

Stones Turned: *Digging into The Past, Digging into The Present*

*Shadows move along ladders
under the silence of ordinary things
there is another silence:
it belongs neither to the leaves nor to the
dead*

Etel Adnan, 'The Manifestations of the Voyage'¹

Contemporary art and archaeology appear to be very different animals – the former predominantly interested in making a dent in the present moment, the latter predominantly concerned with understanding the past. Whereas archaeologists methodically try to record and piece together the remnants of the bygone, artists seem to find *poiesis* in temporal gaps. Put differently, one can be seen as a practice of empirically connecting the dots, the other of willingly scrambling, or even, undoing them. In archaeology it is mainly human presence that is at the centre, and that directs what is being excavated. Contemporary art is, as always, much messier and going on recent production that favours the speculative, human absence and any variations thereof, seems just as important as human presence. It allows for a practice that not only is – to use McGill University Professor Christine Ross' helpful wording – "a pivotal site of temporal experimentation"² – but also one that takes temporal scale into account. Expanding on Ross, who notes that the aesthetics of contemporary art "brings together time and history, contemporary experiences of temporal passing and modern historicity,"³ it "free[s] the three categories of time (past, present, and future) [and] activates the past *in* the present and allow[s] it to condition the future in that very process."⁴ Digging literally deeper into temporal layers by folding in archaeology, might to a degree, explain why at this moment in time we see a surge in artists working with and around archaeological subject matter. Given that the current political climate of polarisation, populist nationalism and xenophobia rekindles all kinds of nasty shadows of the past, whether ancient or recent, this is not so strange.



Add to this growing awareness of decolonizing museological practices results in hard ideological and ethical questions being asked of the discipline of archaeology, and makes a fertile playing ground for artists. Questions include how archaeology is instrumentalized in furthering nationalist, nativist and other narratives. A stark example of this is the 'weaponization' of archaeology in Israel to demonstrate a biblical connection to the land.⁵ This is craftily countered by Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour in her most recent film *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015), which I discussed in the third issue of this journal. Perhaps the starkest examples of how issues of provenance, ownership, looting and the destruction of heritage and material culture have been mediatized and brought to the fore, are the devastating wars in Iraq and Syria.⁶ Here Iraqi-American artist Michael Rakowitz's project *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-ongoing)⁷ is an example of calling attention to the artefacts stolen from Baghdad's National Museum of Iraq during the 2003 American invasion. To this day there are still over seven thousand objects missing. In his project Rakowitz has recreated these objects from the packaging of Middle Eastern foodstuffs and Arabic newspapers, echoing how in war these artefacts often become collateral damage, lucrative throwaway items that are disposed of, not only from their (institutional) home, but worse, from their place in history. At the same time Rakowitz has attempted to reconstruct their material presence, refusing that these objects become forever lost to humanity, no matter how inadequate their substitutes.

Another recent example of archaeological controversy, in particular on the level of institutional responsibilities, is the much-debated Humboldt Forum,⁸ Berlin's latest prestige project. Planned to be housed in a rebuilt palace that oozes Prussian imperial grandeur, the Humboldt Forum is to show a vast collection of ethnographic objects, amassed—questionably—during Germany's colonial past. Critics have accused it of ignoring the atrocities committed during Germany's colonial era and the project's celebratory discourse worryingly veering into the dangerous territory of national and nationalist mythmaking.⁹ Indeed, archaeology, mythology, national identity, and nation- and state-making are inextricably intertwined.¹⁰ Testimony to this, and showing the other and extreme side of the coin, is the highly mediatized destruction by the Islamic State, of pre-Islamic antiquities and heritage sites in Syria and Iraq, and even bloodier attacks on archaeological museums, such as the 2015 attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, leaving twenty one people dead.¹¹

LAYERING TIME AND SPACE

In their most recent project *Unconformities* (2017), Lebanese artists/filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige make slippery the very notions at the heart of archaeological debates: geography, historical scale, chronology, identity and belonging. The backdrop to this project is very much informed by their artistic oeuvre that spans over two decades and is primarily concerned with the politics of visual representation in the aftermath of rupture, not solely, but often related to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90) during which the artists 'came of age'. Key to their practice is complicating configurations of time and space. *Unconformities* is in this sense a poetic interrogation of the slippage between archaeological and geological temporalities, destruction and (re)construction, as well as human and non-human subjectivities. These are big topics, personalized by focusing on places significant to their own personal and professional biographies. These places are respectively: Beirut (city of their birth, upbringing and a returning referent and site in their artistic production), Paris (their current place of residence and production), and Athens (Hadjithomas is of Greek descent and the city was a refuge for her family during the Lebanese Civil War). In and by themselves Beirut, Paris and Athens as urban, but also mythological centres, produce their own imaginaries.





It was the reality of rapid urban transformation in Beirut that the artists witnessed on a daily basis from the windows of their family home that initially sparked this new body of work. The reconstruction of post-war Beirut, the on-going erasure of architectural—and often by corollary archaeological—heritage sites by real estate developers for new lucrative construction is a bone of contention amongst many Lebanese.¹² To this should also be added unbridled land speculation, gentrification, and social polarisation. *Unconformities*, however, invites us to look at cycles of urban destruction and (re)construction and the effects of disaster—man-made or other—through a wider temporal lens. *Unconformities* is comprised of three components: *Palimpsests* (2017), a film showing the drilling of soil cores at construction sites in Beirut; *Time Capsules* (2017), an installation of suspended core samples from Beirut, Paris and Athens; and *Zig Zag over Time* (2017), a narrative timeline composed of photos, drawings and text. What binds these three elements together is that they each materialize, but also scramble, representations of time and space. As such, the aesthetics of each piece follows the project's conceptual logic of ruin and creation. While the video *Palimpsests* roots the project in Beirut and serves as its contextual and catalytic framework, the other works trouble and widen conceptions of a fixed geography and temporal scale. The opening sequence of *Palimpsests* shows us the drilling of core samples, a common practice in construction to determine the properties of the soil before building. The technique, though filmed sensuously, seems crude. The cores are displayed in wooden crates, depths are marked manually, while chains and cogwheels rattle into place. This pragmatic mechanical choreography is contrasted with the archaeologist's fine brushes, mesh nets and dexterity picking through the dirt and categorising whatever is brought to the surface.

This figure of the archaeologist appears tiny next to the bulldozer mercilessly ploughing away. And yet it is this very tension Hadjithomas and Joreige want to draw to our attention: the archaeologist sifting through the past and the bulldozer destroying the old for the new, they are very much part of the same historical cycle. The latter is emphasized by a stunning aerial shot that pulls away from the construction site and pans out to show us Beirut while it incorporates footage the artists filmed in the aftermath of the 2006 July (Lebanon) War. In this case, the bulldozers dig through the debris of the bombing. It is here through the rubble where the city's many chronologies and ontologies, its cycles of destruction and construction, come together and form a palimpsest. This not only stretches the idea of scale, but also our own position in history. Demolition and disaster, resilience and survival: the earthquakes that destroyed ancient Beirut, the Ottoman period, the French Mandate, the Lebanese Civil War, the 2006 July War—they are all flecks on the same timeline.

VERTICAL TIME

Unconformities was first shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2017. But it was at the Acropolis Museum in Athens (2018), the first time ever a work of contemporary art was shown in this archaeological museum, that its potential to disrupt clearly surfaced. The Acropolis Museum, like most museums—especially those dealing with antiquities—is as much an ideological and nationalist project as it is scientific. Timelines and historiographic scripts are carefully crafted to convey a narrative that is distinctly demarcated, linear in its chronology and very much centred on the human experience. *Unconformities* however, which derives its title from the geological term indicating a break in the geological record,¹³ suggests a fluid and mutable approach to time and place. The exhibition as a whole functioned as an unconformity subtly unsettling the premise of the museum that hosted it. This is best demonstrated by the work *Time Capsules*, a mesmerizing installation of soil cores taken from Beirut, Paris and Athens. Suspended vertically in a resin, the history of these three cities is displayed and at a first glance they look remarkably similar: stones and rock. However, closer inspection reveals that to each city there are specificities and nuances in the dug up matter. Whereas two adjacent layers of rock in Paris may span two hundred years, in Beirut, it may only be thirty years. There is a continuous stretching and shrinking of time at play here. In a way, time, even if suspended and captured in a resin, continues to flow. An unintentional side-effect of the chemical preservation process used by the artists is the formation of crystals between the rocks. Like a growth they form a web around the rocks and stones, as if they were alive, enveloping the material manifestations of history with something that cannot quite be controlled or subdued. It becomes a beautiful metaphor for the idea that history is never static, but always in movement.

HORIZONTAL AND FOLDED TIME

Time moves in a linear way in the third component of the *Unconformities* project, *Zig Zag over Time*, timelines that frame the exhibition as a whole. Also here time does not necessarily move at the same pace; its rhythm is disrupted, accelerated, slowed down. Fittingly the artists chose long leprellos (zig zags) to represent their timelines that are composed of photos of the soil cores, and annotated with textual notes and drawings by various scientists with whom the artists collaborated. They include amongst others geologists, natural history museum illustrators, and archaeologists, who all have their own style of drawing and coding soil samples and time, specific to their discipline. This assembly of inter-disciplinary voices shows that the representation, as well as the interpretation, of history is manifold. Indeed, the textual notes that are featured on *Zig Zag over Time* are highly

subjective and reveal only snippets of what the scientists told the artists, never the full story. They range from the technological such as “[r]oots, stones and concrete from the infrastructure of public networks”, the ecological “[m]odern and industrial fill from the gas industry, significant pollution”, to the archaeological “[n]atural red pottery clay from Iridanos river, first traces of settlement” and the geological “[d]ark grey tectonic schist, revealing discontinuous unconformities, latencies and ruptures”. It is no coincidence that the artists use a representational form that highlights the timeline’s ruptures: the leporello’s folds are subtle yet visible pauses for the viewer. They indicate that even when chronologies seem linear and horizontal, they are always defined by their gaps.

OBJECT MATERIALS MEET STORY MATERIALS

Beirut-based art critic Ari Amaya-Akkermans observes in his review of Hadjithomas’ and Joreige’s exhibition in Athens that “most archaeological institutions remain off-limits to artists.”¹⁴ It took the Acropolis Museum almost a decade—and much negotiation—after opening to allow for that to happen with *Unconformities*. The questioning of *who*, in the case of archaeological museums, and *what*, in the case of natural science museums, makes history, remains sensitive, if not uncomfortable for many Western institutions. This is because the very premise of their foundation—Eurocentric knowledge—is often challenged. “While not necessarily scientific or quantitative, [art projects like Hadjithomas and Joreige’s] qualitatively serve to decolonize archaeological knowledge from its role in the legitimization of European historiography.”¹⁵ In other words, Hadjithomas and Joreige counter an exclusive and Eurocentric gaze by foregrounding the malleability of time in order to recuperate notions of possibility and a shared history between Beirut, Paris and Athens.

Lebanese artist Ali Cherri similarly shifts this Western gaze, but he looks specifically at how archaeological museum objects tell us stories of power, identity, history and belonging. Here he is not so much interested in what the object is *per se*, but more in its materiality and which kind of historical narratives can be woven around it.¹⁶ To Cherri archaeological objects are by default artefacts of ruin and survival: “An archaeological site is where things survive the catastrophe of time.”¹⁷ Throughout his art practice he complicates the meeting of animate and inanimate, notions of embodiment, and how we understand the latter’s survival and demise. This is exemplified in various ways in his most recent works that all draw from archaeology. In his video *Somniculus* (2017) the artist’s own bodily presence in archaeological museums is central, while in another video *Petrified* (2016) the objects in the museum themselves are the embodied agents of ruin and survival. The ghostly reigns in *The Digger* (2015), in which Cherri portrays the Pakistani caretaker of a necropolis in the desert of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates: here is a figure whose forgotten presence amongst the dead not only drives the narrative, but becomes spectral itself.

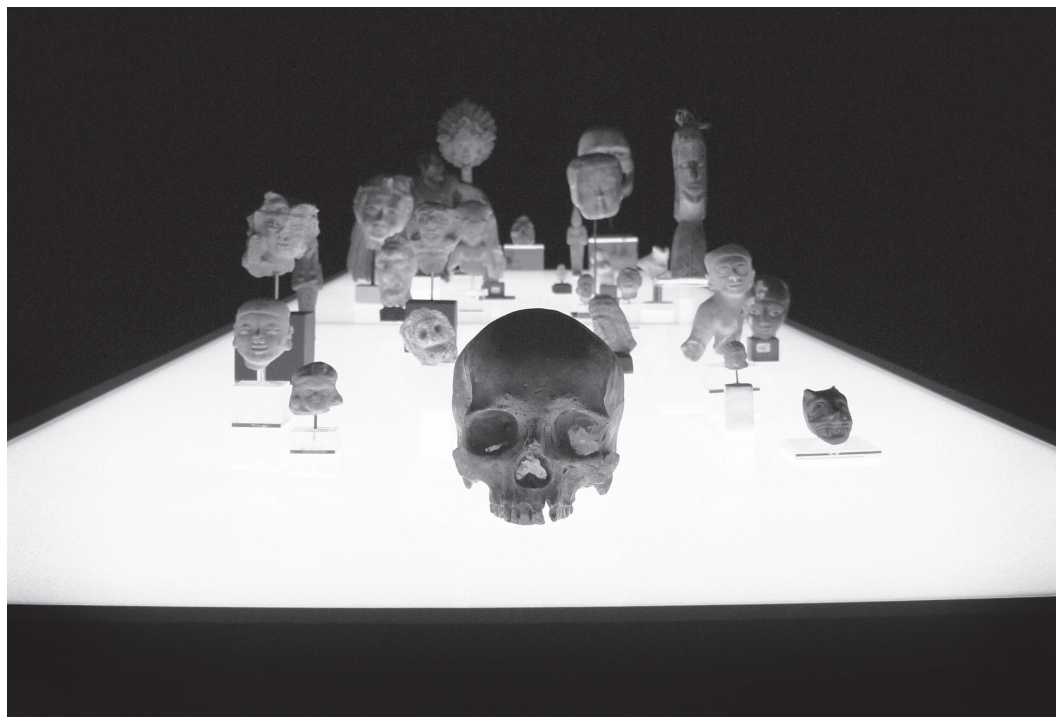
In all of the above works the museum becomes similar to an archaeological site: a locus where ruin and survival is displayed and where artefacts are disciplined in narrating the tale of their survival over and over again. Still, Cherri is convinced that artefacts in museums can speak to us in different ways and counter what the museum really wants them to say.¹⁸ This is most clear in the video *Petrified*, where Cherri’s voice-over asks, “What are we looking at when looking at relics in a museum? We expect everything to speak to us: the beasts, the dead, the stones. And these statues are mute. They have mouths that do not speak. They have eyes that do not see us. Their eyes are petrified. They are not asking to be saved.” What is interesting here is that Cherri undoes artefacts from their agency while simultaneously bestowing it upon them. This is further augmented by showing the artefacts in the dark, out of focus, in detailed close-ups, or only lit from one side. They are always



shown in a fragmented way as if they exist out of time and are robbed from their historical grounding and meaning. In the background we occasionally hear the amplified ticking of a clock. Also here time passes, but how does time really flow then in a museum populated by these objects?

This poetic image is disturbed when Cherri introduces a second channel to the video installation. We see the hands of archaeologists brushing away the earth from human bones at an excavation site. It is very matter-of-fact with highly trained and confident gestures that are almost mechanical. It is difficult to imagine that these bones are the remains of an actual person. Nevertheless, these skeletons form the bridge from the realm of the dead to the living in the film. The following scene is filmed in an aviary where we are greeted by birds tweeting and cooing. If anything must signify life, it must be birds. However, they too in their captivity have become petrified objects of display. A remarkable flattening between the animate and the inanimate, the human and the non-human occurs in Cherri's film. Animal, bone, stone, though they remain silent and out of history in *Petrified*, they do speak to us in a different way.

It is probably no coincidence that Cherri is fascinated by taxidermy. Somehow the presence of the animal is still there. Taxidermy animals are made to look like their referent, perhaps even commemorate them, yet however lifelike, they have a very different ontology. In a way Cherri's *modus operandi* could be viewed as taxidermic, as in moving the metaphorical skin of objects so that they can exist elsewhere, in a realm between the living and the dead, outside of what is assumed, and in a place where everything can be entangled.



FRAGMENTS OF NEW KIN

In 2017 the Archaeological Unit of Saint Denis, a suburb close to Paris, offered Cherri 300kg of excavated animal bones dating back to the tenth and twelfth centuries which had been examined, classified and catalogued, eventually taking up too much storage space.¹⁹ The Archaeological Unit had exhausted the usage from this stock and as a last resort they were given to the artist. This spurred Cherri's interest in the life cycle of objects and how their value can be demoted over time,²⁰ in this case from a living entity, to an object of science and study, to eventually a thing without use and no value. It is perhaps ironic that the only afterlife for such an object is transforming it into an artwork. Working with discarded stuff, or what Cherri calls "the debris of things," allows him to forge new material alliances. Kinship is created between objects that take in different positions in the value hierarchy. This is beautifully articulated in his installation *Where do birds go to hide* (2017) in which he draws from the Saint Denis archaeological stock and uses the botanical principle of grafting to meld one demoted object to another: one large tree trunk harbours the small body of a taxidermy bird, on another shards of bones seem to grow like fungus. And then there's a small taxidermy bird lying on its back, with a Roman brick from the archaeological site of Ostia Antica stacked on top of it. Shifting the object's value here means shifting its skin. These works are fragile and speculative, detailed and full of life and mortality. They are open-ended and remind me how anthropologist Anna Tsing speaks of human and non-human interspecies, intersections and "assemblages" as "open-ended gatherings."²¹ They emit glimmers of hope and possibility in dark times.

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Notes

¹ Etel Adnan, 'The Manifestations of the Voyage', *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage*, Tucson, AZ: The Post-Apollo Press, 1990. Cfr. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53852/from-the-manifestations-of-the-voyage>; accessed 1 October 2018

² Christine Ross, *The Past is the Present; It's the Future Too. The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, p. 4

³ *ibid*, p. 5

⁴ *ibid*, p. 6

⁵ The instrumentalisation of archaeology by Israel is a case in point. See for example Natasha Roth, 'Parks and Occupation: Archaeology is the new security', *+972 Mag*, 7 March 2015; <http://972mag.com/parks-and-occupation-archaeology-is-the-new-security/103855/>; accessed 27 December 2015

⁶ Cfr. Craig Barker, 'Fifteen years after looting, thousands of artefacts are still missing from Iraq's national museum', *The Conversation*, 9 April 2018; <http://theconversation.com/fifteen-years-after-looting-thousands-of-artefacts-are-still-missing-from-iraqs-national-museum-93949>; last accessed 10 November 2018, and Frank Gardner, 'Saving Syria's heritage: Archaeologists discover invisible solution', *BBC World News*, 21 March 2017; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39331342>; last accessed 10 November 2018

⁷ Cfr. <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-invisible-enemy-should-not-exist/>

⁸ Kate Brown, 'The Big Move to Berlin's Humboldt Forum Has Begun, as Pressure for Restitution of Colonial-era Objects Grows', *Artnet News*, 11 June 2018; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/humboldt-forum-move-1293233>; last accessed 10 November 2018

⁹ For an excellent summary see Graham Bowley, 'A New Museum Opens Old Wounds in Germany', *New York Times*, 12 October 2018; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/design/humboldt-forum-germany.html>; last accessed 10 November 2018

¹⁰ See for an excellent discussion on the complex relations between archaeology, nationalism, colonial and postcolonial geopolitical contexts in the Levant, Chiara de Cesari's article 'Postcolonial Ruins. Archaeologies of political violence and IS', *Anthropology Today* vol. 31: 6, December 2015, pp. 22-26

¹¹ Cfr. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bardo_National_Museum_attack; last accessed 10 November 2018

¹² Perhaps most debated is the reconstruction of Downtown Beirut by former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's company Solidere. See for good discussions on the relation between war, post-war reconstruction, loss of architectural and archaeological artifacts and real estate development; <https://en.qantara.de/content/lebanons-architectural-heritage-a-race-against-time> and <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/developers-threaten-beirut-s-architectural-heritage-1.451322> and https://www.icomos.org/risk/world_report/2000/leban_2000.htm; last accessed 13 November 2018

¹³ Cfr. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconformity>; last accessed 13 November 2018

¹⁴ Ari Amaya-Akkermans, 'How Archaeology has fuelled Successful Art Experiments', *Hyperallergic*, 25 May 2018; <https://hyperallergic.com/444344/how-archaeology-has-fueled-successful-art-experiments/>; last accessed 11 September 2018

¹⁵ *ibid*.

¹⁶ Skype interview with the artist, 13 September 2018

¹⁷ Jim Quilty, 'The art of ruins falling into ruin', *The Daily Star*, 22 August 2015; https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/f814a2_853c1d0be1f34f109c165d2ae7241900.pdf; last accessed 3 December 2018

¹⁸ Skype interview with the artist, 13 September 2018

¹⁹ Cfr. brochure of Ali Cherri's solo exhibition *Dénaturé* at Galerie Imane Farès, 12 October 2017–16 February 2018

²⁰ Skype interview with the artist, 13 September 2018. Cherri refers to Jane Bennett's notion of demoted objects, in which she defines demotion as "the power of humans to turn nonhuman things into useful, ranked objects."

²¹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015