

OUR GOAL AT THE PALESTINIAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND HUMANKIND IS TO INFORM, CONNECT, FASCINATE, AMAZE, DELIGHT, SURPRISE AND EXCITE YOUR INTEREST IN THE WAY THE WORLD WORKS IN THE NATURAL AND CULTURAL EARTH OF PALESTINE.

-Mission statement of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*

by Angela Serino and Laura Schleussner

In the Deniz Apartments as I was wandering through Khalil Rabah's installation of The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, I found my way into a back room and sat down at a desk to look at a number of books spread out on a desk. Just after I had perused a book on historical Palestinian dwellings, "Throne Village Architecture" and as I was paging through images of "Earthquake April" documenting the destruction of the historical center of Nablus by Israeli troops, a young man came in, sat down behind the desk, and explained that this part of the desk, his part, was "real" office space. I learned that he was an employee of Riwaq, an NGO for architectural conservation based in Ramallah and that he had been invited by the artist to work in the Museum for the first few weeks of the biennale.

Fascinated by the incorporation of a real organization into this very special Museum—which operates within the undefined space between the real and the not quite real—Angela Serino and I decided to talk with the artist Khalil Rabah and Iyad Issa from Riwaq about the nature of The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind and their unique institutional "cooperation".

LS: At the Istanbul Biennale press conference the curators emphasized that they were taking the Biennale out of the oldest part of the city and locating it in newer sections to extract it from a historical context. Is the issue of abandoning or embracing a specific historical context relevant to what the museum is doing here?

KR: I think the curators saw that. I didn't really capture that element of the curatorial work at the time, but I picked up on something else. They were talking about the concept of a museum as the stable environment of a collection, the museum as an institution of art, and the function of a biennale as a transient event. Here, this Museum is presenting an exhibition "Palestine before Palestine" from the permanent collection of the Museum, which tells people that there is a museum and an established permanent collection, and yet the Museum only exists as an institution within an institution: the transient event of a biennale. This double positioning is very, very exciting.

In a sense, the entire project of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* now operates above and beyond itself here at the Istanbul Biennale. For me, when I say that the Palestinian Museum was established in 1905 to encourage wonder, curiosity, and discovery, it's simply that. To fascinate, to excite: this is how we move things forward, and bring new life to things.

LS: How did you decide on the departments of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*?

As I go along I do research on natural history museums. They are about science and the representation of fact. It is a context that provides information and teaches us about science.

The Anthropology Department of the Museum originates from a project for the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1998. At that time I saw a story on CNN about people living in zoo cages in Mozambique. I thought: "Oh my god, we think the Palestinians are really suffering?" The story stayed in my head, and for the exhibition I went to Mozambique and photographed this place. People actually rent lion cages, because the situation there is so bad. This was a shift in my life, my perspective. At the time, I never really grasped why I was doing this project. When I started working on the Museum I realized that these projects were sort of expeditions for me, so within the context of the Museum they can become the anthropological expeditions of the Museum.

There is a biological section. I use olive wood to heat my apartment and over the years I have collected some pieces that look like bones. Or looking at soap, I see it looks like fossils. It's all about perspective and playing with context. The accompanying text in the exhibition talks about how things are processed in a natural way. Extinct, endangered. Catastrophe from outer space, catastrophe from the inner core. These are natural occurrences but also cultural ones. When I say the purpose is to inform people about the natural and cultural earth of Palestine, maybe it's my Palestine this way. A psychic, metaphoric Palestine. Or maybe because I don't want Palestine. For me it's becoming less and less about Palestine, especially when I say "The" Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind. Less about a national thing. It represents a desire to identify with a national establishment that wants to place itself in a national discourse of the history of life. Here, it's all sort of imaginary. It's a hallucinatory level of experience.

LS: How did you decide to invite employees of Riwaq, a foundation for architectural conservation in Ramallah, to take part and "staff" The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind?

KR: You mentioned earlier you were interested in why a real institution is part of a (pauses)... "whatever" institution. This project plays with that. I initially worried that the Riwaq participation would become sort of a performance. I didn't want that. I wanted to avoid that as much as possible.

I've been working for Riwaq for the past several years. All last year I kept saying: guys, let's do a biennale. And all of a sudden they wanted to have an open house to introduce the public to Riwaq, and I said we should make the event a biennale. Riwaq has been doing so many conservation projects—everywhere. There are 33 projects in 33 villages. I suggested we announce that we are opening these projects to the public. We got so involved in this concept, that it was a very big success. Because we organized our first architecture biennale this past summer in Ramallah, the identity of the institution itself has started to change. It has started to connect internationally and locally. When the opportunity arose to participate here in Istanbul, I decided that it's good that our team come to the Biennale, and maybe we will make some connections that would enable us to participate in

the Venice Biennale for architecture in this coming year with a concept about what we would like to do for our own next biennale back in Ramallah. In this sense, the Museum has become sort of a place and address.

AS: How else will this experience here in Istanbul with The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind give back to the organization in Ramallah?

IS: First, our biennale in Ramallah was a small event. When Khalil said he wanted to do a biennale in Ramallah. I said, "What's a biennale?" Then he had to explain it too to everyone who came to Riwaq for the event: "It's a bi-annual event." At our biennale we did not invite people to Riwaq. We took them all around to the renovation projects. It was quite different. After all, it's about displacement. (Laughs) It was really a new thing for Riwaq and for the people of Palestine.

Second, seeing the way building conservation is done here was a new experience for us. We have people who do conservation, but we also have a problem. We treat buildings like archaeological sites. Don't move it, don't touch it, and don't paint the walls. Here it's amazing. They use the whole thing. They can paint it, they can use it, and they can even keep the façade and build another building off of it. So you can maintain the same spirit, you can keep everything....

KR: Iyad works with Riwaq on the planning unit, and there is another person who works on the issue of conservation, but all the units are sort of interlinked at Riwaq. For me it was also exciting to involve Riwaq for another reason. There is the physical context of urbanism and conservation, projecting a new history or playing with it backwards and forwards. Conservation is really about the element of time. You have to decide which era in time you really want to focus on and how you manifest that. I showed them some photographs of this how this old building [the Deniz Apartments] used to look and said, "Let this project be a kind of a conservation project."

For example, we have just announced that it's the Museum's 100th anniversary. Last year it was our 75th anniversary. We decided, "Let's go back to the Ottoman period, so now it's the 100th anniversary." This anniversary commemorates the time of the Ottoman Emperor Abdul Hamid. He loved Palestine, but he could not go to Palestine, because he was afraid of being assassinated. He passed so many interesting laws about Palestine at that time. For instance, no foreigner was allowed buy any land in Palestine. This law was later overruled. Abdul Hamid also discovered the camera as a reliable witness. So he sent people to take photographs of Palestine. He wanted to see this land, and he fell in love with it. There is a very interesting archive here of the photographs he commissioned. It is really interesting to think that he was ruling a country through representations of places that he was fascinated with but had never seen. So I say, let's live in the Ottoman period. Let's live it now!

LS: What about the factual vs. fictional nature of objects? In Berlin you see people selling pieces of the Berlin Wall. You never know if this is a real piece of the Berlin wall or a random piece of wall with graffiti they ripped off. Is this somehow related to your work?

KR: I was in Berlin three years ago. I was walking around, and I saw the trace of the Wall and noticed people selling these souvenirs. It was three years ago they started building the wall at home. What hit me was the absence of it. This presence can be absent. How do I deal with it? So then I said: I am going to sell the wall. I wanted to auction the wall, because I didn't want it to be a natural institution where people paint on it. Let's sell it. Get rid of all of it. Who can do this? Oh, The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind is so concerned with endangered environments. It can do it! So the museum introduced the Third Annual Wall Zone Auction in Ramallah, which is shown here on a video in this exhibition. I think it confused a quite a few people, because they had never heard of the Museum before, and it was celebrating its 75th anniversary and it is doing the 3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction. The number refers to the years that they have been building the wall. In a sense, this becomes a means of narration, a way of articulating certain poetic things.

AS: What about the name of the Museum? Does it confuse people?

It's the longest name. When we did the auction there was a website, which I hope we can get hosted again:
www.thepalestinianmuseumofnaturalhistoryandhumankind.org. When someone said it's too long, I decided to count the letters. It turned out to be 48 letters. And when people learn that it is 48 letters, they get goose bumps, because in Palestinian history 48 is the year the state of Israel was established, and Palestine stopped existing in a way. And with this number I think I resolved it. There is a very personal, collective consciousness about this number. The number 48 for us Palestinians is the most important number you will ever learn about in your life. When I discovered the title contains 48 letters in a way I started to have peace about what 48 can mean for me personally. It's not necessarily a disturbing thing anymore. It is something beyond what I was brought up to carry as baggage with me. Here I am getting into personal territory. 48 can mean something else. It can be something not necessary about the catastrophe, and we call it a catastrophe. The 48 catastrophe. Ok, it is the number of letters in the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind.

AS: Did people automatically understand that?

KR: No, people are annoyed because it's a long, long word. But never mind, because the website is not hosted. It doesn't function anyway.

AS: Not yet.