

UNIVERSITY OF
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JAMEEL

PHANTOM LIMB

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CURATORIAL TEXT

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"There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History

"It's not us who are radical; it's historical facts which are radical..."

Bénédicte Savoy, interview in The Guardian, 21 June 2019

Phantom Limb brings together artists who, through a diverse range of practices, interrogate our lived relationships to material heritage, navigating the complex and contested terrains of memory, memorialization and the writing of histories. Ranging from sculpture and installation, through video and photography, works in the exhibition pose pressing questions around the weaponization of heritage, the construction of foundational myths, and the uneven power relationships manifested through the administration and legislation of material culture.

The space of material heritage and its attendant disciplines and administrations, has long been the site of competing claims to historical narratives, a tool for substantiating territorial claims, and the stage onto which national and ethnic identities are projected. Recent years have seen an acceleration in the demolition of buildings, monuments and ways of life that are of global historical importance. At the same time, debates on the restitution of cultural artefacts have accelerated out of the confines of the museum into the political zeitgeist, becoming ever more insistent.

The urgent and often emotional debate around the circulation and exhibition of material culture, including archeological artefacts, while a pertinent global issue, is one that is keenly felt within the context of the wider Middle East. Long histories of occupation and conflict have simultaneously fueled the excavation and documentation of artefacts and the global antiquities market. Over half of the 15,000 artefacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in 2003 remain missing, while in Syria hundreds of archeological sites, museums and historical monuments have been damaged and looted since 2011. In 2018, 40,000 objects confiscated in Palestinian territories by Israel's Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration were put on display at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem,

prompting the call for their immediate repatriation. One need only consult Interpol's list of stolen artefacts- which can also be read as an inventory of recent and current conflicts - to ascertain the full breadth of the antiquities trade, estimated to have a daily turnover of \$10 million.

Archeology, a discipline long critiqued as a hand-maiden to colonial pursuits, was fundamental in shaping desires for, and consumable images of the 'Other' through the production of romantic ruins and through the extension of the logic of salvation and preservation onto both the landscape and its occupants. This was most apparent in the Levant and in particular in Palestine, where the field of archeology was, and continues to be, a politicized tool for producing historic 'facts' that are in turn used as evidence legitimizing the continued occupation and settlement of Palestinian territories¹.

By performing an 'Archeology in reverse', that is by tracing backwards from the object the entangled network of hands, policies and discursive frameworks that inscribe it within the space of heritage, we can start to emancipate these objects from the confines of the universal display and engage in meaningful conversations around the restitution and repatriation of material heritage.

The exhibition's title *Phantom Limb* refers to the painful condition when the body refuses to acknowledge the loss of its part, usually the result of violent injury or amputation. This visceral haunting in the present of something that was forcibly removed in the past echoes many of the concerns of the artists presented here. It is also the main protagonist of **Kader Attia's** video *Reflecting Memory*, part of a larger body of work by the artist exploring the concepts of repair and injury as markers of time and history. Shot in a documentary style, *Reflecting Memory* follows sufferers of Phantom Limb syndrome as they receive mirror therapy and features interviews with surgeons, neurologists and psychoanalysts. Through encounters with numerous characters the film opens up to the notion of repair in post-conflict societies, and as the artist states, is a "reflection about the complexity of memory, the working of memory, the duty of memory and its representation" and repair as a form of resistance.

Rayyane Tabet's ongoing work *Orthostates* brings together 32 of the 194 intricate Neo-Hittite reliefs excavated and removed from Tell Halaf in Syria over the course of several decades by German archeologist Max von Oppenheim. The reliefs-represented here through ghostly marks produced by direct contact charcoal rubbings- would never be united again, as they were dispersed to various museums, destroyed in air raids, or looted and sold. Part of a larger body of work that begins with the discovery of letters written by Tabet's great-grandfather during his time as von Oppenheim's secretary in the 1930's, *Orthostates* traces the complex story behind the excavation and dispersal of the reliefs; foregrounding the role of legislation, colonial relationships and accidents of history in the eventual scattering of the reliefs across various museum collections in Europe and the U.S.A.

¹ For a thorough study of the role of Archeology as a tool of occupation, see Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on The Ground* (University of Chicago Press, 2001). Also, since 1967 Israel has used archeological excavations as a pretext for territorial claims in the West Bank and Gaza. See *Palestinians say East Jerusalem archaeology project inaugurated by US is 'fake'*, *The National*, www.thenational.ae/world and Odgaard, Lena *What happened to Gaza's Apollo statue?* www.msn.com and Soueif, Ahdaf *The dig dividing Jerusalem* www.theguardian.com

But when the object no longer exists, how can we make it speak? How can speculation and imagination produce spaces from which to re-read and re-claim lost and silenced histories?

Jumana Manna's body of work reflects on the spaces of archeology and heritage as theaters of modern myth production, and on the tensions between preservation and ruination. *Amulet and Shoulder* are two sculptural works produced in response to the remains and lost interiors of the once glorious 16th century El Badi' Palace in Morocco. Their organic forms echo both those of the human body and those of colloquial architecture, speaking to our desire to re-make and re-cast history, and questioning what residues are produced in the process.

In *An extraordinary event* **Akram Zaatari** assembles eight photographs by Osman Hamdi Bey. Taken in 1887 in south Lebanon, the photographs document the discovery and excavation of 19 Phoenician sarcophagi before they were swiftly dispatched to Istanbul. These ghostly photographs are the only known record of this moment.

For over ten years Palestinian artist **Benji Boyadgian** has stalked the Wadi Al Shami, or the 'Valley of Garbage' as it is known to Israelis, collecting surface materials that testify to past and present lives around the valley. These objects range from discarded building materials to fragments of destroyed olive trees and historic artefacts. Read together, they produce what the artist calls an 'archeology of destruction', where the objects can be read through the imaginary of conflict and of contemporary globalized consumption. Located between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, between highways and Israeli settlements, Wadi Al Shami is slated for settlement. In light of this fact, the collection slowly transforms into a historical record of loss.

What new propositions can be made for expanding the administrative logic of preservation and permanence to include so called precarious structures such as refugee camps and migration routes? How can the purposeful destruction of sites and the weaponization of heritage be mapped against larger networks of violence and erasure to produce new understandings of the functioning of power?

Forensic Architecture's multimedia installation *Maps of Defiance* brings together visual materials and data analysis documenting evidence of destruction, genocide and enslavement perpetrated by ISIS against the Yazidi people in Sinjar, Iraq. Comprised of annotated maps, 3D models of destroyed cultural sites and analysis of attack and escape routes, the installation demonstrates how innovative methods of digital design and image capture can enable on-the-ground DIY cultural heritage documentation for use in human rights investigation, while at the same time preserving the memory of destruction before it is erased through processes of post-war reconstruction.

The act of inventorying can itself take on a political dimension. In the ongoing work *The Collection of Jane Ryan & William Saunders*, **Pio Abad and Frances Wadsworth Jones** reproduce parts of the vast trove of art, jewelry and antiquities acquired by

Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos; including an extremely rare 25 carat pink diamond worth \$5 million and a pearl and diamond tiara taken from the Russian tsar's family in 1918. This iteration focuses on 3D printed replicas of a portion of the jewelry collection, some 413 pieces, seized by US Customs at Honolulu Airport in 1986. The jewelry has since remained unseen by the public, stuck in legal and political limbo. Here they reappear, not as not as luxurious accessories but as spectral reconstructions testifying to occluded and silenced histories. By making visible this inventory and some of its objects at 'full resolution' Abad draws attention to the roles that certain artefacts have played in the recent history of the Philippines, specifically in shaping the cultural legacy of the former Philippine dictators.

In **Decolonizing Architecture's** ongoing project *Refugee Heritage*, the refugee camp, quintessentially imagined as a precarious and impermanent space, is put forward for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List. An ambitious and complex project involving organizations, individuals, camp residents, politicians and conservation experts among others, the nomination of the Dheisheh Refugee Camp in Palestine as a World Heritage Site seeks to deploy the potential for heritage to be mobilized as an agent of political transformation. This iteration of the project, commissioned for *Phantom Limb*, presents the comprehensive nomination dossier including maps, photographs, architectural surveys and testimonies related to the camp and its history, as well as two videos underscoring the imperatives behind the project.

How can the 'ruin', historically a romantic space that stands within the matrix of paradigms of modernity, become a site for the reclamation of agency and community empowerment? How can we, as Ann Laura Stoler writes "attend to their reappropriations, neglect and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present"?²

In the 1980s, the historic town of 'Anah in Iraq, once described by Gertrude Bell as "3 hours long and one street wide"³ was completely submerged as part of a large-scale Damming project. The town and its inhabitants, including an 11th century minaret, were extracted and re-located nearby to new 'Anah. In a new work commissioned for the exhibition, **Rand Abdul Jabbar** excavates the histories of the lost 'Anah, taking as a focal point the tumultuous history of the town's minaret, which was destroyed and reconstructed all of three times. In the 1980s the minaret succumbed to forces of modernization, in 2006 it was destroyed as part of a campaign targeting Iraqi cultural heritage sites, and again in 2016 by ISIL. Collaborating with local craftsmen and archeologists working to once more re-build the minaret, as well as with family and government archives related to the old and new towns of 'Anah, Abdul Jabbar's sculptural and video work produces a counternarrative to that of ruination and loss.

In both Ali Cherri and **Théo Mercier's** work assemblages of artefacts and objects produce uncanny and sometimes humorous forms. In Théo Mercier's recent work *Venus a l'oeuf*, large ancient looking jars balance on cartons of eggshells. The

2 Ann Laura Stoler (ed), *Imperial Debris: On Ruin and Ruination* (Duke University Press, 2013), p.11

3 Gertrude Bell, from a diary entry dated March 12, 1909

installation plays on the sanctification of relics and artefacts and the sometimes-precarious premise on which their authority stands. In *Massacre*, a violent heaping of wooden masks within a museological vitrine recalls the violent means by which many such objects enter the space of the museum.

In **Ali Cherri's** ongoing work *Graftings*, the artist stitches together disparate parts of artefacts to produce hauntingly incongruous hybrid forms. The work's title evokes the medical and horticultural practice of using parts of a living entity to heal or restore another.

While material heritage is at the heart of this exhibition, objects and sites are never fully rendered, rather they are evoked, imagined, and referenced; haunting the exhibition as ghosts. This relational approach stands in contrast to current drives to document historic sites and objects at the highest resolution possible. The creation of 3D renderings and immersive visualizations, while a valuable reference for scholars and citizens alike, is not a wholesale solution for the messiness of reconstruction and repatriation. While such documentation is invaluable in efforts to re-construct destroyed sites, as with the work of Forensic Architecture, its encasing within copyright legislation produces an uneasy echo of past histories of appropriation.

How are histories, particularly histories of defeat and loss, carried forward to future generations? In 1973 Palestinian artist Sleiman Mansour created *Jamal Al Mahamel* one of the most iconic images of displacement and loss. Depicting an elderly porter struggling to balance the load of Jerusalem on his back as he walks, the painting would be reproduced countless times and hung in homes, schools, shops and offices across Palestine. Purchased by Muammar Qaddafi and kept at his compound in Bab al-Aziziya, in 1986 *Jamal Al Mahamel* would be destroyed by American air raids on Libya. In **Khalil Rabah's** large scale painting *Untitled (All is well)*, we see the iconic image being reproduced in what looks like a painter's studio, though the load of Jerusalem gradually disappears, prompting reflections on shared histories of struggle and their impact on the present.



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AN EXHIBITION PRODUCED BY ART JAMEEL

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