

Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence

Historically, the State of Kuwait was exceptionally receptive to large waves of Palestinian immigration due to its support for the Pan-Arab movement and its adoption of the Palestinian cause. Palestinians first arrived in Kuwait as visitors involved in educational missions around the time that oil was discovered in the Burgan Field in 1938. As a result of the 1948 and 1967 wars, more Palestinians settled there, and by 1990 Palestinians in Kuwait numbered 400,000. As Kuwait's development plans were set into motion, Palestinians found themselves players in the golden era of the construction of the Kuwaiti nation. Prior to the age of armed struggle, Palestinians in Kuwait strove to persist in an environment striding steadily towards progress and change while expectantly awaiting the materialization of a state of their own.

The Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence (MoMRtA) questions the impact of the presence or absence of minority communities and subcultures on the nations they take residence in. In specific, MoMRtA investigates the unchronicled impact of the unique Palestinian society that emerged in Kuwait, one that contributed to and lived the modernization of Kuwait and the pioneering projects undertaken in this vein. Its exploration is conducted through a collection of twenty-eight commissioned objects that purposefully conjure the fading of, and thereby recall, the golden era of Kuwaiti and Palestinian-Kuwaiti society. MoMRtA employs crafts, art, and memory to produce an exhibition project that is presented as an intervention at the Museum of Modern Art in Kuwait opening on 22 May 2012, under the patronage of the Kuwait National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters.

MoMRtA's collection of objects proposes a specific narrative for the social history of Palestinians in Kuwait. Rather than glorify any one personality or concern themselves with stories of well-known persons, these objects relay the contemporary history of a group (through its individuals). In light of the absence of collective images, narratives, and archives, memory is taken as the main point of reference. Fragile and fragmented, this is a memory that has been accumulated, dismantled, reassembled, and at times lost. The museum's objects conflate pieces from this recollected past in order to recognize and make sense of the present as well as address, imagine and reclaim the legacy of Palestinians in Kuwait today. Falling somewhere between the real and unreal, the fabricated objects appear to be brand new, invaluable, and unique ones, but an element within them always verges on the unimaginable and impossible. Each piece within the collection is too elaborate to be contained but also inherently unusable.

MoMRtA is an independent authority that reflexively poses questions about who possesses the right to produce a museum like itself. It embodies a proposal for explaining this faltering history while at the same time questions the conditions of a museum in general. Its objects are similar to those required by any museum, inextricably and uniquely linked to the existence of Palestinians in Kuwait as much as to the universal, collective, personal, and arguable nature of all museo-artifacts. This museum attempts to free its objects from the confines of a specific structure or site for permanent display, favoring the rotating of its collection in exhibitions hosted by other museums and spaces both inside and outside of Kuwait. The place and time of an encounter with the museum's collection continuously change so that there is no local audience who can access it in a permanent, periodic, or fixed way. Instead, a multiplicity of audiences becomes familiar with the museum's collection through its travels and in its varied forms of display. Its first exhibition, however, undoubtedly had to take place in Kuwait.

Each fabricated object from this nomadic museum's collection lies somewhere along a timeline that connects two points derived from Palestinian history. The appearance and material makeup of these objects are without a doubt linked to this period. *Gold* is a formative material and not just an encasing in *Ruler* (Cevdet Erek), which takes the shape of a golden time line that begins and ends with two Palestinian calamities: 1948 and 1990. *Necklace* (Muhannad Abboud) is also carved in gold and reads "We are all for Kuwait, and Kuwait is for us", a famous contractual phrase pronounced by the Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber Al-Sabah and reiterated throughout the age of the *Ruler* by nationals. It is impossible to don this necklace; its chains are two stiff, parallel cylinders that refuse to bend in order to connect its links. The objects in this exhibition are produced from the margins of an existence of which they are an integral element. The viewer must look closely at the decorative details of *Dress* (Raed Ibrahim) to see how its usual Kuwaiti patterns have been replaced with designs from traditional Palestinian cross stitch. The neck opening of this Palestinian/Kuwaiti dress has also been considerably shrunk so much so that it becomes impossible to wear and leaves one only with the possibilities of remaining outside or lying beneath its cover.

Today, Palestinians also reside outside of the history book of Kuwait rather than in its midst. The pages of the history book of Palestinians in Kuwait are blank and fading. Their unrecorded history is in the process of dissolving and so too its blank book within the pool of undocumented events in *History* (Mohssin Harraki). The elements of time wear away at the work while the production of other books that might give proof for or refute the existence of Palestinians in Kuwait continues to be deferred. The museum then embodies another direction, a first-time display, a proposal, a critique of a reading or chronicling of events in a certain light, a document for an unrecorded narrative that slips further and further into oblivion. The disappearance of this history is not unlike the inevitable vanishing of traces inherent in the fragile surface of *Memory* (Min Rasy). Formed from Kuwait's dust, any impressions left behind shift and change at the slightest touch. *Memory* dares to willingly acknowledge and enable the impossibility of affixing a memory of a place.

Images that affirm the existence of Palestinians in Kuwait necessitate memory, narrative, and personal archives. One can piece together the parts of the story through the interpretation of the museum's objects in whatever order one might choose. A box of *Cocoa* (Kamel Abu Yahya) boasts pictures of Kuwait which on close inspection are evidently inaccurate depictions. Imagination, it seems, is what is added to a story so that images become a translation of its words.

In *Fils* (Mesrop), a section from the heart of the local currency is removed and transplanted to Palestine. At that time, five percent of the salaries of Palestinians in Kuwait was donated to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), with other amounts given to support varied sustainable development projects aimed at building the Palestinian nation and feeding and educating its people. These percentages and donations were tallied to what was spent in the local markets of Kuwait on an assortment of living needs. The Kuwaiti *fils* in some way then becomes a Palestinian *qursh* too. And while many Palestinians in Kuwait did not live meagerly or minimally, the Kuwaiti government itself was generous in its spending on ambitious Palestinian projects that grew from initiatives within. Unions of students, workers, farmers, athletes, women, and the family, and a range of political parties (until 1990), the PLO, and various committees were formed by Kuwaitis for Palestine and the Palestinian people. Year after year, Kuwait supported Palestinian athletics teams who played for fourteen clubs, each of which was named after a Palestinian city.

In the map *Hawalli* (Mohamed Abusal), indicated lines of movement emphasize the circulation embodied by projects, facilities, housing developments, and schools in the area of Hawalli, a once heavily populated Palestinian area in Kuwait city. These lines emerge from Hawalli to connect with other areas in Kuwait and then extend to link with projects beyond its borders, from schools, universities, and mosques in Palestine to refugee camps, houses, and educational initiatives in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, reaching as far as international sporting events like the 1984 Olympics in California. The work *Yalazrag* (Mohssin Al Tamar) references the five minute segment that preceded the daily eight am news on Kuwaiti radio when the Palestinian league games were played out in Kuwait's stadiums. The fourteen Palestinian clubs competed on Kuwaiti soil in various athletic games, from soccer and basketball to volleyball and boxing, and the results of these games were announced in local newspapers side by side with the results of the Kuwaiti league and other local competitions.

The first sentence that appears in the Kuwaiti curriculum for elementary writing and that is referenced in the notebook *Copy* (Bilal Chrif) is "Hamad has a Pencil". Only in this museum, Hamad can be seen accompanied by fellow student Humus, who carries a pen, in three drawings printed on 35mm transparencies installed in slide viewers. Between 1967 and 1976, many of Kuwait's public schools held evening shifts to accommodate the large numbers of Palestinian students who arrived in Kuwait following the 'Naksa', the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war. In the school grounds of the 'Abdallah Al Salem School', annual celebrations were held in commemoration of the establishment of the PLO. No doubt that Hamad and Humus's comradery dates back to when they shared a classroom bench at such a school.

At that time, Hamad and Humus might have also read and collected issues of the magazine *Al Arabi*, the only magazine that continues to feature topics suitable for publishing across the Arab world. *Al Arabi* in this way overcame material and news obstacles and fulfilled the promise of Arab unity that transgresses the temporality of borders and regimes. The special edition of this magazine, published in the museum in the form of a light box rather than in print, announces the news of the completion of a bridge that connects Failakah Island to Kuwait City. Failakah received the first wave of Palestinian educators to arrive in Kuwait in the 1930s and was the subject of a series of unrealized museums. The bridge thus facilitates access to the island, the proposed home for MoMRtA. Within the collection too, and featured on the cover of this *Al Arabi* magazine, is *Museum* (Nabeel Younis), a Lego brick model depicting IM Pei's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art and a suggestion for the design of MoMRtA's building.

During this period in Kuwait, fathers owned all types of American cars, which were widely popular then but to which their relationship would eventually change as of 1990. With prices of gasoline much higher elsewhere than in Kuwait, whatever the car owned and by whomever, comparisons to life in Kuwait and its ease have complicated the process of Palestinians acclimatizing to their new environments. Included in the exhibition is the side mirror of a *Buick* (Bruno Fantoni), carved from marble and engraved with the commonly present warning: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear".

The infamous farewell phrase of Kuwaitis, "Don't Forget Us", pleadingly warns those departing from failing to recollect. This single phrase, etched onto *Soap* (Amin Al Tabakhi), is inherently threatened by dissolution in each new instance of use. In the collection is another object that intentionally disintegrates in the space and time of its display. It is a giant orange *Celebration* (Ziad Hilal) cake that brings to mind the fruits of Jaffa and pays tribute to its vast orchards, especially of olive trees. These were the trees that seasonally bore olives and oil, transported from Palestine to Palestinians around the world including Kuwait. A real-size reproduction of an oil tank is presented as a *Trophy* (Rebecca Joselyn) within the museum. Created from pure silver, the tank is marked with English hallmark stamps, no doubt pertaining to the time in which this object was produced. Palestinians were the trophy bestowed by the British Mandate at its end to the region, Kuwait being no exception.

The environment of Kuwait forms the backdrop for the museum's collection among which is a glass sandglobe. Visitors must shake the sandglobe for the sand within it to take on the appearance of *Touz* (Michael Dickson) whirlwinds particular to Kuwait. In contrast with the grains of sand that rustle around, time appears frozen in a decorative pillow that reveals a screenshot from the famous game of Atari entitled *Conditions* (Khadijeh Yosef). Popular during this period in Kuwait's history, Atari was an essential part and reflection of the technological particularities and living circumstances afforded by it and shared by Kuwaitis and Palestinians alike. Palestinians in Kuwait and Kuwaitis were also challenged by the same dangers and threats. One common threat was that posed by the oil spill in the Nowruz Field in Iran, creeping across the Arabian Gulf towards the shores of Kuwait. "Yatna Bug'at el Zait" (The Oil Spill is Approaching) is one of the songs that overtook the country to raise awareness among inhabitants, in a humorous fashion albeit, of the potential incoming threat. Hanging from the ceiling of the museum is an electrically charged glass lighting fixture in the shape of an oil drop on the verge of leaking that happens to be a *Lightbulb* (Pieke Bergmans). The threat of the oil spill returns only in a more violent form post-1990.

This museum's collection questions if the home of Palestinians in Kuwait was formed and connected to the memory of entire generations before it was connected to their destinies. *No Home* is an updated version of Zakaria Tamer and Muhieddine El Labbad's story that revisits the encasings that typically housed objects in Kuwait during the era of the golden ruler. Architectural plans of houses, almost identical to those inhabited by Palestinians in Kuwait, are etched in the work *Home* (George Vlosich) using the game Etch-a-Sketch and encased in its famous red frame.

And while the keys to doors, closets, and cars owned by these houses' inhabitants are recreated from transparent acrylic for this museum in larger-than-life size, the return key - the key to possessions in Palestine - is bestowed with another impossibility in *Return* (Hakim Jamain). *Return* is literally the return button of a computer keyboard, the sole function of which is to follow the conclusory period by starting over each time at the beginning of a new line.

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