

## ***THE PALESTINIAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY AND HUMANKIND***

“The museum is a colossal mirror in which man contemplates himself from all angles...”

- Georges Bataille, *Documents* 5

The public museum, since its foundation in the late eighteenth century, has enjoyed a complex, interdependent and ever-changing relationship with the artist. Khalil Rabah mines the rich potential of this relationship through *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* - a nomadic, ever-changing museum of the mind that parodies



the practice and policies of existing national museums in order to reflect upon the maintenance of memory and recollection. In its varying manifestations, the *Museum* provides an absurd tour of the spectacle of memory and the dark corners of Western colonialism.

An engagement with history is at once a pre-condition and a problem for Palestinian artists, given that their past is continuously being hijacked and erased by Israeli occupiers. Through his *Museum*, Rabah works at a double task: on the one hand, imaginative liberation from the tyranny of a history which seeks to deny Palestine a past (and therefore a presence) and, on the other, immersion in history to recover and recreate a past. His *Museum* plays with the paradox of shaping narratives to affirm an evolving recovery of identity while resisting the imposition of rigid interpretations of memory.

Like the memory theatres of Classical tradition, Rabah's *Museum* provides a kind of mind-map that makes use of imagined architectural spaces to enhance and investigate our ability to remember things. One of the best-known examples of the memory theatre is the structure reputedly built by Giulio Camillo in sixteenth-century Italy, in which the integration of architecture and



imagery was said to be such that anyone entering would be able to commit to memory the realisation of all human knowledge. More than a mnemonic device on an architectural scale, Camillo's theatre was said to offer a glimpse of the eternal verities - a life-changing revelation.

Unlike Camillo's theatre, Rabah's *Museum* aims to rupture and transform the unities of humanist historical thought. The old methods of classification have become unworkable and nothing can be further from the spirit of Rabah's *Museum* than 'a place for everything and everything in its place'. Belief in the authenticity of the contents on display in the *Museum* is both encouraged and undermined and inside the *Museum* the actual, the historic, the remembered and the imagined are collapsed into fluid figures, hybrid structures and fractured forms. Unlike Camillo, Rabah stratifies memory through the arrangement of objects that evoke the memory of events that may or may not have happened, but always could have happened.

This summer, in Athens, the imagined architecture of previous manifestations of Rabah's *Museum* took on physical shape in his installation *The New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*. Unlike earlier versions in Berlin, London, Ramallah and Istanbul, which were designed to deliberately thwart expectation and blur boundaries between the real and the virtual, this version was housed in a specially designed building with a formalised layout that parodied established institutions such as the British Museum.

Set in the shadow of the New Acropolis Museum in Athens, Rabah's *Museum* was able to subtly utilise the politicised location of his building-based project. The British Museum remains an ongoing presence in Athens, through the highly visible and publicised absence of the Parthenon Marbles, still on display at the British Museum despite the demands of the Greek government that they be returned to their country of origin. The powerful symbol of the empty gallery in the New Acropolis Museum, that awaits the return of these highly emotive artworks, is a gesture that could easily belong to one of Rabah's own mythical, psychic spaces.

This colonising gesture of encroachment and annexation is one that the *Museum* will itself be employing in its next manifestation at the Brunei Gallery, where it will assume control of Petrie's Palestinian collection – a series of finds made by the British archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie in the area around modern Gaza in the 1920s and 1930s. Adorno's famous comparison of museum and mausoleum is linked with the idea that museums enclose objects, separating them from the life-forces which gave them their original social and political meanings.

Rabah takes this idea full-circle. The anthropological, archaeological, botanical and geological specimens in his *Museum* – whether annexed, self-created or simply non-existent - nonetheless do evoke the people who might once have owned them in a way that Petrie's objects do not. The subjects have been colonised and their possessions have become scientific, aesthetic and imperialist trophies. By re-colonising this collection, the *Museum* highlights the psychic, social, economic and political parochialism of many existing national museums and their collections.

Alongside the Petrie Collection, the *Museum* will display its latest project - *50,320 Names* – in which Rabah lists the names of all the buildings on RIWAQ's Registry of Historic Buildings in Palestine. Begun in the summer of 1994 and only recently completed, this remarkable research project lists all buildings and historic sites which date earlier than 1945. Rabah's own document of a documentation locates itself somewhere between visual memoir and metaphoric memory and functions as an on-going act of remembrance that is as much about the role of memory as it is about the specific events of the Nakba. Starkly presented, Rabah's list does not attempt to reconstruct or recover what has gone before, but rather to celebrate a process that takes the tools of interpretation and documentation out of the hands of the coloniser.

By subverting the classical architectures of memory, the *Museum* questions the basis of knowledge formation and history-making in the context of colonisation.

Through his astute and well-targeted parodies, Rabah suspended his *Museum* somewhere



in between a museum of the absurd and the horrors of political reality, reminding us that Palestine does not have its own national museum or gallery and is faced with international indifference as its social, cultural and ecological infrastructures are torn apart.

Rabah cannot help but make the viewer aware that the contents of his museum parallel the signs of his country's obliteration. When his temporary installations are taken down they become pieces of memory dispersed among the witnesses of its occurrence. At the same time, the *Museum* makes transparent the prospect of recovery along with the process of loss. The *Museum's* very resilience and flexibility demonstrates the defiant optimism of its creator. It is, after all, a place established to "...inspire wonder, discovery and knowledge of amazing phenomena." Rabah's *Museum* – wherever it locates itself, whatever format it takes - remains an unusual and vital place: a sanctuary where it is possible to both lose ourselves in and have our awareness raised by works of art.

By Kelly O'Reilly