

From memory to memory and back again

Peter Lewis



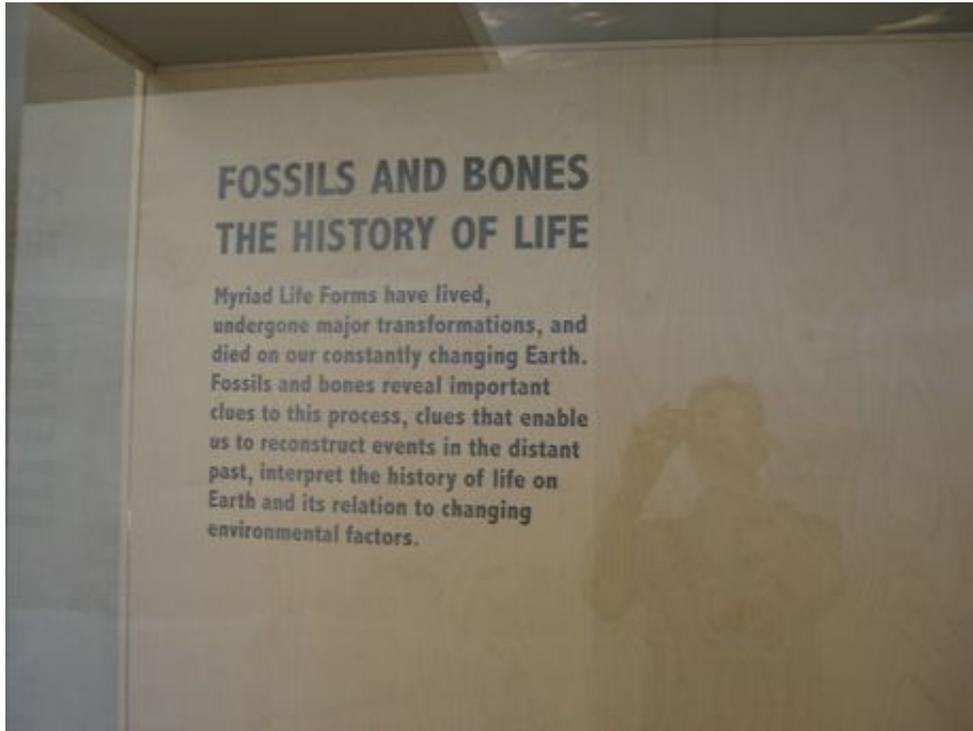


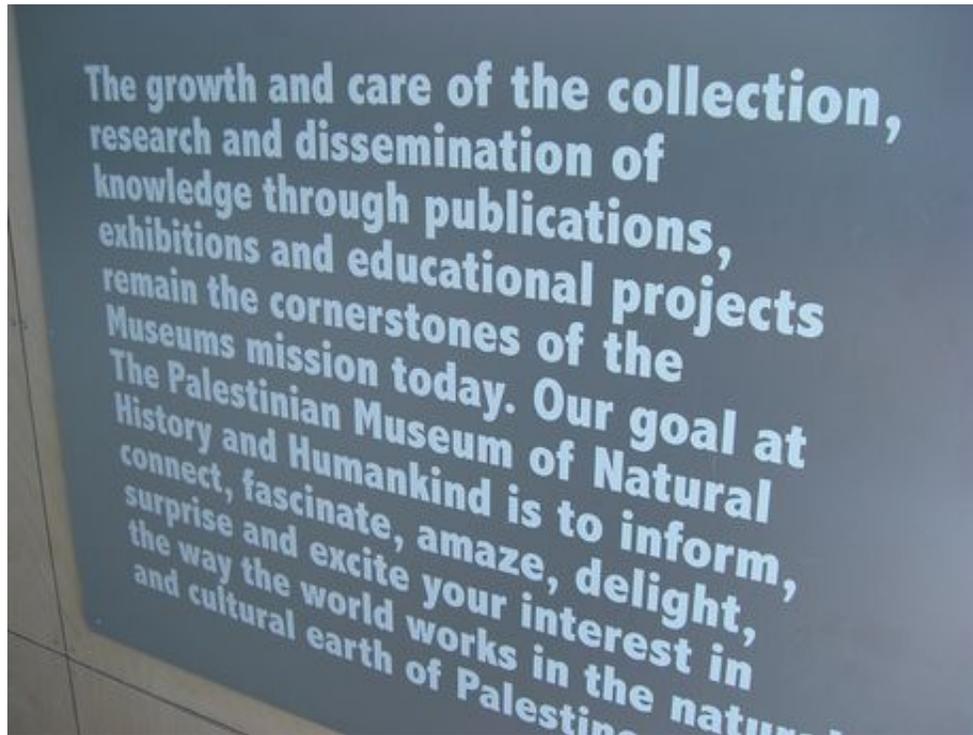












"The Museum's mission is to use the collections it houses to research, interpret, communicate and apply understanding of the environments and cultures of Palestine in order to increase their long-term sustainability."

Khalil Rabah

"The New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind took part in the 'The Grand Promenade', Athens, 2006 (curated by Anna Kafetsi). 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."

Kelly O'Reilly

My first experience of the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind was an encounter on my way to the Parthenon in Athens last summer with Makiko Nagaya. Like a standup comic's opening line, the joke would present hopefully [suspending disbelief] anticipate an ending outside expectation, break open its 'serious' logic with a turn on itself, at the point of realisation of a false [literally lead up the path] synoptic understanding. Catharsis, dénouement call it what you will. We stumbled into a small 'museum' half way up the hillside path that winds to the Acropolis - it was cool inside - this structure was built intentionally as a temporary accommodation [a metaphor for a state of nationality] for artefacts and descriptions, archives of sorts and some contemporary displays including video. With wooden floors and a smoked glass roof - although Khalil tells me the Greeks want to preserve the building's concrete shuttering and wood structure - this architectural work was commissioned as part of a nomadic curation in the city [curated by...]. The guards showing us round very convincingly as museum attendants. There was a question of whether there was an understanding or not of the work on display on a basis [understated] that Greek culture in terms of collective memory will always seek to embrace, intuit, curate, *demotically*, the whole ethos of an 'antiquity' in form of relics as living evidence, in the more dialogic sense of atheistic *diakonia*, serving to both present and past. In this sense then the [bi]location of a Palestinian art / museum / curatorship in Athens seemed appropriate, double-faced, that it would display an irony [a displacement] more in keeping with the ancient Greek [Platonic] one, to make certain of discomfiting presence, via the impasse in the present, being without a real future, or past: between not forcing understanding [that something is to be taken seriously] and not understanding that its force is also an understanding [that a joke is played out upon you at the same time]. Something like that. Here were the emblems of Palestine, agricultural, mythological, and allegorical, in disturbance with brutal political contemporaneity to that wounded and precarious being, elided in the fabrication of vested economic and political interests. The violence of Fiction. Things, events, that in the future anterior, we wish could not have happened.

There was also a publication. Again the same rule of paradox applied. This 'middle ground' [its *terra firma* was / in-between / is, slippery] upon which Khalil Rabah exercised the art of not -thinking in terms of the binary as a contradiction or opposition but as a two-ness as the basis of an elision instead of the solidity of one-ness. So the paradox was/ is that it did not, does not present a 'contradiction' in the western sense of the term, as a

dialectical progression in time, heading towards an end [a home-coming for Zion], or redeemed only in the returning One, but as the absurdity of wishing for such contradictions made concrete [of History as something detached from real situatedness, yet forced through reality for the Idea] in order to progress in the exchanges of thinking about the mythology of the future. [W.Benjamin's 'angelic' back to fronted-ness, witness to the tearing up of the earth, put into operation.] What if the thought already existed, in an unexcavated and allegorical sense that was both shared and witnessed [from a phantom audience, a third subject within recollective powers of perception] in the drama of everyday conversations? That ego-less beautiful country, without borders, walls. The publication was neither therefore 'sublime' [like an auratic 'thing' nor 'obscene' - grotesque, cynical, giving up all truth] in design but plain, to communicate an aesthetic mistrust in specious deferrals of what is true. It was ordinary, presenting its news-items with a child-like simplicity [not neutrality] that spoke very directly one to one [it made no pretence other than to be naïve about its own sense of parody] about concerns for a nation, for nationhood, for history of that nation etcetera. So it indicated a lot to speak of, with an irony well placed in the old notation of how irony can make for a discomfiting awareness of limits, whether these are epistemic, or 'political', by forced choice, how to deal with the sophistry of political double-speak without falling into those very same traps...

I met again Khalil Rabah one year on when asked to present a talk in London, at Artists Studio, by its Director, Shezad Dawood. Not many came, but the talk was good. Although advertised in the Frieze magazine, it did not draw a crowd. We puzzled over the lack. Jen Wu had come at least from the ICA, since she was researching 'Arab' art. Perhaps this is important, whenever we talk of conversation itself, before it has to be forced through into 'acceptable' knowledge, that a certain intimacy is generated through it. More formal contours emerge later. Makiko recorded it, a gritty soundtrack on the Casio camera. I thought it was downloaded but not so. It got wiped, unfortunately, so it is now appropriate that by memory I must excavate what transpired that afternoon. I remember [half-remember] I caught his eye on entering the front door, about 15 metres away from the inner door, we engaged in a conversation on co-incidence [we both felt we had met before]. The uncanny of this simultaneous sense of a recollection that had no material basis was the vaporous background for a rehearsal of identities, and of transparency, even of the effect of maybe the effect of some shared [greater capacity] of recollection, cognitive apparatus between many people. A 'general intelligence', as Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse* in 1857, the drafts for *Capital*. Such general intelligence is established in Plato

as a knowledge already- there. [I went to the show in order to prepare for a dialogue on the show and to discuss a rehearsal of some key points.] We drank some, and conversed on mutual acquaintance, Athens, design, especially the 'ready-made' shelving system, the office design [modernist] aesthetic, and the benefits of hallucinogens in tuning bureaucratic space into a shared psychic, non-discursive space. Utility, the Symbolic order, the Sovereign semiotic of the Bureau, were to be contaminated, de-composed, through a gradual process in dissolution. What was clearly simulacrum here was directed to the amnesia of Simulacrum itself: bureaucratic, corporate, and state power. We talked also of the installation in front of us as colliding perceptions, distributions of the sensible [as Rancière names] an aesthetic disturbing the quotas of representation; gallery / waiting room, or travel agency, as a social space, where everything is apparent [uncanny] in its synchronic place, only to begin. Like a child's adventure into an archive. Nostalgia worked for the memory here, pretending so as to initiate recollection, and a new awareness. An atlas of the world as somewhere else, in micro-political time, with its familiar land masses and oceans, colour coded - but this one seemed arbitrary, although 'real' in appearance, that is as a key to representing ideas and specifically political geographies [I noted this and commented on the surrealist idea of a map of the world where Alaska was the largest continent, and Britain was not represented, when surrealism still had a polemical heart], a model of a beautiful jet liner, clocks showing different times [were these set incorrectly against the measure of regulatory, world time?] a shelving system [of course empty, not unlike the Museum in Athens' aporia, awaiting the return of Platonic justice, never to emerge from a British Empire still holding ideological sway] a leather [white] sofa... etcetera. I asked Khalil about the colour coding as an architecture of plans; here it was subverted from the personal system of idiosyncratic categorisation vis a vis the universal, socially determined, or symbolic order. Did he purchase these paraphernalia from the tourist industry?

This piece is the most recent in a series of works under the umbrella of the Museum's activities. This one seemed a more serious departure into corporate styling from Pan-am, the 60s, The Olympics, to the network, instant, at home 'anywhere'. Post-Fordism, the internet, banking on-line, the new rights of passage from childhood's Empire, to Empire, into the sheerness of the electron and the seductive, post-oedipal, genocidal flare. A week had past since we talked about starting from the 'rehearsed' ideas. A small group assembled so we talked in the basement dining room and kitchen, not upstairs with the work, and had some drinks. It was a fine day in London, I had taken a short-cut with Makiko, walking at a pace through the labyrinthian halls of Harrods department store, a

veritable museum of commodities, and a national symbol subverted by suspicious circumstances [assassination] and xenophobic denial, the gross and banal assertion of state sovereignty, round the corner and we arrived at the highly desirable property on Pont Street, we were late and so we missed lunch. Anna Soucek from Vienna was there, a friend from Goldsmiths days, and the two, Makiko and Anna went out to buy some wine.

What was the relation, I began, to his earlier architectural practice? What was the relation to institutions, was the Museum displaying, albeit without shouting, an innate rebelliousness about the authority of States, a clever parody that co-existed and eluded, within and without a 'state' of transcendence above and condition below? These could be, is it not precisely this, interchanged, in momentum? Nothing is sufficient to represent the epoch. Something will always remain of what has been representative. The aesthetic is mutable, also difficulty. What remains? What evades recollection? The lucid and enigmatic 50,320 Names of buildings located in 16 main towns and 406 villages in 11 West Bank districts and 5 districts in the Gaza Strip, although described building materials, typology of construction, condition, comprised a Registry, or architecture of memory in the face of loss. Over 70,000 photographs housed in an exquisite archive.

"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. Rajah's own document of 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, Rajah'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." [Kelly O'Reilly]

We agreed on many points. The 'impossibility' of the museological archive within the world-as-archive. I remember, on the complex relation of teaching and the business of universities [can 'excellence' be bought, let alone taught?] and of becoming one's own institution, seeking a new identity: that the independence of these activities, and their parody is mutually antagonistic and co-extensive. Dadaist self-deprecation declared a violence to the object of belonging, having no desire to the Law, the World War, which also found some resonance in the work of our colleagues in Beirut, Tony Chakar and Walid Ra'ad, and also of the work of Christine Toumé and Ashkal Al-wan [Christine in fact turned up, but later]. So we talked around some of the differences too. There was an idea of

childhood that did not escape reason, which instead informed some of the play in the work of invention, an ingenious moulding of a logic also that enabled ideas of others to influence the evolution of the critical component of an idea. Khalil said that it was friends who suggested that he set up a company for a mythical Palestinian airline, a proper legal company. He set it up as a real airline of Palestine in order to stall, perhaps, to operate in the imagination, and to alert to one's being too comfortable [as the early days of flying promised, in an egalitarian wish for international community] in a sublime turn to a situation that is one of horror; specifically of the political reality of Palestinian people, and the total loss of freedom of any movement or sense of being. How and when did we acquiesce? What of the incommensurable soul? The task is not lost. Khalil offered an example, of the Museum's auction of the Wall.

"In March 2004 the Museum held the 3rd Annual Wall Zone Sale at the Sakikini Centre in Ramallah. This high profile event auctioned objects taken from the natural environment and surroundings of the 120m separation wall that has been erected between Israel and Palestine in order to raise funds for projects that increase awareness of the social and ecological implications of the wall. [] ...To take a lead role in the urgent task of researching an enormous CATASTROPHE of life - on-earth commonly referred to as the APARTHEID WALL, THE SEPARATION WALL, THE WEST BANK WALL, THE SEAM ZONE, ALJIDAR ALFASSEL, THE SECURITY FENCE, THE WALL IN PALESTINE, THE OCCUPATION WALL."

[Khalil Rabah, From Newsletter Winter/Spring 2007]

Christine Toumé and her friend took Khalil off for a drink somewhere. I got an email later from him, and I replied. We both hoped to continue where the conversation left us, in the impasse, one shared in the spirit of recollection of memory and its viscosity; of the importance of the project of the Many, and the reciprocal understanding that there was a lot of work to do to construct a future narrative and that it would be at some unknowable time re-invent the logic of the institution, and thereof, *in potentia*, of the politics of the Good.

"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."

[Kelly O'Reilly.]





















