

Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence; primordial voice given to the absent ones

By: Ala Younis



Buick, Bruno Fantoni, 2012, Marble. 20 x 15 x 12 cm.

*'Yes, no place in the world possesses so many interesting aspects to its overall anatomy. Archaeologists and architects, photographers and pilots, experts and labourers, doctors and nurses, students and teachers, merchants and employees, contractors and their competitors, all live a very interesting, harmonious, and agitated life on the most unique spot in the world.'*¹

The collection of Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence (MoMRtA) is limited to the period from 1948 to 1990, a golden timeline measuring eight centimetres and titled "A Ruler". 1990 is situated in

the middle of the ruler, for we are now past that time mark. Half of the ruler marks absence; half represents the time during which Palestinians lived in Kuwait. The timeframe of the ruler is the time during which this large minority developed a special kind of presence in Kuwait. The perimeters of the ruler are two points of entry, two points of departure. Two migrations, two returns, two linear relations between leaving and (non) return. The Palestinians in Kuwait in 1957 numbered 15,173 (7.3% of Kuwait's population); in 1961 they numbered 37,482 (11.7% of the population); in 1965

they numbered 77,712 (16.6% of the population; in 1970 they numbered 147,696 (20% of the population); in 1975 they numbered 204,178 (20.5% of the population); and in 1981 they numbered 299,710 (20.9% of the population). In 1990, the Palestinians in Kuwait were estimated at 400,000 being 18.7% of the population. Government employees have put the number of Palestinians in Kuwait following the war at 450,000. In 1995, they numbered 26,000 (0.01% of the population)². Numerous Palestinians of Kuwait stand with their arms spread out between two times and places, while pages of the “History” book of the Palestinians in Kuwait, devoid of any register, break apart. Details of the accomplishments that worker communities and minorities have made in the environments to which they have travelled are neglected. With the first arrival of teachers in 1936, Palestinians, among others, began contributing to Kuwait’s national awakening before Kuwait’s oil had been discovered and before Palestine had been lost. This museum focuses on the success of the economic and social integration of Palestinian refugees in the modernization projects of oil-rich states. *Produced by MinRASY Projects, the Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence (MoMRtA) is a para-museum. Something like, something near, but not a museum. This ‘not’ may span from negation to denial without implying a dialectical relationship. A radical contiguity is affirmed in the very gesture of exhibiting in modern art museums. Coquettishly mimicking the names of such museums, with a zest of self-derision in the final anagram of art (which one can also read as Arty A!), MoMRtA opposes to the heroic values of modernism, such as progress, based on time continuity, another idea and experience of time. Some measuring devices in this thought provoking collection, such as the empty time ruler with two Palestinian exodus dates, and a sand hourglass without sand, convey the idea of a temporal incommensurability. Recycling the lost times of those who left their homes years ago with their large keys, hoping they will soon return and open their same doors with those rusty “museum” keys, a collection of different transparent keys, with the Mac “return” one, does not simply work like surrealist paradoxes, expressing the inanity of their subject. At a primary level, all the MoMRtA collection can be understood as surrealist paradoxical objects. Another, multilevel, reading is possible. Many*

objects, in this manufactured response to absence, work like a Rosetta stone. One can read the same sign in the Kuwaiti official idiom, parasitized by different levels of common Kuwaiti citizens’ talk. A primordial voice is also given to the absent ones, Palestinians who think of themselves as a part of Kuwait’s history; it cannot be heard without the echoes of the romantic revolutionary one, adopted not only by Palestinians, but by all of us, Arabs or justice lovers from anywhere, who adopt their cause.³

The items in the collection are arranged in inspiration by a famous Palestine Alphabet poster, published by PLO’s Dar Al-Fata Al-Arabi, that allocates a Palestinian symbol for each letter. In the museum, each object becomes a Palestinian letter from Kuwait: “Buick” is a wing-mirror carved out of white marble, of the type found on the American cars once popular in Kuwait. On this mirror is the warning that appeared during the mid-1980s: “Objects in mirror are closer than they appear.” A box of “Cacao” bears images of Kuwait made imaginary by the addition of elements to contemporary photographs, creating a non-real scene of Kuwait today. Visitors must look closely at the embellishments of a traditional Kuwaiti dress to see how they have been replaced by Palestinian embroidery and how the head opening has been made impossibly small, forcing one to remain outside or below this gown and not within it. Those who have been raised on the interpretation of Palestinian icons will know how to interpret the Celebration’s gigantic orange cake; it will remind them of the oranges that their grandfathers grieved over in Jaffa and its orchards. This orange is left to fall apart during the exhibition of the museum, while the fingerprints of some of the public are left upon its skin. Those raised in Kuwait will know how the toy in the Arabic Sesame Street, “Open Sesame!”, taught Palestinian children to count numbers in the Kuwaiti dialect. Characters of chalk, delicate and fragile, plead, or warn, those leaving of forgetfulness, as in the well-known farewell of Kuwaitis, “don’t forget us”. This sentence is carved into a bar of soap, confronting the dangers of dissolution in new places and times. *“Nouman and Malsoun were characters designed specifically for the Arab version of Sesame Street, produced by the Gulf Cooperation Council Joint Program Production Institution in Kuwait. The street brought together actors, composers, illustrators, and*



Right to left Patch, Museum, Al Arabi.

technicians from all the Arab countries, and was among the very first Arab educational programs. Production halted in 1990, and Nouman and Malsoun disappeared like so many others at the time. Some say they left Kuwait with the Palestinians, carrying grief for that miniature homeland (Sesame Street) that included everyone. They all left lightly, with no direction as their destination. And while waiting for the bus, they stood beside a Palestinian teacher who told them “I came to Kuwait in 1936 and I don’t have another homeland. I feel as though I’m chalk, and when the lesson ended so did I!”. Nouman looked at Malsoun and didn’t say a word ⁴”. Kuwait offered Palestinians to live and extend their space of being as “Palestinians”; to celebrate anniversaries, produce and sell traditional craft, speak the dialects, and fundraise for support. This won the hearts of many, who came to think of Kuwait as a second home. For those who left, they still speak of this time favourably or with a sad tone

of regret. Palestinians have now moved from Kuwait, once and forever, as a result of the Iraqi invasion in 1990. Palestine (the nation) in Kuwait (the home) was “Hawalli”, the area with the highest density middle-class population. In 1990, its residents were Palestinian teachers, engineers, civil servants, and politicians, living beside local associations, groceries, offices, health clinics, and government and community-run schools. Hawalli was the stronghold of the Palestinian populace; in it were the offices of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the headquarters of Palestinian associations. The affairs of 14 sporting clubs bearing the names of Palestinian cities were administrated from Hawalli, as well as a Palestinian sports league whose news was broadcast for five minutes every morning just before the 8 am news on Kuwait Radio. Entire Palestinian sports teams travelled to participate in global sporting events in the name of Palestine. *“Every human has a home; Home*



Right to left Buick, Gathering, Dress, Fils, Celebration, and Cacao.

is the place that gives him peace of mind and happiness. The Palestinian has no home, And the tents and houses where he lives are not his homes: Where is the Palestinian's home? Today, the Palestinian does not live in his home"⁵. In this collection, the museum does not ask whether there was No Home to the Palestinians in Kuwait. Rather, it asks about the home in Kuwait that was, and which became tied to the memory of entire generations before being tied to their fates. A new version of the "Home" story takes another look at homes for things that appeared in Kuwait during the golden age of "A Ruler". The lines of a floor plan for nearly identical apartments that Palestinians and others lived in is repeated in the work "Home", this time joltingly scratched into an Etch-a-Sketch with its well-known red frame. The keys to these homes in Kuwait are remade and enlarged in clear acrylic in the collection titled "Return". Its key to return, a new impossible, is a button on a keyboard whose function

is to proceed to that following the full-stop, to make a fresh start at the beginning of a new line. Like museums of natural history, everything seems of intuitive use, or familiar, except that something about each object has transformed and connected it to the story of the Palestinians of Kuwait. Something has been added, or subtracted, something has grown expensive, or grown trifling, or grown deep. Everything stands somewhere between impossibility and exaggeration.

In 1962, Kuwait's inhabitants had the highest per capita income in the Middle East, and Palestinian labours were among the preferred imported work force. Following the 1967 war, with more numbers forced now to settle in Kuwait, Palestinians found themselves players in the era of the construction of the Kuwaiti nation. The legitimacy of the Palestinian's presence and employment in Kuwait was nonetheless still linked to the legitimacy of their own cause. The Palestinian cause remains,



Conditions, Khadijeh Yosef, 2012. Canvas, thread, 50 x 50cm.

for many, the unbreakable bond that has inflamed and continues to inspire projects of Arab unity and cooperation. In 1967, Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah (1965–77) expressed his satisfaction with Palestinian workers in Kuwait to his guest Ahmad Al-Shukeiri, the first president of the PLO. *“Look at them, amongst their number are the finest surgeons, the finest doctors and the finest administrators. Without these skills it would have impossible to appoint them to their current positions.”*⁶

The small coin denomination “Fils” grows into a special issue, cantered with an opening of about 5% of compulsory deduction from Palestinian employees’ salaries paid to the PLO, the rest being spent on their costs of living in Kuwait itself. The Kuwaiti “fils” has grown to resemble the Palestinian “qursh”. Between 1967 and 1976, many public schools in Kuwait were transformed during the afternoon into PLO schools to absorb the multitude of Palestinian students who

arrived following the 1967 war. The halls of Abdullah Al-Salem School held the annual “Fatah Festivals” with its flags, songs, divisional figureheads, and visitors. Kuwait’s elementary school notebooks open with the phrase “Hamad has a pen.” consisting of three drawings on transparent paper in small slide viewers: “Hamad has a pen”, “Humus has a pen”, and “Hamad likes Humus”. Surely a collegial relation developed between Hamad (the Kuwaiti) and Humus (the Palestinian, or “Sammoun” as he was also nick-named) when they shared a school desk. Perhaps Hamad and Humus sat waiting for the same programs during the limited television broadcast in “Patch”. Perhaps they both followed, and then collected, issues of “Al-Arabi” magazine, whose archives were entirely lost during the invasion of Kuwait. A determination to retrieve the lost archive led to its re-collection through purchase and donation. Three special issues of Al-Arabi appear in the

museum in the form of light boxes and representing the position of the educational publishing project. The cover of the first issue bears an image of a model of Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence. It is formed of Lego blocks figured to simulate the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in the United States, designed by the architect I. M. Pei. Kuwaiti territory remains filled with designs by this famous architect and other stars in his field. This first issue of these special editions announces that there are increasing numbers of visitors to the “Museum” following the completion of the Kuwait-Failaka bridge project. The Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence is imagined to be on Failaka Island, the land of halted museum projects and the residence of the first teachers. The cover of the second issue announces the “disappearance of the golden Sammoun.” The museum guard says that the wax figure of men gathering around the “Sammoun” has melted after it was displayed on a light box at the museum’s first exhibition in Kuwait. The museum curator says that a globe that appears to have melted atop another light box did not in fact melt, but rather released air after a public transportation system was sewn onto its skin. This system has lines branching from Hawalli to neighbourhoods and vital public utilities and projects that support or employ Palestinians, not only to and from Hawalli, but the entire world, and possibly even to the 1984 Olympiad in California. The museum patron says that the museum 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. That the collection is an independent authority that reflexively poses questions about who possesses the right to produce a museum like itself, embodying a proposal for explaining a faltering history while at the same time questioning the conditions of a museum in general. It is like the “Necklace” (*We are all for Kuwait and Kuwait is for us*)⁷ that cannot be worn, a chain that ends in two rigid cylinders that do not bend and do not connect. “*Kuwait exists there: that which lived in his mind only as a kind of dream or imagining, exists there. It is surely something real, of rock and dust and water and sky, and not the thing that hovers in his weary head. There, beyond*

all doubt, are alleys and streets, men and women and children running”⁸. Imprinted on the museum’s stamps are the different means of the Palestinians’ arrival to Kuwait, whether legal or illegal, including the famed water tank that was the main protagonist of Ghassan Kanafani’s novella. These stamps have been illustrated in a modern style inspired by the type of Palestinian art that became widespread in the 1970s and until 1990. Kuwait’s environment serves as the background to this collection. Among the museum’s collection is a glass ball that holds sand. When shaken, the golden grains of sand are stirred up like the Touz sandstorms of Kuwait. Then they settle to reveal a golden gate with an open door, part of which is sunken into the floor of the glass ball. As the grains of sand hasten to return to the base of the glass ball, time is frozen in a pillow, whose screen is borrowed from a well-known Atari game. This game was wide-spread at the time, and formed part of the technological and temporal specificity of Kuwait’s conditions, when Palestinians and Kuwaitis together faced environmental and technological conditions and threats posed by the encroaching oil leak from the Nowruz oil field via the Arabian Gulf and reaching the shores of Kuwait during the Iran-Iraq war. “A drop of oil has come to us” was a song that made waves throughout the country, informing local residents in a witty way of the possible threat of the encroaching oil leak. From the ceiling of the museum hangs a light fixture in the form of a liquid drop, slanted and fed with electricity to become light bulb. The threat of an oil leak returned, intensified, post-1990. The oil can, in which Palestinians carried olives and olive oil as gifts wherever they went in the world, has been re-produced at its original size in the form of a trophy of sterling silver bearing British silver hallmarks for the monarchy’s diamond jubilee, while the museum’s Medallion is etched with the mandate crown and falcon that bestowed the Palestinians to their neighbouring countries. Among the first wave of Palestinians to come to Kuwait, were army members, as part of an agreement between the British and the Kuwaiti rulers. Medals are symbolic objects, that out live the recipient. The true medal of honour that could have been bestowed to the Palestinians was naturalisation, this was the real medal that waves of immigrants strove for. “*An awareness of*

*national identity, insofar as it is the antithesis of a competing identity and a precondition for confronting that alternative, demands that the Palestinian experience be documented and fixed in two forms. The first form is the duty of the writers, yet which writer is capable of writing the definitive national Palestinian history, of setting down this history in a single systematic and comprehensive volume? How can the writings of Palestinian poets and novelists be come a “national literature” in the broader social sense of the term? At this juncture the question (itself a crucial one) moves from the province of “writing” to that of national cultural policy, which preserves the historical events and objects of the Palestinian people in libraries where they continue to live”*⁹. The museum liberates its collection of acquisitions from a specific building or site in which it might be permanently displayed. Instead, the museum moves with its collection in exhibitions hosted by other museums. The production of this traveling museum’s collection has been undertaken by an international selection of artists, illustrators, designers, and craftsmen invited to create the collection’s pieces. Discussions with those participating in the small collection were grounded in documents, films, and products that record its period, as well as a great deal of debate, narration, research and more research, citation, and elaboration. The place and time for visiting the museum’s collection changes constantly, and thus a local public does not always or regularly access the museum’s collection. Its first exhibition was naturally in Kuwait. For its premiere exhibition, the museum commissioned 28 objects that purposefully conjure the fragile and fragmented, fading memory of this once-emerged unique Palestinian Kuwaiti society. The exhibition was set up at the Museum of Modern Art in Kuwait, and , had an opening party laid on, official sponsorship and provided a visitors’ book. The opening was attended by hundreds of guests, Kuwaitis, Palestinians, other Arabs and foreigners. Eyes widened, eyebrows lifted and silence fell, as those present were forced to deal with the narrative’s entry into regions of uncertain interpretation, and then their faces began to reflect responses and discoveries. *“My appreciation and respect for this beautiful feat, which has brought back memories I didn’t know I had. My thanks from my heart. However, I’m not sure about. . .”*¹⁰. The day of the opening

in Kuwait, the sky blanketed with thick clouds of sand, was perhaps more a day for responses than for questions. Many visitors arrived assuming that the museum would simply offer yet another narrative of Palestinian torment, but instead it did no more than examine an existence that mixed comfort with hardship, and which is remembered only in the fondest terms. The museum makes no attempt to create pieces that look as if they were salvaged from the golden days of Palestinian life in Kuwait, but rather offers pieces in the absence of those authentic (arti)facts. Each exhibit is accompanied by a short text and placed on its own stand with a cover to maintain the appearance of separation from the public. The exhibition lasted for one month, in which time it received between ten and forty visitors per day, compelling the host museum to extend it for another month.

The disappearance of this history is not unlike the inevitable vanishing of traces inherent in the fragile surface of memory. Formed from Kuwait’s dust, the visitors did not know they were leaving their impressions behind at the slightest touch to the very thin layer of the dust that accumulated to the surface of this concrete slab for months. “Memory“ dares to willingly acknowledge and enable the impossibility of affixing a memory of a place. In an online illustrated novel set in Ahmadi, Kuwait, in 1967, a wife of an expatriate writes on her time there: *“The air becomes visible, even inside the house. A mist, then a yellow light. The sand invades the house, pushing past the wet towels lining the rattling windows and doors. We force smiles in case the children are scared. But there is something exciting about it. Like everything about our life in Ahmadi. It’s out of the ordinary. We could never have dreamed this. The sandstorm passes, the dust subsides, the sky is blue. Everyday life begins again.”*¹¹. The second intervention took place at the National Public Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMA) in Algiers, in December 2013. 40 commissioned objects were put on display, among which was a Provision that linked two faucets, one only hot and the other only cold, neither of which may be used alone but rather must be mixed, a heavy stone Thermos from which water gushes forth if someone tries to open the stopper, and an “Absence” of a settled coffee in perforated cups.

MoMRtA plan to move between the museums of the world, creating new exhibits wherever it pauses, is a way of reading or recording, a documentation of a history whose disappearance intensifies its absence. At the opening of MoMRtA at MAMA, and while the museum's objects steam out of a pressure cooker, a member of People's Committee for the Protection of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MNAMC) was handing invitations to all that will remain when it exhibits MoMRtA in Tunis in 2071. A one day intervention at Kuwait's Heritage Museum, one of Kuwait National Museum galleries, saw objects of MoMRtA taking their place in the rooms and vitrines showcasing the traditional life in Kuwait that preceded its modern boom as a result of oil discoveries. Through this exhibition, the visitor can see how old Kuwaitis survived the very harsh condition of Kuwait environment. The objects travelled in time, taking the journey through Kuwait's history: MoMRtA's chalk "toys" resting near the teacher's chalkboards, the trophy in the way of the water bearer carrying similar cans full of sweat water on his way to the city, a woman resting on "conditions" cushion, a man-sipping-tea going through the blank pages of the "history" book while another is wearing the medallion to his chest. Upon fine cotton paper are drawn the leaves and veins of plants inspired by the scientific book "The Weed Flora of Kuwait". Re-coloured by the original artist, on the same paper, his son has grown crystals of salt. The sensitive work speaks of two organic forms different from one another in shape and composition, yet each grew naturally in Kuwait's environment. "Memory Tricks You into Believing What You Want to Believe"¹². On a maquette of Failaka Island, the building of the museum will be welcoming guests in an landing at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Palestine, in the context of the Qalandiya International Biennial in October 2014. Intervening with selected items produced or reproduced in the Palestine specifically for this edition, the museum offers the visitors in Palestine the chance to encounter objects that respond to their own absence from Kuwait. The objects are significant in themselves, remarkable, in that they are either impossible or blatantly exaggerated. Most importantly, the museum never mentions Palestine by name, not even once.

Notes

1. Saba George Shiber words in research by Mohammed Alajmi, *History of Architecture in Kuwait: The evolution of Kuwaiti traditional architecture prior to the discovery of oil*, University of Nebraska (Lincoln, 2009).
2. Hassan A. Al Najjar, *The Gulf War: Overreaction & Excessiveness* (Dalton, 2001).
3. Jacques Aswad, *Para-museum*. "Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence", catalogue published by Public National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Algiers, 2013).
4. Amer Shomali, artist statement, Ramallah 2013.
5. Zakariya Tamer, *Home*, from *The Rainbow Series*. Dar Al-Fata Al-Arabi (Beirut, 1974).
6. Hassan A. Al Najjar, *The Gulf War: Overreaction & Excessiveness* (Dalton, 2001).
7. Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah (1977–2006) mentioned this phrase frequently in his speeches after he assumed power in 1977.
8. Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in The Sun*. (Beirut, 1963)
9. Dr. Faisal Darraj, *Identity, Culture, Politics: A reading of the Palestinian condition*. Azminah Publishing (Amman, 2010)
10. From the museum's guest book, during its first exhibition in 2012 at the Museum of Modern Art, Kuwait.
11. "The Best Life Anyone Has Ever Lived," <http://www.oil-town.com/2013/04/2-best-life-anyone-has-ever-lived.html> (accessed 22 July, 2013).
12. Title given to "Salt" object, by its artists Magdy El-Gohary and Basim Magdy, 2013. The piece is made of ink, watercolours, sodium chloride and copper sulphate crystals on paper.

About the Writer

Ala Younis is a curator and artist. Her curatorial projects include 'Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence' (2012-ongoing), 'National Works' for Kuwait's first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2013), "Covering One's Back", Cairo (2013); "An Index of Tensional and Unintentional Love of Land", New Museum (2014); among others. She is on the advisory board of Berinale's Forum Expanded.