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The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind: interview with artist Khalil Rabah

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It is generally difficult to make people change their opinions, especially if these are grounded in core beliefs. If you pretend to talk about something else entirely, however, you might find yourself forcing your counterpart to agree. Getting to the raw material behind hard convictions and making people think about issues from a different perspective is precisely what art does.

Take the ongoing project/artwork/institution created by Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah entitled “The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind”. To the artist, the project wants to question the viewer’s belief systems and how these beliefs manifest themselves in the social and political realm: “It’s about having viewers stop and apply a set of reflections taken from the artwork to their own lives and experiences,” he says.

In the creation of his museum, Rabah uses an artistic device which has also been employed

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by artists such as Walid Raad and Robert Zhao Renhui. This involves creating a fictional institution to question the power of official bodies in writing history. It is also a critique of the approach and display methodology of museums worldwide, which is overwhelmingly Western. Rabah turns this approach on its head, showing how natural and anthropological artefacts can narrate two parallel histories of domination and abuse. One is that of colonialism; the domination of men over men. The other concerns the domination of men over nature.

Despite its name, you won't find the Palestinian Museum of Natural History in the most obvious location of Ramallah, where the artist is based. Indeed, the museum is nomadic, a political stance in itself. People have had the chance to see it, or rather parts of it, in a number of locations worldwide. In 2007 it could be found at the Brunei Gallery at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, and in 2006 it was at De Appel in Amsterdam. A year earlier you could have spotted it at the 2005 Istanbul Biennial.

The museum hasn't been replicated piece by piece in every location. In each of its incarnations, it has embodied different concerns, in dialogue with the specifics of its location. In Istanbul, the artist showcased a

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series of specimens which appeared to be natural, but were in fact all man-made, prompting the viewer to question the idea of authenticity. In Amsterdam, the museum presented the natural history of the tulip, tracing its origins back to Palestine. In New York, Rabah explored the idea of the museum's archive.

A current reincarnation of the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind is at Rome's MACRO as part of the exhibition "Art and Politics" until 10 May next year. The work consists of a wooden box protected by glass, showcasing an assortment of olive trees, rocks, soap and dirt.

The installation is accompanied by a video demonstrating how to make olive oil. Another video features an auction of works from the Palestinian Museum. The idea of selling cultural artefacts, the values of which have been recognised by a museum, is baffling to viewers, forcing them to reflect on the importance of cultural heritage.

Allusions to the political reality of Palestine are scattered throughout Rabah's project. In some incarnations of the museum, botanical research is described as encountering territorial obstacles in the field. In others, the viewer is invited to consider the legal rights of trees and other natural objects.



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In this sense Khalil Rabah uses the mechanics of the art world to show an international audience the difficulty of creating a history of Palestine and constructing a national identity in the face of an occupation which denies that very thing. He also examines how institutions and official status help in constructing and legitimising national identity.

Rabah knows that Palestinian artists are unfailingly perceived in a political sense on the international art scene. In his work, he refuses to shy away from confrontations: “Starting with the name — The Palestinian Museum of History and Humankind — I want to confront expectations and nationalism. My work is both pro- and anti-nationalism at the same time. Of course, it is related to the Palestinian experience, or to a certain knowledge of Palestine, because this is who I am; a Palestinian. But I believe the conditions of a specific place can sometimes represent bigger concerns for humankind.”

Khalil Rabah was born in 1961 in Jerusalem and studied fine arts and architecture at the University of Texas, in what he describes as an “informal” education, consisting mainly of visiting museums on his own and producing works. He has taught architecture at Birzeit University and fine arts at Bezalel Academy, Jerusalem. He is a co-founder of Al-Ma’mal

Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem and Art School Palestine in London.

The interplay between the imaginary and reality has always been an important part of his work. “At one point I was advised by a local curator to build a centre for the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind on the Acropolis in Athens,” he explains.

“Sometimes for people the notion of something being real is attached to the physical and to a specific geographically located place or building. If you have a building, then it’s real. The minute you start to engage with architecture, it becomes an actual museum. But is it really? What are the boundaries? What is this territory? Then it becomes contested.”

This whole idea of the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind getting off the ground as an artwork and then gaining “official museum” status through collaboration has been part of the artist’s evolution of the project. What he is interested in is the exploration of alternative institutional building. While the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind is perceived as a psychic and intellectual project, its collaborations with real institutions such as the Riwaq Centre for Architectural Preservation in Ramallah make it real, somehow, in turn.

It might be a matter of definition, but today the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind exists in a grey area, where it is neither completely true, nor entirely false. “It is a living thing, and it gives me the energy to keep it alive,” insists the artist, who finds it of great interest that concepts and ideas can transform themselves. “You stop doing artworks and you start doing museums. Then you stop making museums and you make worlds, and these worlds can start making their own worlds.” Where will it stop? Will it stop? “Sometimes you have to let it do what it wants to do,” replies Khalil Rabah. “It gets out of control sometimes.”

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