

## Identities and Temporalities: Thoughts From Home Works 6

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Walid Raad, Preface to the Third Edition, Photographs, colour, 38 x 51 cm each, 2013 and Preface to the Fourth Edition, Video, colour, silent, 12'49", 2013 (Photo: Joe Namy)

**Home Works 6**, a forum on cultural practices, enveloped the Beirut art scene from May 14 through May 26.

Organized by Ashkal Alwan in collaboration with various other institutions throughout Beirut, the multidisciplinary project included lectures, screenings, performances, and an exhibition.

Rather than being based on a cohesive topic, the forum was held together by an atmosphere, or an attitude: a preoccupation with historical moments, authority, and the 'tinkerings' occurring in informal spaces.

In the opening statement published in the *Home Works*' booklet, curator Christine Tohme wistfully speaks of the inspiration for the forum and hints at a lived temporality that cannot yet "be annexed to the past." The statement vaguely evokes a suspension of time, in which attributing a fixed meaning to historical events is impossible and every decision is indefinitely deferred.

The curator of the forum's exhibition portion, Tarek Abou El Fetouh, presented a re-enactment through contemporary works of three exhibitions from historically transitional periods: the 1974 Arab Art Biennale in Baghdad, the first Biennale in Alexandria, Egypt in 1955, and the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition in Beijing right before pro-democracy protests in 1989.

Each of these three historical shows grappled with questions of identity generated through contemporary socio-political changes. This same 'questioning' is reflected in the burgeoning culture of inquiry emerging in the region, as we see in other art scenes such as in Egypt.

Naturally, however, some questions have changed over the intervening fifty years. For example, artists are now trying to free themselves from geographically determined labels with the pressure of ideology replaced by the pressures of capitalist markets.



The exhibition is shown in three separate pavilions named after the original shows, and, as Abou El Fetouh explains, insinuates both temporal and spatial leaps. A suggested path leads the visitor through each section, and then to a central common area.

Although the recommended route hints at an unfolding narrative, because most works are isolated in individual rooms, this narrative is lost along the way. Aesthetic connections between the different pieces partially bridge the pavilions' segregation.

Much of the artwork on display reflects the layering of memories, events, and traditions. The combination of pre-existing and newly commissioned works offers a multi-faceted approach to questions about cultural identity that permeate the exhibition.

Amongst the pieces on view is Ali Cherri's two-channel video installation, *Pipe Dreams*, which airs images of former Syrian president Hafiz Al-Assad speaking to Syrian astronaut Mohammed Fares on July 22, 1987. In a video projected on the wall, Fares answers questions from the president while sitting among his colleagues on board a spaceship in orbit. "How is your physical and mental status?" Assad asks.

It is almost impossible as an audience member not to associate the president's slightly patronizing question with daily reports of massacres in contemporary Syria. The result is a collapsing of past images onto Syria's tragic present, making viewers cringe.

Among other interesting works are four pieces from Iman Issa's on-going series *Lexicon*. Issa drew inspiration from specific drawings, sculptures, and paintings from different geographical areas and periods. Issa developed personalized interpretations of these original works, and then juxtaposed the description of the originals with her remakes.

In Issa's pieces, detailed texts fade into the abstract forms of visual elements, such as a wooden sculpture reminiscent of an hourglass' stylized frame, and the picture of a round light shining in the dark.

In *Preface to the Third Edition* and *Preface to the Fourth Edition*, part of the on-going project [Scratching on Things I Could Disavow](#), Walid Raad continues his inquiry into the odd encounters between new contemporary art institutions being built in the Middle East, and individuals, economic schemes, and artistic practices.

As in his previous projects, Raad explores a fictional future narrative in his works – in this case through a sequence of photos and a video. According to the short story transcribed on the label next to the pictures, in the future a series of artefacts from the Islamic tradition will be moved from the Louvre museum in Paris to the newly built Louvre in Abu Dhabi. As captured in Raad's images, the works undergo deep aesthetic changes during the transport. The video, *Preface to the Fourth Edition*, evokes future modifications with an abstract collapse of forms into colors.

Other works explicitly refer to the future, imagining a post-apocalyptic world. Basim Magdy's *Investigating the Color Spectrum of a Post-Apocalyptic Landscape* is a sequence of pictures shot on the volcanic island of Lanzarote, off the Canary Islands. Magdy exposed the film stocks to different household chemicals, which altered the colors and caused different image distortions.

Ho Tzu Nyen also stages a post-apocalyptic landscape in his work *Earth*. The high-definition video re-deploys mannerist composition techniques to show the awakening of fifty individuals after a global catastrophe. These characters move slowly, recovering their consciousness for a few seconds, and then fall asleep again.

In one of the most intriguing pieces, *The Remains*, Seo Ming Jeong sealed dead bird corpses in polished cinerary urns of porcelain formed in the shape of these delicate creatures. Jeong captures the birds' moment of passage from life to death in the ceramic sculptures elegantly posed on top of a grey bed of clay.



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