al-Ragam, 2018, p. 64). These divergent modernities became intertwined: welfare practices born of Nahda and Islamic modernism, now belonged to a state which was imposing its own modernism through the built environment.

By the 1960s, Kuwaiti housing programs had been stretched thin by the unsustainable Land Acquisition Program (LAP). During this period, Palestinian lead planner at Kuwait Municipality, Saba Shiber, grew as a Pan-Arab public intellectual who transformed the region with his regional modernist architecture, seeing architecture as central to the Arab world's success in the modern world. Shiber wanted to turn Kuwait into an Arab Renaissance City. From his readings of medieval social scientist Ibn Khaldun, the postcolonial work of Shiber sought to create a revolution in Arab architecture. His work was directed at creating formal solutions that were rational, economic and organic building on the pre-existing aspects of the local Arab habitat and heritage using locally appropriate construction methods, climatic conditions and provision of open space for social and cultural events. In the early sixties, Shiber called for greater variety in housing options, decrying LAP city growth as unsustainable: "This is not only uneconomical, but it is not conducive to social interaction and the conservation of valuable urban land. It is therefore necessary to reconsider the question of single plots" (Al-Ragam, 2013, p. 246).

However, master plans abandoned, high municipality turnover, the sale of downtown to the commercial elite, and speculation making land unprofitable to develop, led to a city little resembling the grand plans. The city became poorly maintained and congested as Kuwaiti citizens resided in the suburbs, only interacting with the city via cars and

offices. In the sixties, advisors urged the municipality to build residential neighbourhoods within the city walls to reinvigorate the city, but speculation had made land unaffordable for the government. Despite this, higher density or vertical housing was only seriously considered in the housing crisis of the seventies as the municipality set out a master plan to build inner-city housing for 4,650 middle-income Kuwaiti citizens, encouraging the educated middle-class to "take up residence in the heart of their city" and pioneer this alternative modern mode of living. However, in just a few decades, the suburban way of life had become engrained in the Kuwaiti psyche as the detached suburban model of a privately designed house on state-subsidised land had become synonymous with state modernity and progress as well as a basic right. Fear grew of a "national affront" due to increasing ascendency of non-Kuwaitis in the capital as citizens became a minority. Al-Sawaber's architect awarded the commission referred to the project "as a political gesture intended to draw back a native Kuwaiti presence to the capital's centre" (Al-Nakib, 2016, p. 148).

The building of Al-Sawaber complex occurred at a time of great intellectual and experimental work in Kuwaiti architectural circles. Kuwait City during this time can be seen as a utopian site of experimentation in which competing possibilities of world-making that were taking place in Kuwait from Arab nationalism to US neoliberalism, Socialist internationalism, and the Non-Aligned Movements. In 1966, there were over one-hundred and fifty Arab engineering consultancy firms operating in Kuwait, mostly from Egypt and Palestine. Leading practices in the region such as PACE (Pan Arab Consulting Engineers) began in Kuwait during this time at the height of Arab Nationalist ideology. Kuwaiti professionals, mostly trained in the UK and the US, worked alongside Arab professionals from the region, hiring south Asian contractors to carry out their work. Socialist State companies also operated in this competitive market such as the Yugoslav contractors on the iconic Kuwait Towers. After the nationalisation of oil in the seventies, the municipality accelerated the project to turn Kuwait City into a symbol of the modern state and about forty projects by renowned international architects were implemented to capture international attention. Narratives of 'imported modernism' ignore these dynamic complexities of exchange.

However, the government's invitation to Western and international architectural firms, was also an intentional side-lining of Arab firms. Arab nationalist ideology had taken a foothold in the Education Department which bubbled over in 1959 into a public rally celebrating the Egyptian president Abdel Nasser and the United Arab Republic at the modernist Shuwaikh school. Democracy was called for against the reign of Sabah as female students trampled on their abayas (Al-Rashoud, 2016). The next day, clubs were closed, the press suspended, and public demonstrations banned, as the ruling family began a decade of side-lining Arab nationalists. In this context, international architects were seen as politically safer than Arab ones. Both the commissioning of Western architects and the relocation of Kuwaitis to the city centre were ideological power moves to displace Arab nationalism.

In this architectural struggle between competing visions of modernity, a 24.5-hectare site, formerly the Al-Sawaber Fareej, was selected in the heart of the city for this promised vertical housing project. High profile international architects, including Dissing & Weitling, Georges Candilis and Arthur Erikson submitted proposals in the competition set up by the Municipality. Arthur Erickson, Canada's most famed architect won the commission. In 1977, the National Housing Authority (NHA) proposed Al-Sawaber project as "a landmark in the progressive housing program for Kuwait, serving as a prototype for future housing developments" (Al-Ragam, 2013, p. 246; Erickson, 2020). By the time that Erickson submitted his design proposal in 1977, the land that had once housed the Al-Sawaber fareej at the heart of the city had stood vacant for two decades.

> [Al-Sawaber] had to overcome the Kuwaitis' aversion to apartments, which endangered privacy through overlooking neighbours and the lack of a family courtyard. The stepped profile accommodated traditional enclosed courtyards … and provided a completely shaded and naturally ventilated inner street, like a souk… to counter the harsh summer sun and sandstorms (Erickson, 2020, p. 5).

The architect's plan: 900 stacked villas connected by pedestrian 'streets in the air' linking to amenities (Used with permission from the Arthur Erikson Foundation).

Local architect, Jassim Al-Nashmi, has referred to this as a luxury hybrid between modernism and local cultural practices. Each building was to have two apartments of 295m2 separated by stairs and lifts. The apartments contained four bedrooms, a dining room and a living room, a kitchen and two bathrooms and were fitted with central air conditioning systems.

However, the state "bastardised" Erickson's plan (Hayat, 2014). Contractors were pressurised into making cost-saving alterations requested by the state. Al-Sawaber was subcontracted to a Singaporean-Korean contracting firm that economised by abandoning the microclimate, halving the 900 units proposed, and building few amenities (Al-Ragam, 2013). On completion in 1989, by the end of the

year, Al-Sawaber was only 10% occupied (Al-Nakib, 2016). Erickson lamented: "the government lost sight of its original objective … only the unique outline was vaguely ours, and no Kuwaiti of means would live there" (Erickson, 2020, p. 5).

Al-Sawaber never came to symbolise a Kuwaiti notion of modernisation that was not, as Rizvi states, only the development of industrialised building processes and urban infrastructure, but also "the spread of ideals of progress and [the] standards of comfort" associated with the suburbs (Isenstadt and Rizvi, 2008). Rather than feeling modern, Al-Sawaber felt like a regression to a pre-oil concrete fareej, living in close proximity to your neighbours.

The housing authorities advertised Sawaber both as housing where residents could "enjoy all the amenities of modern city life while contributing to the larger community of Kuwait Town," suggesting reciprocal relations to the inner city and yet simultaneously claimed that Al-Sawaber would be "an urban oasis where Kuwaiti families can feel at home," suggesting a privileged detachment where citizens could remain separate from non-Kuwaitis (Al-Nakib, 2016, p. 199).

Two years after Al-Sawaber opened, Iraq invaded Kuwait. As refugees flooded into the complex, the spatial plan was put to one side. Local architects have told me that Failaka Island refugees were not allowed to return home but never obtained legal possession of their Al-Sawaber apartment. After the Gulf War, Kuwaitis married non-Kuwaitis (who because of this had no right to land) and female divorcees moved into Al-Sawaber. The Amiri Diwan set aside a number of apartments for war widows. Many other apartments were bought up by private investors who leased them to non-Kuwaitis and many flats began to be illegally sublet to migrant labourers, overcrowding the apartments with dorms (Al-Ragam, 2013). As the complex exceeded its maximum occupancy, despite many apartments remaining empty, public services in the complex were overwhelmed.

The Kuwaitis I spoke with talked about the residents of Al-Sawaber almost as if they had mythological status. One woman told me that

Al-Sawaber with the Liberation Tower in the background, an unmissable sight in the centre of the city. (Used with permission from photographer Abdul Raouf Murad© 2017)

one of the Amiri rulers, Sheikh Jaber, was an admirer of the German social housing he had seen on his travels and so became a patron of Al-Sawaber providing apartments without leases to women whose husbands were killed in the war. I heard stories of men who owned villas but lived a double life keeping foreign wives in Al-Sawaber. Some spoke of blocks that houses well-known actors and television personalities alongside apartments overcrowded with over twenty men with stoves in every room. For some of those who had visited Al-Sawaber that I spoke with, the experience was very shocking to see such poverty and poor living standards, not just for migrants, but for Kuwaitis themselves.

Yet despite not living up to the utopic plans for the site, residents appropriated the space and apartments to their needs. By 2000, Al-

Sawaber's facade began to look like a patchwork of DIY improvements. Some apartments had blocked off windows for privacy, others closed in and annexed balconies to increase size. Some extended their apartments onto the ground floor, blocking fire exits, while others personalised the hallways from the lifts putting down astroturf and chairs and hanging pictures.

Although the state privileged some and marginalised others through architecture, Al-Sawaber is key example of how different groups have resisted dominant narratives and how state goals can be warped. Al-Sawaber was not built to display state power but was a reluctant state experiment, an anomaly that continued to challenge state norms throughout its life. Despite its enormity, its prominent location downtown and views of the Liberation Tower and key city-sights, Al-Sawaber never succeeded in capturing local imagination. It became what my interlocutors referred to as a backdrop to life in the city.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the foundations of Arab modernity, on which Kuwait (and particularly the Arab Nationalist opposition) had rested, received some heavy blows. In 1967, Egypt suffered a "confidence-shattering defeat" against a foreign power, Israel, which caused "the Arab world to re-examine… the cultural assumptions through which their modernity was constructed" (Armbrust, 1996, p. 7). Socialist Arab-nationalist politics and the economy were devastated in defeated countries. Islamist movements filled the vacuum as Gulf countries prospered from rising oil prices. Confronted with "the democratic and cultural 'disturbances' of modernity", the critical 1976 parliament was dissolved and the state formed new alliances with conservative, Islamic forces in Kuwait repudiating calls for reform. Progressive and Arab-nationalist groups were side-lined as progressive values were challenged, including dance and co-education (Al-Ragam 2018). Stanek emphasises that for architects, reference to an "often-unspecified 'Islamic tradition'" became a requirement for governmental commissions in the 1970s (Stanek, 2015, p. 375). Al-Ragam labels this a "crisis in modernity" (Al-Ragam, 2019, p. 377). And finally, when Iraq invaded in 1991, "none of Kuwait's achievements as a modern nation-state … had been able

A personalised elevator hallway in Al-Sawaber. (Used with permission from the 'savesawaber' Instagram account 2013 https://www.instagram.com/savealsawaber/)

to vouchsafe its sovereignty in 1990" (Al-Nakib, 2018, p. 15). Prior to the Gulf war, Palestinians comprised 20% of Kuwait's population. Most were denied re-entry or expulsed; only 20,000 remained, no longer allowed to fill government jobs or other positions of authority (O'Toole, 2015). In the 2000s, the "long live the Arab Nation" line in school children's salute to the flag was replaced with "Love live Kuwait and Long live the Emir". Kuwait was no longer looking to Arab modernism for direction.

In this climate, the demolition of Al-Sawaber fulfilled a convenient ideological. Al-Sawaber became a scapegoat; any deterioration or social issues were used as evidence to condemn the project. Several factors contributed to Al-Sawaber's deterioration. Without a homeowner's union, residents were unable to generate profit from the commercial facilities to make the complex maintenance financially sustainable. Residents held the government responsible for upkeep. In the 2000s, fires periodically broke out in Al-Sawaber apartment

blocks; some of which, informants speculated, may have been started deliberately to blame migrants. Al-Sawaber became branded in a 2009 Al-Watan Daily article as a "Complex Unfit for Living, Haven for Prostitution" (Oteifa, 2009). Yet, this ignores the unaddressed abandonment by the state, lack of a union, lack of communal amenities and lack of economic self-sufficiency. Many Kuwaitis I spoke to referred to various different calamities in Al-Sawaber which reflected what was being said in the press about the building, from being a "pseudo red light district" to having a drinking and drugs problem, to finding weapons inside apartments.

Though a minority group of architects and campaigners embraced an alternative narrative of modernity and sought to preserve Al-Sawaber, most Kuwaitis accepted the narrative of the 'strategy of defamiliarization' which discredited Al-Sawaber as a symbol of the failure of modernity. Throughout the late 2000s and early 2010s, the housing authority began to appropriate the apartments for meagre compensation. Others continued living in the complex, campaigning for a better resolution. While most of my interlocutors were in some way opposed to the demolition of Al-Sawaber, they all admitted that theirs was not the majority view. They conceded that the majority view was not to keep Al-Sawaber: it was considered seedy and an eye-sore. As one architect put it, "while the architectural community protested, the rest of the country laughed." The hashtag #save_sawaber started trending in Kuwait in 2018 as the government made plans to demolish the complex. Contemporary Art Platform Kuwait held an exhibition in March 2019, titled 'Looking at Al-Sawaber' featuring pieces from contemporary artists. In early 2019, the question of preserving Al-Sawaber was raised in the National Assembly by MP Mohammad Al-Dalal (11/1960, 2019). The social media Campaign Save Al-Sawaber organised events around the complex to garner public support for an alternative future for the complex. In January, the architectural community filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Finance using the Law of Antiquities (the Amiri Decree of 1960) but were unsuccessful. One protestor whom I spoke to admitted that no-one expected they would be able to overturn the decision to demolish it, they wanted to hold the government accountable.

Man walks past graffiti art on a walkway in Al-Sawaber. (Used with permission from architect Jassim Al-Nashmi)

Urban Dancer 'Doss'. (Used with permission from TJC films)

However, even as it was being shut down, Al-Sawaber could not be contained as a dystopia, becoming again a place of imagination and potential through the art forms and political activity that ensued. The PK Jaguars, a Kuwaiti parkour group began to use the complex as their urban playground. Kuwaiti rappers and dancers filmed music videos, Filipino photographers did fashion shoots and graffiti artists used Al-Sawaber as their canvas. The architecture that registered evidence of violence on the materiality of its structure was not accepted as abject, but as a place of possibility.

The complex was slowly abandoned as people were forced to accept the governments terms. Eventually the electricity supply was cut off, but still some residents remained, operating generators. Fareed Abdal, speaking to me referred to this as a "terrorising of the people... the lobby was so strong. They delayed the time of the hearing in court... bulldozers came, firefighter, police – it was a scene! They destroyed in name of maintenance and renewal". Kasim Al-Rasheed, one of the last Kuwaiti citizens to leave, showed Al-Qabas News around his apartment, shouting, "they will delete me before they delete my apartment" (Al-Qabas TV, 2019).

Through a concerted political crackdown on Arab nationalism, building a more conservative parliament, and constructing a discourse of modernity as a foreign invasion, the state's "strategy of defamiliarization" created a narrative that abjectified Kuwait's modernity and modern infrastructure. The architects and protestors, however, held another narrative of modernity: a history of reform and innovation that should be heralded and preserved. As photographer Abdul Raouf reminded me, an architect doesn›t make a building with an expiry date. The state bastardised and disowned a project which it trumpeted just a generation before.

In March 2019, bulldozers arrived and the dream of al-Sawaber was toppled. "What really shook me was how fast it came down. The beam and post pre-fab made it come down so elegantly, it didn't seem real," admitted one woman. It was hoped that Al-Sawaber, as well as the responsibility for its deterioration, could be disregarded, its

absence making way for the new. Five years on, the plot lies empty, another field for migrant workers to play cricket. It is evident that the destruction of the site was more important than its replacement, its propulsion was simply destructive. Ultimately, Al-Sawaber was a place of ambiguity that did not sit comfortably with the state's vision of a controlled modernity of the privileged citizen. Al-Sawaber feels to be 'matter out of place', a taxonomic nightmare whose demographic did not fit with a system where all citizens live segregated from non-nationals in the suburbs.

In the era after the construction of Al-Sawaber, much of the Arab modernist and nationalist dreams which captured the national imagination in the early oil era were discredited by wartime betrayals. The cultural assumptions of Kuwaiti modernity were challenged and its destabilising effects catalysed a nostalgic shift towards an imagined tradition grounded in the pre-oil past (Al-Ragam, 2018). Kuwait's experimentation with modernity ultimately failed to live up to expectations as it failed to safeguard them from invasion or economically supersede their neighbours. Post-2003, architecture became an easy target for the malaises of society and the shortcomings of the state. This narrative which defines the modern city by loss and failure, discredits not only the material forms, but the social and political reforms and innovation they fostered. This "strategy of defamiliarization" acts as a buffer against reform and innovation.

Al-Sawaber complex can also be understood as a problematic 'event' in the history of Kuwait's modernity. Conceptualising Al-Sawaber's spacetime as an event renders the life of the complex inseparable from its spatial form and from the understandings of political life that it has fostered. One woman spoke of walking through Al-Sawaber as "monumental, like walking through a film – dystopian but poetic. A beautiful spatial experience." Al-Sawaber condensed a sensory spatial experience of modernist history into a crystallisation of other parts of life: big histories lived concretely through the sensation. Al-Sawaber contained within it: a renouncing of the suburb, whether intentional or not; a historical experimentation with 'modern' ways of living; an

encounter with the foreigner both in its architectural design and in the cohabitation of many groups. Al-Sawaber in many ways encapsulates histories of utopic dreams in Kuwait.

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