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في بيروت عندما زار المغفور له الملك سعود، الطلاب السعوديين في تلك المدرسة



، ثم سعد التويجري ، ثم خالد التويجري ، ثم عبدال
... وخلفه الأستاذ قلا مدير الق
... خلف محمد السويد (غير معرف)



مؤسسة
الخدمات التجارية
خليل عبد الكريم الياس
الرئيس

ثم بجانبه بندر السديري بنظارة شمسية أيضاً ، ثم أمام بندر السديري
عبد السعود ، ثم محمود جونت ، ثم خلفه وبين
أمام محمود جونت ويوسف محتسب يقف خلفه
وبجانبه قاسم الهجن ، وخلفه بدر الصالح ، أمامه عبدالرحمن
المدرسة السيد يسلي لثف ، ثم وراءه عبدالوهد القصبي ، ثم





Art Jameel
Jameel Arts Centre
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
jameelartscentre.org

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Art Jameel is an organisation that supports artists and
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CRUDE



MURTAZA VALI

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FOREWORD

'Crude' is the first group exhibition at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai. Conceived by curator Murtaza Vali, in conversation with the Art Jameel team, this exhibition's exploration of oil through the eyes of contemporary artists could not be more prescient in terms of subject and curatorial approach, presenting an innovative material reading of a substance so crucial in shaping local and regional histories and cultures. Jameel Arts Centre sets out to be an institution that positions art as central to understanding the world around us: our programmes are discursive, drawing out threads of enquiry that are oftentimes hidden in plain sight. The Centre's position on the Creek, and the nature of Dubai as a city, has seen our curatorial thinking coalesce around the idea of confluence—the ebb and flow of micro and macro exchange, of human encounters through trade, language, history, prompted by both informal and prescribed social and cultural spaces.

The works included in 'Crude'—some sourced from the Art Jameel Collection—tend to embrace the slipperiness and contradictions inherent not only in oil as a substance and harbinger of geopolitical transformation, but also in life at large. (Perhaps we are biased, but this is an exhibition that affirms the exceptional capacity of contemporary art to unravel and expose complex conceptual, thematic and experiential ideas of our time). We are also proud that the exhibition includes both established, highly influential artists, and those long-nurtured by the wider Art Jameel and UAE arts communities who are now gaining an international following.

On behalf of Fady Mohammed Jameel, President of Art Jameel, we would like to extend our thanks and appreciation to the curator and participating artists; institutions and individuals who have loaned works to 'Crude'; the designers of this book, Studio Safar; and all those who have built the exhibition conceptually and physically behind the scenes, not least Art Jameel's 'Crude' team, led by Nora Razian, with Dawn Ross and Albert Kolambel.

Antonia Carver

Director
Art Jameel



A CRUDE HISTORY OF MODERNITY

INTRODUCTION

Oil is magical and insidious. As the most valuable, highly coveted and finite natural resource, it was and continues to be a powerful agent of geopolitical upheaval and socio-economic transformation. Oil has been a trigger for misguided colonial adventures, imperial endeavours, wars and coups, a catalyst for nation-building, modernisation and development, and a cause of terrible ecological disasters and irreversible climate change. Though it is the essential fuel of capitalist modernity, literally propelling the unrelenting expansion that characterises this period, it remains “hidden in plain sight”.¹ Oil’s ubiquity means we take it, and the modern way of life it fuels, entirely for granted. Though, or maybe because, it pervades all aspects of our contemporary existence, our dependence on it is routinely abstracted and concealed, both consciously and unconsciously. Like capital, oil resists representation. As Imre Szeman suggests, “one of the major difficulties faced by any aesthetic encounter with oil is the apparent capacity for the substance to absorb all critique, in much the same way that it absorbs light”.²

'Crude' offers a corrective, attempting to make oil visible and open to critique by presenting artworks that engage directly and obliquely with the many archives, infrastructures and technologies it has produced. The focus in Western contemporary art and exhibitions about oil tends to fall on the disastrous environmental toll of fossil fuel dependence.³ While the growing urgency of the crisis definitely merits such a focus, it may also be linked to the fact that the primary relationship to oil in these societies is one of consumption and, hence, critique and activism are initiated and enacted in response to this. In contrast, in the Middle East, where many of the largest deposits lie, the relationship

1. Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman, “Oil Imag(e)inaries: Critical Realism and the Oil Sands,” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies/Revue d’Études Interculturelles de l’Image* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 46–67.

2. Imre Szeman, “How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 155.

3. See, for example, Inke Arns, ed., *The Oil Show* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2011) and Jen Budney, ed., *Beneath the Petroliferous Moon* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 2013).

is more complex. Revenue generated from the industry has helped shape the modern histories of oil-producing societies and continues to influence their current state. In these societies, oil emerges as an important historical protagonist, social and cultural catalyst, and the abiding, if invisible, material texture of everyday life. Traces of these distinct but intertwined processes and effects are embedded in the spectrum of representations—documents and records, plans and photographs, architectures and infrastructures, images and artefacts, icons and symbols, subjectivities and materialities—that oil, and its attendant industries and economies, have produced. Bringing together recent work that engages with this material, 'Crude' narrates an alternative, materialist (art) history of modernity in the region.⁴

The exhibition's title does not just reference unrefined oil. It acknowledges the critical perspective that many of the included artworks bring to bear on their subject matter. It also serves as a metaphor for the coarseness of the history of petromodernity across the region, which was and continues to be an incomplete and flawed process. It focuses on historical lacunae and forgotten pasts: those moments of friction when oil's slippery flow was interrupted just long enough for the substance to emerge into view. While oil's strategic and economic importance privileges the macro-scaled optics of geopolitics—including the intertwined histories of colonialism, imperialism, modernism and nationalism that have unfurled in its wake—this exhibition draws equally from the spaces, experiences, textures and materialities of everyday life, the “infra-ordinary” sphere where oil's pervasive influence is, perhaps, most potent and most surreptitious.⁵ Challenging the smooth, linear narrative of hegemonic histories, 'Crude' presents, instead, a necessarily partial, fragmented, idiosyncratic and episodic account: a crude history.

HISTORICAL PRELIMINARIES

Oozing out of cracks and fissures in natural seepages, oil has been known, traded and used in various ways across the Middle East since antiquity: as medicine to treat a broad spectrum of ailments, as mortar for construction, most famously in the walls of Babylon; as caulking; as binder to smoothen the road surfaces; as an illuminant and even as a weapon.⁶ Large subterranean deposits were first discovered and tapped in the region in 1908, when British businessman William Knox D'Arcy, who had secured a concession for the region seven years earlier, finally struck oil at Masjid-i-Sulaiman in what is now southwest Iran. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company, the precursor to British Petroleum, was established shortly after, with the British government taking

4 . Cuauhtémoc Medina adopted a similar curatorial methodology in the 9th edition of *Manifesta* entitled 'The Deep of the Modern'. Medina's ambitious exhibition excavated the history of coal mining in Belgium's Limburg region, reflecting on both its past and present through commissioned work, historical art and archival materials. See Cuauhtémoc Medina et al. *Manifesta 9: The Deep of the Modern: A Subcyclopaedia* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2012).

5 . Georges Perec, "Approaches to What?" *Species of Spaces and Other Places*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: Penguin, 1997), 209–211.

6 . Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 23–24.

a controlling share in it in 1913, entangling corporate and state interests. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire, a conglomerate of Western corporations divvied up concession rights in neighbouring Iraq, where oil was struck in 1927 in Baba Gurgur, near Kirkuk.⁷ The clamour to secure concessions continued across the rest of the Arabian Peninsula during the 1920s and 1930s. Oil was discovered in Bahrain in 1932, the first in the Gulf States, followed by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in 1938, and then Qatar two years later.

Oil quickly displaced coal as the primary energy source, especially in the West. Instrumental to this sea change was the decision taken by Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, in the years leading up to World War I, to shift the fuel used by the Royal Navy from coal to oil, inaugurating a century of colonial and imperial adventures in the name of oil.⁸ A more concentrated and hence efficient source of energy, oil's specific biophysical properties—its fluidity and lightness—made it easier to extract and transport than coal. Its relative lightness also made long-distance transport across oceans feasible, dramatically expanding the sphere of resource extraction, producing the necessary conditions for oil-fuelled imperialism and, eventually, even globalisation. Timothy Mitchell has argued that these distinct biophysical properties produced different political possibilities of what he calls “carbon democracy” creating “both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits”.⁹ Coal's heavy reliance on labour and its territorialised and “dendritic” transport chain afforded workers, who could easily interrupt distribution through strike and sabotage, tremendous leverage against management.¹⁰ In contrast, oil's relative ease of movement and its interconnected global network compromised the efficacy of these political tools.

As the essential fuel of capitalist modernity, oil has elicited a vast and daunting amount of interest and reflection. While its geopolitical, economic and, more recently, environmental impacts have been widely discussed and analysed, its influence on social and cultural life, especially at the level of the everyday, has been largely overlooked. Over the last decade the discourse has begun to shift, precipitated by what Patricia Yaeger has called “resource anxiety”, a realisation that oil's imagined surplus and endless potential are under threat.¹¹ The exuberance historically associated with oil first began to dissipate in the early 1970s when spectacular disasters and mounting scientific evidence made the irreversible environmental toll of our fossil-fuel dependence clear. On the other hand, the 1973 oil crisis resulting from an Organisation of Oil Producing Countries (OPEC) embargo and the scarcity panic elicited by emerging theories of Peak Oil, forced a re-evaluation of the innumerable ways in which daily life was impossible without

7 . Established in the 1890s as the Turkish Petroleum Company and renamed the Iraq Petroleum Company after the fall of the Ottoman empire, this consortium consisted of a group of American firms including Standard Oil of New Jersey and Standard Oil of New York, British-owned Royal Dutch/Shell and the Anglo-Persian/Iranian Oil Company, and the *Compagnie française des pétroles* who each held 23.75 percent. The remaining 5 percent went to Calouste Gulbenkian, the Armenian businessman who brokered the deal. See Yergin, 184–206.

8 . Yergin, 11–12.

9 . Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso Books, 2011), 1.

10 . Mitchell, 36–39.

11 . Patricia Yaeger, “Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Resources,” *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (March 2011): 306.

cheap and plentiful oil. These shocks firmly shifted our understanding of oil, from seeing it as the “lifeblood” of society to it becoming an “addiction” that we cannot seem to kick.¹² The complex social and cultural effects of our use of and dependence on oil through the twentieth century, which in turn produced the specific conditions of our contemporary world, are only now beginning to be systematically analysed and understood through the emerging academic subfield of energy humanities.¹³ These scholars repeatedly foreground the central role that energy, and specifically fossil fuels, has played in the history of capitalism and modernity. Much of what we think of as progress—the scientific and technological advancements that enabled both the industrial and digital revolutions, the population explosion and the concentration of human life in cities, the speed, ease and scope of mobility, travel and trade, and the globalisation of capital, finance, information, media and culture—would not have been possible without the energy surplus that fossil fuels, and especially oil, provide. Oil has literally and metaphorically fuelled the conditions of temporal acceleration and spatial contraction that define our “extreme present”.¹⁴

These accounts complicate and challenge older approaches to understanding oil.

Most conventional accounts, often crafted by oil companies or sympathetic parties, narrate their activities as triumphant and positive, bringing unprecedented wealth, progress and modernity to humankind. Erasing histories of colonial oppression, imperial exploitation and racial prejudice, these accounts present the story of oil exploration and discovery as frontier myths, with oilmen as heroic pioneers venturing bravely into untamed nature, tapping its hidden resources for the betterment of civilisation.¹⁵ Another subset of oil narratives focuses on the negative geopolitical effects of petrowealth, positioning oil-producing nations, increasingly located outside the West, as “rentier states” whose reliance on revenue generated from a single industry leaves them particularly susceptible to the “oil curse”.¹⁶ Oil, or at least the tremendous revenues it generates, is presented as inherently corrupting, sabotaging the very possibility of democracy, and producing, instead, authoritarianism. By privileging the effects of the revenues generated from oil over the political, economic and social mechanics of the substance itself, this approach absolves Western nations, who are the primary consumers of oil and have continually exploited foreign resources for access to cheap and plentiful supplies, of any responsibility for this state of affairs.¹⁷

As Matthew T. Huber has argued, these conventional accounts, especially those that focus on oil's geopolitical, economic and

12. Matthew T. Huber, “Oil, Life, and the Fetishism of Geopolitics,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 22, no. 3 (2011): 33.

13. The following anthologies provide an introduction to this burgeoning interdisciplinary academic discourse: Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason and Michael Watts, eds., *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman, eds., *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds., *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017); and Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Fueling Culture: 101 Words on Energy and Environment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

14. Shumon Basar, Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Age of Earthquakes* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

15. The classic examples of this type of account are Roland Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 1: The Developing Years, 1901-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); James Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 2: The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and James Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Volume 3: British Petroleum and Global Oil, 1950-1975: The Challenge of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) on British Petroleum; and Wallace Stegner, *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil* (Vista, CA: Selva Press, 2007) on the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco).

16. The rentier state argument was first posited by Hossein Mahdavy, “The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran,” in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. M. A. Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 428–467.

17. Mitchell, 1-2.

environmental effects, tend to fetishise it as a self-evident *thing*, its agency concentrated in and contained by the substance itself. Through this process of reification, oil seems to transcend history.¹⁸ Instead, he suggests a dialectical approach that views “oil as produced through a set of social relations”.¹⁹ And to get a fuller picture of the role of oil in social life—in the past and present—it becomes necessary to heed Mitchell’s imploration to “follow the oil”, carefully tracing and mapping its effects through the many complex social, cultural, political, economic, infrastructural and material histories and networks in which it is imbricated.²⁰

OIL WORKERS/ ART WORKERS

Much of this information lies buried in the numerous archives generated through the twentieth-century quest for oil across the region. In addition to vast collections of corporate, bureaucratic, diplomatic and scientific documents,²¹ oil companies produced rich visual repositories that documented their activities and contributions on the ground and in the field. Commissioned as corporate propaganda by their public relations departments, this material strategically and univocally celebrated the progress and achievements enabled by oil, informing investors and employees about the workings of the industry and the distant parts of the world where it functioned.²²

Though the teams that generated this material were led by Western expatriates, they often employed local photographers, filmmakers and artists, drawing on their intimate knowledge of the landscape, language, culture and history. ‘Crude’ includes a selection of works created in the mid-twentieth century by Latif Al Ani and Houshang Pezeshknia, two contemporaries employed by oil companies, in Iraq and Iran respectively. Al Ani and Pezeshknia provide us with a unique perspective on how petromodernity was experienced and understood by natives of the countries where oil was being extracted, albeit influenced by their employment in the industry.

Al Ani worked as a photographer first for the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) from 1954-60 and then for Iraq’s Ministry of Culture and Guidance in the 1960s.²³ IPC’s photography unit was an integral part of the company’s public relations department, established in 1952 in the months following the nationalisation of oil in neighbouring Iran.²⁴ Al Ani’s photographs appeared regularly in the IPC’s widely distributed monthly English and Arabic language magazines, *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al Naft (People of Oil)*.²⁵ His

→ Following spread, top left

Latif Al Ani
Aerial View of Tahrir Square and the Monument of Liberty, Baghdad, Iraq
1961

→ Following spread, bottom left

Latif Al Ani
Aerial view of a Housing Project in the Yarmouk Neighbourhood, Baghdad, Iraq
1961

→ Following spread, top right

Latif Al Ani
Building the Darbandikhan Dam, Iraq
c.1961

→ Following spread, bottom right

Latif Al Ani
School Lunch, Baghdad, Iraq
c.1961

18 . Alan Stoekl posits writing oil’s history as “the most effective way of refusing such a reification...all the while granting it the visibility it deserves.” See Allan Stoekl, “Foreword,” in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xii.

19 . Huber, “Oil, Life, and the Fetishism of Geopolitics,” 44.

20 . Mitchell, 4-8.

21 . For an analysis of the types of archives generated and produced by oil corporations see Andrew Barry, “The Oil Archives,” in *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, eds. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason and Michael Watts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 95-107.

22 . Mona Damluji, “Visualizing Iraq: Oil, Cinema, and the Modern City,” *Urban History* 43, no. 4 (November 2016), accessed June 4, 2018, <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/visualizing-iraq-oil-cinema-and-the-modern-city-by-mona-damluji>.

23 . There has been a surge of interest in Al Ani since his work was rediscovered and presented as part of the Iraq Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. See Philippe Van Cauteren, ed., *Invisible Beauty: The Iraq Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia: Latif Al Ani, Salam Atta Sabri, Rabab Ghazoul, Akam Shex Hadi, Haider Jabbar* (Milan: Mousse Publishing; Baghdad: Ruya Foundation, 2015). A large selection of Al Ani’s work has since been published in a monograph, see Tamara Chalabi, Morad Montazami and Shwan Ibrahim Taha, *Latif Al Ani* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2017).





→ Right

Latif Al Ani

View of Rashid Street and
the Mirjan Mosque, Baghdad,
Iraq
1963

↓ Below

Rifat Chadirji

Views of Abboud Building,
Baghdad
1955



24. After the nationalisation of the oil industry in Iran in 1951, the IPC consciously and strategically worked to localise both production and distribution of this material, training and employing local photographers, filmmakers, writers and translators. See Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq."

25. Distributed to company employees and stakeholders in Iraq, the broader region and in Europe, circulation numbers for *Iraq Petroleum* and *Ahl al Naft* reached as high as 20,000 and 46,000 per issue respectively. See Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq."

26. Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq."

27. This period in Iraq's modern architectural history was showcased in the exhibition 'City of Mirages: Baghdad, 1952-1982', first presented at the Col·legi d'Arquitectes de Catalunya, Barcelona (July 10-September 13, 2008). See the related multilingual publication, Pedro Azara, ed. *Ciudad del espejismo: Bagdad, de Wright a Venturi/City of Mirages: Bagdad, From Wright to Venturi* (Barcelona: Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 2008). Wright's Orientalist design for an opera house was never built, Gropius's extensive plans for a new university campus were only partially realised, and Le Corbusier's gymnasium was only completed decades later under Saddam Hussein.

striking black and white photographs from the late 1950s and early 1960s, taken using a medium format Rolleiflex, document Baghdad's oil-fuelled urban transformation. They are part of a visual repertoire through which Iraqis came to recognise themselves and their nation as modern. As Mona Damluji has stated, through such photographs and films, the IPC "invented the image of Baghdad for Iraqi audiences as the sight/site of oil modernity in the 1950s. In other words, oil urbanisation, or the modernisation of the city as shaped by the petroleum industry and its revenues, in Iraq cannot be understood apart from the representation of Baghdad as visible evidence of petroleum's promise to benefit the national population."²⁶

Established in 1952, the Iraq Development Board used oil revenues to solicit ambitious architectural proposals from stalwart modernists like Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier.²⁷ Constantinos Doxiadis was given the task of developing a new masterplan for Baghdad that would accommodate the city's fast-growing population through mass housing projects.²⁸ The crowded souks and narrow alleys of the medieval city were gradually replaced by wide avenues filled with automobiles and buses, flanked by new modernist landmarks, like Philip Hirst's Rafidain Bank (1945-57), the first skyscraper built in the city, and Rifat Chadirji's Abboud Building (1955), a gleaming white cylinder on Shorja Street, seen in Al Ani's 1961 photograph of the city's commercial heart.



Modernisation and development initiatives were not limited to cities. In a 1962 photograph of the Darbandikhan Dam under construction in Kurdistan, receding spirals of light and dark dramatically frame the welder in the foreground. Oil revenues were also used to improve vital social services such as education, healthcare and housing. In a 1961 image, a smiling schoolgirl proudly holds up a glass bottle of milk, presenting the state as benevolent and caring, literally nurturing its citizens into modernity. And as women entered the workforce, long-standing gender norms began to change, a societal shift that Al Ani also chronicled.

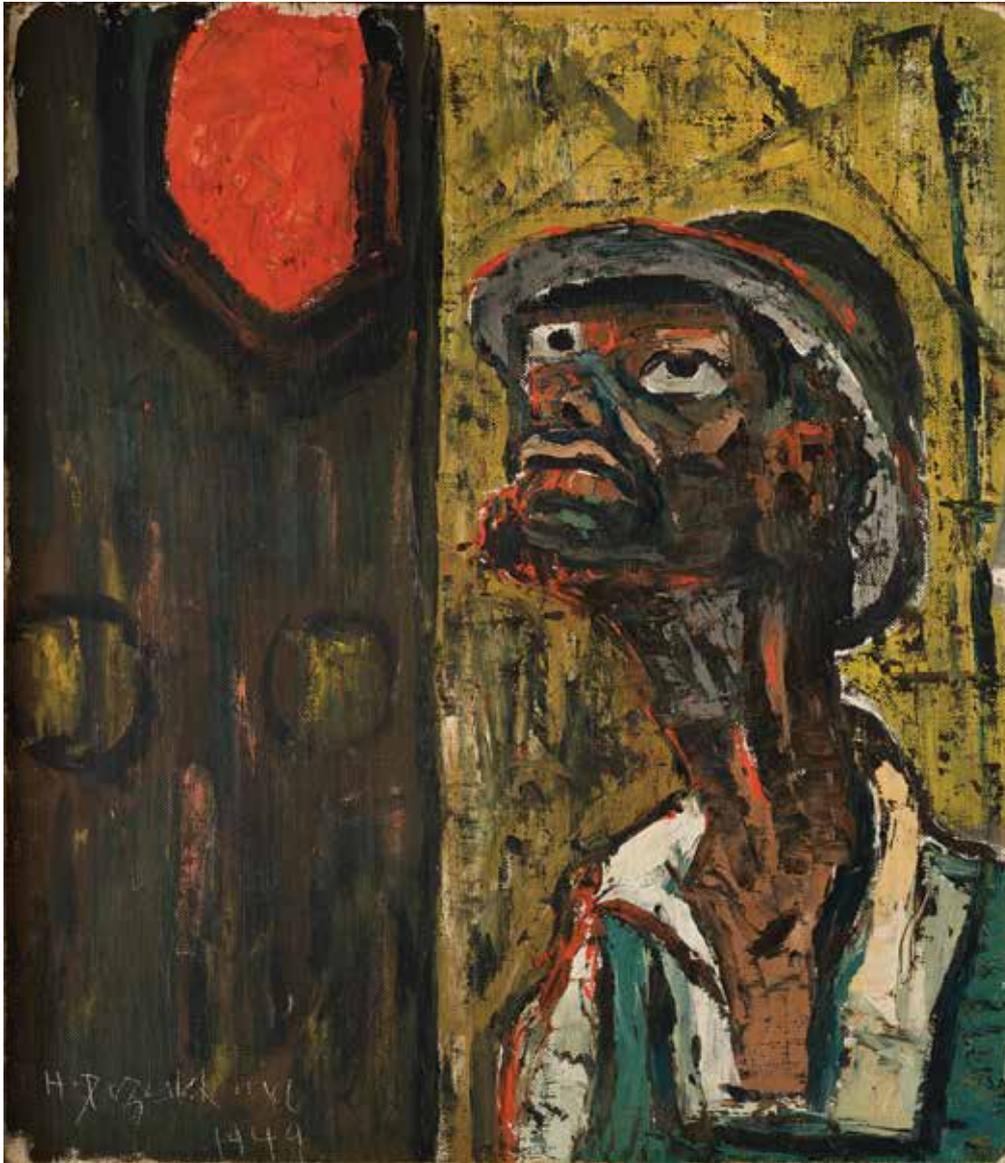
In Al Ani's photographs, the urban and socio-cultural transformations of oil modernity are registered both in front of and behind the camera, through particular compositional strategies and novel perspectives. IPC and the colonial authorities regularly used aerial photography to survey and map the landscape, and Al Ani used this elevated point of view to capture the changing topography of modern Iraq. Al Ani's 1961 photograph of Baghdad's Tahrir Square, one among a series of aerial shots of cities and towns, centres Jawad Salim's monumental sculptural frieze *Nasb al-Hurriyyah* (*Monument of Freedom*) (1959-61) within the larger urban fabric.²⁹ Al Ani reflected the dynamism of the period through his repeated use of diagonals.³⁰ A grid shot at an angle reappears in two disparate contexts: a 1959 photograph of women working in an automated date-packing factory in Basra and one from 1962 of a mass housing project in West Baghdad. Together these images demonstrate how modernity's inclination towards rational order and industrial logic reorganised

↑ Above
 Latif Al Ani
Date Packing Factory, Basra, Iraq
 c.1960

28. Panayiota Pyla, "Back to the Future: Doxiadis's Plans for Baghdad," *Journal of Planning History* 7, no. 1 (February 2008): 3-19.

29. Commissioned in 1959 by Brigadier General Abd Al Karim Qasim, the new leader of the republic, to commemorate Iraq's declaration of independence, *Nasb al-Hurriyyah* was completed in 1961 after Salim's untimely death in January of that year. For more information on Salim's monument and the art historical context surrounding it, see Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

30. Caecilia Pieri, "The Iraqi City and Architecture in Latif Al Ani's Work: Yesterday's Modernity, a Model for the Future?" *Ruya Foundation*, November 21, 2015, accessed June 15, 2018, <https://ruyafoundation.org/en/2015/11/caecilia-pieri-latif-al-ani/>.





← Previous spread, left
Houshang Pezeshknia
Untitled
 1949

← Previous spread, right
Houshang Pezeshknia
Untitled
 c.1958

→ Right
Houshang Pezeshknia
Khark
 1958



both working life and the city: both the human and urban experience. While Al Ani's photographs document the varied pathways through which modern Iraq came into being, their formal sophistication trumps their status as mere propaganda for an oil company and nation state.

31. For additional information about Pezeshknia's life and work see Layla S. Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art: From Kamal-al-Molk to Zenderoudi," in *Iran Modern*, eds. Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, (New York: Asia Society Museum; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 54; and Hadi Hazavei and Mehdi Rafie, *Houshang Pezeshknia* (Tehran: Shahrivar Gallery, 2017).

32. Other examples include works commissioned by various oil companies in the region. In 1952, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) commissioned the then-14-year-old Abdullah Al Muharraqi to produce paintings celebrating the industry, which were presented to local and foreign dignitaries on the occasion of new oil discoveries. In 1966, Nuha Al Radhi was commissioned by IPC to produce a mural for the entryway of its Baghdad office. In contrast to Al Muharraqi's more conventional figuration, Al Radhi's mural, made from unglazed ceramic tiles like the sculptural friezes of Babylon, was abstract, influenced by contemporary trends in modern Arab art. Inspired by modern *hurufiya*, Al Radhi chose to commemorate Iraqi oil not through images but words; buried in the middle of a rhythmic field of circles, crescents and vertical lines are Arabic letters that spell out "Baba Gurgur", where oil was first struck in 1927. For more information on Al Radhi, see Ala Younis' 2018 installation *Plan (fem.) for a Greater Baghdad*, which was exhibited at the Delfina Foundation, London (February 1-March 24, 2018) and Project Space Art Jameel, Dubai (March 1-April 14, 2018).

Pezeshknia, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, worked as an illustrator in the publications department of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in Abadan from 1948-58.³¹ Among the few modernist artworks that directly picture the oil industry,³² his paintings often focus on workers, revealing his leftist sympathies, stirred up by the burgeoning labour movement in the Iranian oil industry that eventually led to its nationalisation in 1951.³³ In two untitled works painted nearly ten years apart, Pezeshknia uses common modernist tropes such as energetic brushwork and bodily distortions to evoke the difficult conditions under which these men lived and worked. In the more subdued watercolour *Khark* (1958), he captures and conveys both the nobility and the hardship of their labour. Pezeshknia's landscapes subtly critique the oil industry's impact on its surrounding environs. In *Mirage du pétrole* (1950) and *Untitled* (1958), he repeats the same basic composition: a peasant



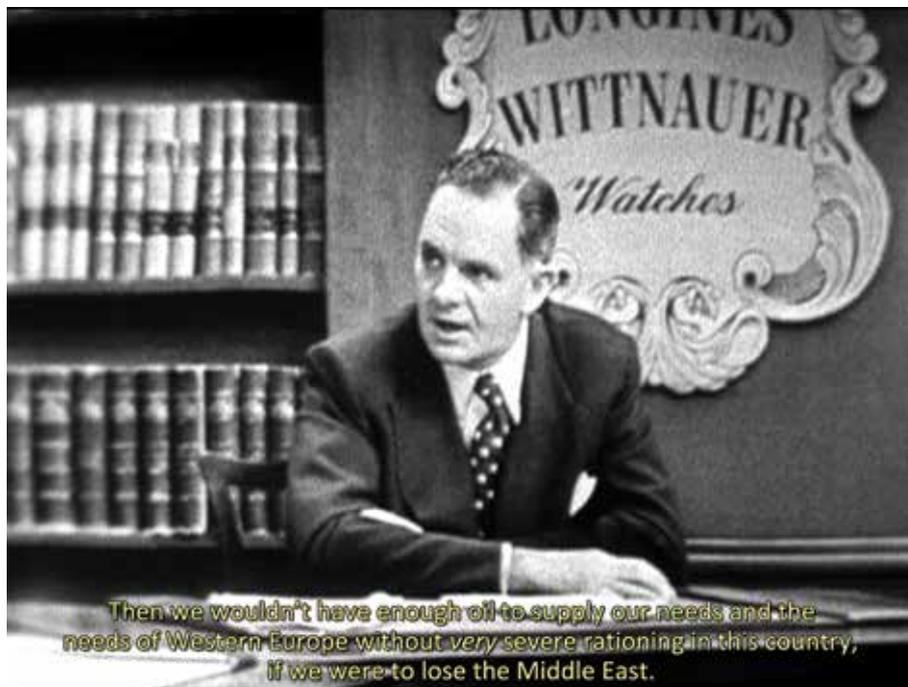
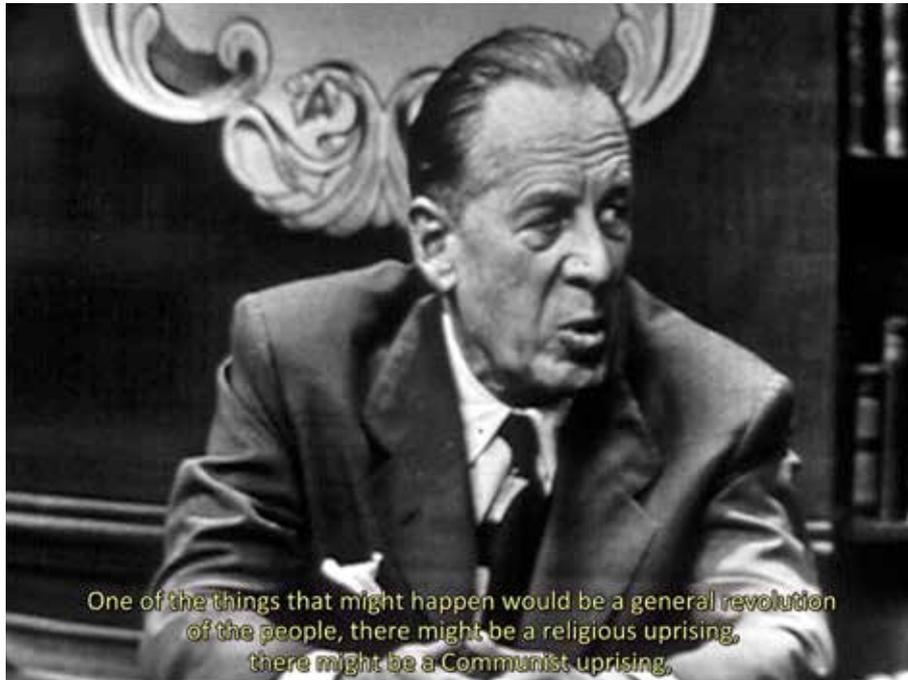
man and child in the foreground, their backs to us, look towards an oil derrick in the distance. In the former, the figures are painted in thick strokes of tar-like black paint, with a golden yellow sun adding contrast. Gestural black swirls and scribbles fill the latter, intimating the ever-present threat of disaster or pollution resulting from the extraction of oil. Although we cannot see their expressions, Pezeshknia's use of a familiar motif—the *Rückenfigur*—gives them an air of melancholy; oil evokes both a sense of awe and dread, yet remains beyond their grasp, haunting the landscape like an apparition.

COMPANY MEN

By the middle of the twentieth century, the West had become increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil for satisfying its growing energy needs. Contemporary Western archives, both of mass media and of the oil companies themselves, reveal how this historical shift was perceived, presented, discussed and debated in and by the West. These archives provide insight into the lives and mindsets of the many company men associated with and invested in the industry, from politicians and corporate executives in the West to diplomats and expatriate employees based in the Middle East.

33 . On the social history of labour in the oil industry see Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani eds., *Work for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

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| ↖ Above, left |
| Houshang Pezeshknia <i>Untitled</i> c.1958 |
| ↑ Above, right |
| Houshang Pezeshknia <i>Mirage du pétrole</i> 1950 |



Drawing from the archive of the titular thrice-weekly current affairs programme, Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck and Media Farzin’s video *Chronoscope, 1951, 11 pm* (2009-11) constructs a compelling and disturbing psychological profile of these company men. Broadcast live on the CBS Television Network—and sponsored by the Longines-Wittnauer Watch Company, the self-proclaimed manufacturers of “The World’s Most Honored Watch”—the show’s format consisted of a pair of journalists interviewing a single, invited guest. Balteo-Yazbeck and Farzin skilfully weave together excerpts from six different episodes, orchestrating a fictional conversation about and around the 1951 Iranian oil crisis—precipitated by democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh’s decision to nationalise the industry. The professional designations of the featured guests—statesmen, oil executives and experts on the region—often extend across two or more categories, revealing the deep collusion of state and corporate interests. Their candid self-interest and casual sense of entitlement and exceptionalism, though not unexpected, still shocks. While an American executive cavalierly dismisses nationalisation as a “tragically unnecessary accident”, disregarding the decades-long labour movement that catalysed it, a British statesman, with classic colonial pretension, protests it as uncivilised breach of contract. Another guest patronisingly rejects the ability of Iranians to operate their oil industry successfully without foreign expertise. The video ends with a sympathetic statement that only emphasises the absurd cynicism of what preceded it. In an excerpt from 1953, Eleanor Roosevelt, former First Lady, US Delegate to the United Nations and, notably, the only woman featured in the video, responds to a question about why “foreigners” remain ungrateful for and suspicious of Western interventions in their countries. Rhetorically inhabiting the position of the Other, she interrogates the West’s true intentions: “Why was this done? Was it done in the long run so we could, we who just freed ourselves from political domination, be dominated through economics?”

If Balteo-Yazbeck and Farzin’s film deconstructs the public personas of these company men, Raja’a Khalid reveals their leisure activities, especially while in the field. Mining vintage American print media, Khalid unearths and re-presents forgotten archival traces that document the daily lives of expatriate Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) executives, and in particular, their inexplicable desire to play golf in the desert.³⁴ An elite corporate pastime, the sport was the American equivalent of cricket in British India. Meticulously re-photographing these traces in a neutral, almost clinical manner, Khalid captures the look and feel of her sources. In an image from an early colour feature on the company from the March 28, 1949 issue of *Life*, a man standing between two pipelines casually sets up to take a swing, eyes focused on his bright red ball, its colour setting it off from the soft desert sand. Four black and white press photographs from the mid-1950s show Aramco employees putting on ad hoc greens made up of oiled sand;

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| ← Left |
| Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, in collaboration with Media Farzin |
| <i>Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm</i> Video stills 2009-11 |
| → Following spread, top left |
| Raja'a Khalid <i>Desert Golf I</i> 2014 |
| → Following spread, bottom left |
| Raja'a Khalid <i>Desert Golf II</i> 2014 |

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| → Following spread, top right |
| Raja'a Khalid <i>Desert Golf III</i> 2014 |
| → Following spread, bottom right |
| Raja'a Khalid <i>Desert Golf IV</i> 2014 |

34 . Works in this series also show expatriate workers and their families “going native”, alongside images showcasing the modern suburban lifestyle the company provided for its Western employees. Together they reinforce prevailing Orientalist stereotypes by setting up an opposition between the primitive and exotic Arab and the modern American, a relationship that has persisted into the present-day as Ayesha Malik’s recent photographs of the Aramco compound in Dhahran show. See Ayesha Malik, *ARAMCO: Above the Oil Fields* (Chapel Hill: Daylight Books, 2017).





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Raja'a Khalid
Golf in Arabia
2013

→ Following page, bottom

Raja'a Khalid
Fortune/Golf
2014

a confused Saudi villager looks on in one. In a spread from the 1961 Dhahran Girl Scouts' calendar book, a pro helps a woman with her form. The foldout cover of the September 1976 issue of *Fortune* shows two men dressed only in tiny white shorts playing golf while fires burn in the background. Throughout the decades, golf continued to be an indispensable part of expat life, played despite inhospitable climate and terrain. These makeshift courses, where the game was adapted to the local landscape, eventually gave way, as oil revenues allowed man to shape nature to his needs and desires, to perfectly manicured grass-covered ones like Dubai's Emirates Golf Club.³⁵ By excavating the archive, Khalid uncovers the little-known genealogy of this bizarre and somewhat perverse urban feature of contemporary Gulf cities.

PROPAGANDA, DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

Initially intended solely for corporate stakeholders, the many films commissioned and produced by the AIOC and the IPC—an extension of a burgeoning documentary tradition in Great Britain—often trickled down to the broader public. They were regularly shown in cinemas before feature presentations, screened at film festivals, and used as teaching tools in schools and universities.³⁶ In Iraq, following the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry, this corporate propaganda material was redirected towards local populations through magazines and films specifically produced in Arabic and distributed locally and regionally. In an attempt to defuse growing anti-colonial sentiment, this material used triumphant images of oil-driven modernisation to legitimise the continuing presence of the company as vital to regional development and progress.³⁷ Part of a conscious and carefully crafted discourse of appeasement, it strategically omitted the many injustices committed by these multinational corporations.

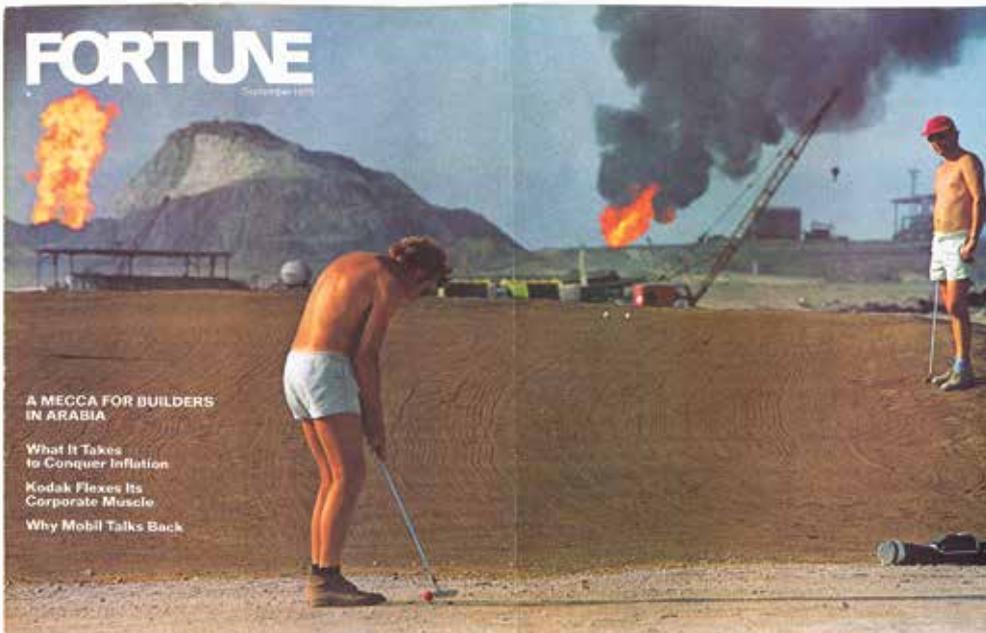
35. Built in 1988, the Emirates Golf Club was the first grass golf course in the Middle East. Now incorporated into Dubai's sprawling urban fabric, it was then located far south of the city's core, a surreal rectangle of lush green grass surrounded by the desert sands.

36. Mona Damluji, "The Image World of Middle Eastern Oil," *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, eds. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason and Michael Watts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 149-151.

37. See Damluji, "The Image World of Middle Eastern Oil," 159-162, and Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq."

38. For a historical account and analysis of *Persian*

Initiated by the AIOC's public relations department, *Persian Story* (1951) was conceived as the first Technicolour film produced in Iran, an ambitious feature that showcased the company's activities and influence there against the epic backdrop of the country's people, culture, heritage, history and landscape.³⁸ The centrepiece would be Abadan, where what was then the world's biggest and most productive oil refinery was located, and around which a modern industrial city had been built. The final version came in at a mere



PROPAGANDA, DIPLOMACY AND SOFT POWER

→ Right
**Nasrin Tabatabai
 and Babak Afrassiabi**
Seep 1
 Video still
 2012

↘ Below
**Nasrin Tabatabai
 and Babak Afrassiabi**
Seep 2
 Video still
 2012



21 minutes, a victim of the increasingly uncertain political climate in Iran at the time. The British were eventually forced to abandon Abadan in October 1951 and *Persian Story* became, depending on your point of view, either a testament to or a eulogy for their time in Iran.

In the company archives, Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi uncovered documents related to the production of *Persian Story*. Facing interminable delays,

innumerable obstacles and unexpected inclement weather, Ralph “Bunny” Keene, who was tasked with making the film, proclaimed the project “unfilmable” in a letter to his superiors back in Britain.³⁹ This encounter between the West and Iran resulted in a lacuna; despite the representational desires of the former, the latter maintained its opacity, resisting entry into the historical record. Tabatabai and Afrassiabi reflect on this episode in *Seep* (2012-18),

Story see Mona Damluji, “The Oil City in Focus: The Cinematic Spaces of Abadan in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s *Persian Story*,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 75-88.

39. A selection of this correspondence and other documents related to *Persian Story* are reproduced in Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi/Pages, “Unfilmable,” *Seep: Pages* 9 (2013): 69-84.

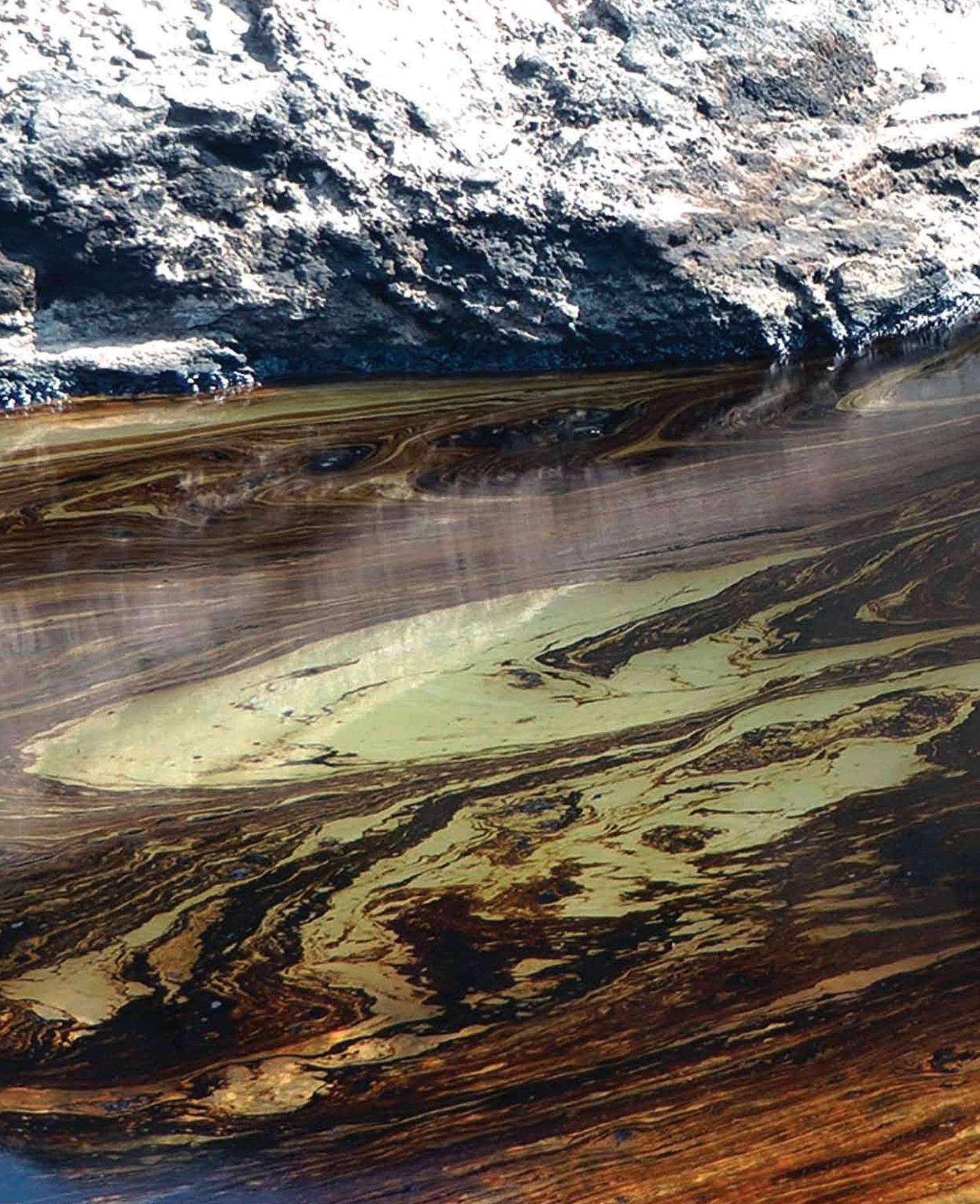
40. Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi/Pages in discussion with the author, July 9, 2018.



an installation comprising interrelated archival documents, sculptural objects and videos. Performing the archive visually and aurally, the video *Seep 1* begins and ends with shots of a hand leafing through a stack of black and white photographs of buildings and interiors in Abadan. As excerpts from Keene’s letter are read out, the camera scans across a series of suggestive but ambiguous “non-objects” that serve as the film’s *mise-en-scène*, and are presented alongside it in the gallery.⁴⁰ A road movie of sorts, shot in and around Abadan, *Seep 2*, records the site and landscape that Keene deemed “unfilmable”, ending at a natural oil seepage, which is used as medium to produce striking abstractions both in film and on paper, the latter mimicking marbled monotypes.

Tabatabai and Afrassiabi link this episode to another archive of Iranian modernity generated by oil wealth: the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art’s famous collection of Western art, withdrawn from display for twenty years following the 1979 Revolution. Suspended in mid-air, a model of the museum highlights not its spaces of display but its interstices, the sloping corridors and spiral ramp that descend into the storage cellar where the works were kept, buried deep underground like a petroleum deposit. And in an accompanying checklist, the withdrawn artworks are organised by size, emphasising their physicality—the space they occupied in storage—over their art historical significance. In their installation, Tabatabai and Afrassiabi “follow the oil”,

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| <p>↑ Above Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi <i>Seep</i> Installation view Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK 2013</p> |
| <p>→ Following page Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi <i>Seep 2</i> Video still 2012</p> |





→ Right

**Nasrin Tabatabai
and Babak Afrassiabi**

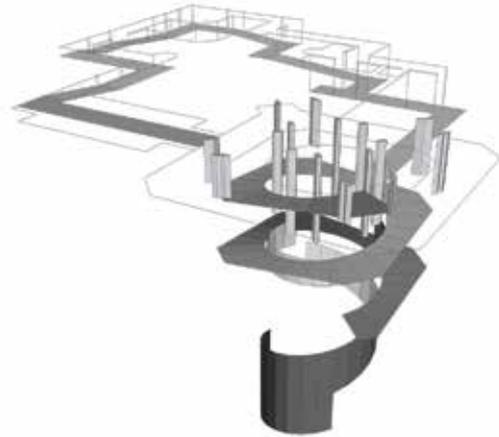
*Sloping Corridors and
Ramp - Tehran Museum of
Contemporary Art*
2012-18

↓ Below

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck

UNstabile-Mobile (from
the series *Modern
Entanglements, U.S.
Interventions*)

Handout
2006



as Mitchell instructs, through its archival traces, locating it precisely in moments where it withdraws from history, where unprecedented political shifts precipitate an

archival displacement. Here, the archive as repository of history reveals its limits, and, like crude oil, seeps back into view through, as the artists note, a “subtractive and dispossessing (rather than accumulative and culminating) relation”.⁴¹ By juxtaposing these two seemingly unrelated historical episodes, Tabatabai and Afrassiabi also reveal the deeply intertwined histories of petroleum and art, manifested through expressions of soft power such as museums and cultural diplomacy, a strategy of statecraft currently popular across the Gulf States.⁴²

This imbrication of art, oil and politics is not a recent phenomenon; it has a long history through much of the twentieth century. Balteo-Yazbeck’s *UNstabile-Mobile* (2006) draws on the history of American cultural diplomacy, which strategically deployed discourses and works of modern art as vehicles for the international propagation of values such as “freedom” and “democracy”. While the CIA-led promotion of Abstract Expressionism as antithesis to Soviet Socialist Realism through the Cold War is well known,⁴³ the United States government also frequently and regularly promoted Alexander Calder’s art through commissions and exhibitions, as Balteo-Yazbeck’s Calderesque sculpture reminds us.⁴⁴ An accompanying timeline suggest a synchronicity between Calder’s sculptural innovations and Western involvement in the establishment of the Iraqi nation. A handout links this history to more recent geopolitical events. It consists of a 2001 Dick Cheney-led Energy Task Force document that includes a map of Iraqi oilfields, pipelines, refineries and terminals, and a table listing international oil concessions in



www.gpscraft.com/iraq/energy.htm

Calder 2006

41. Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi/Pages, “Seep,” *Pages Magazine*, accessed July 13, 2018, <https://www.pagesmagazine.net/en/projects/seep>.

42. There is an uncanny echo between the Orientalist Western media coverage of new contemporary art institutions in present-day Gulf States and in Iran in the 1970s: both view such patronage with suspicion as compromised expressions of new-found oil wealth while overlooking the oil-soaked foundations of many comparable entities in the West. For example, see Richard Goldstein, “Dennis Oppenheim’s Dilemma: Should He Sell Art to the Shah?” *The Village Voice*, January 16, 1978, reproduced in *Seep: Pages* 9: 13-17.

43. Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no. 10 (June 1974): 39-41.

44. Alex J. Taylor, “Unstable Motives: Propaganda, Politics, and the Late Work of Alexander Calder,” *American Art* 26, no. 1 (2012): 24-47.

45. Seymour M. Hersh, “The Iran Plans,” *The New Yorker*, April 17, 2006.



the country under Saddam Hussein. The United States and the United Kingdom, participants in the sanctions imposed on Iraq after the 1990 Gulf War and the main forces behind the 2003 invasion, are conspicuously absent from this list.

This collateral material re-contextualises the Calderesque sculpture, revealing that the shadows cast by its network of suspended biomorphic forms map the locations of Iraq's oilfields, like fugitive stains projected onto the platform below. Made in the years following the 2003 invasion, the work questions whether the motivations behind that military campaign were truly to liberate the country from the clutches of a notorious dictator or simply to safeguard American and British oil interests. Its title references the bypassing of the United Nations in the lead up to the war while acknowledging the ongoing instability in the region that resulted from the conflict. The final element, the cover and an interior spread from the April 17, 2006 issue of *The New Yorker*, featuring an article titled "The Iran Plans" by veteran political journalist Seymour M. Hersh, suggests that the Bush administration's subsequent agitation against Iran was simply one more example of the United States' petroimperialist ambitions.⁴⁵ Balteo-Yazbeck shrewdly reverses the logic of cultural diplomacy, using art and its histories to critique recent geopolitical events, demonstrating how war is routinely instrumentalised in the service of capitalist greed.

↑ Above
 Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck
 UNstabile-Mobile (from
 the series *Modern
 Entanglements, U.S.
 Interventions*)
 2006

OIL AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

AramcoWorld, the English-language magazine published by Aramco since 1949, is widely celebrated across the Middle East as evidence of a modernist past, subsequently eclipsed by authoritarianism, fundamentalism and interminable conflict.⁴⁶ However, like the publications and films produced by the AIOC and the IPC, this magazine was a sophisticated and strategic corporate tool. It projected the company and its activities in Saudi Arabia in a positive light. Like many other constructed narratives, recent scholarship has begun to question the veracity of the official account by the company, positioning it, instead, as a myth that escapes history.⁴⁷

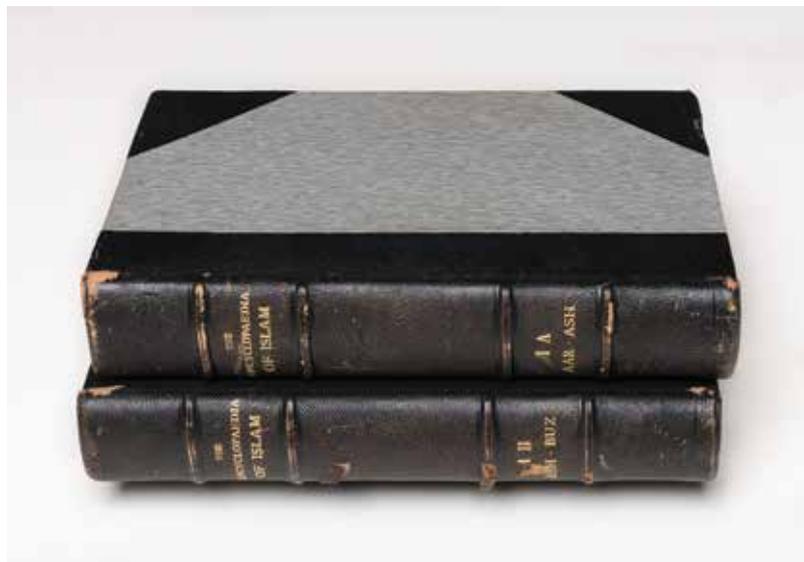
Using company archives as a point of departure, Hajra Waheed's *The ARD: Study for a Portrait 1-28* (2018) subtly challenges the authority behind such narrative constructions. Across a series of collages that resemble pages extracted from a binder, Waheed recombines visual and textual cues from various sources to create a fragmented portrait of the company's Arabian Research Division (ARD), a little-known research, translation and information-gathering outfit within its Government Relations Organization (GRO).⁴⁸ Established in the aftermath of the 1945 workers' strikes, the ARD played an indispensable role in the company's "mythmaking".⁴⁹ Employing regional specialists fluent in Arabic, the department was established and run by Berkeley-trained Arabist George Rentz, previously employed at the Office of

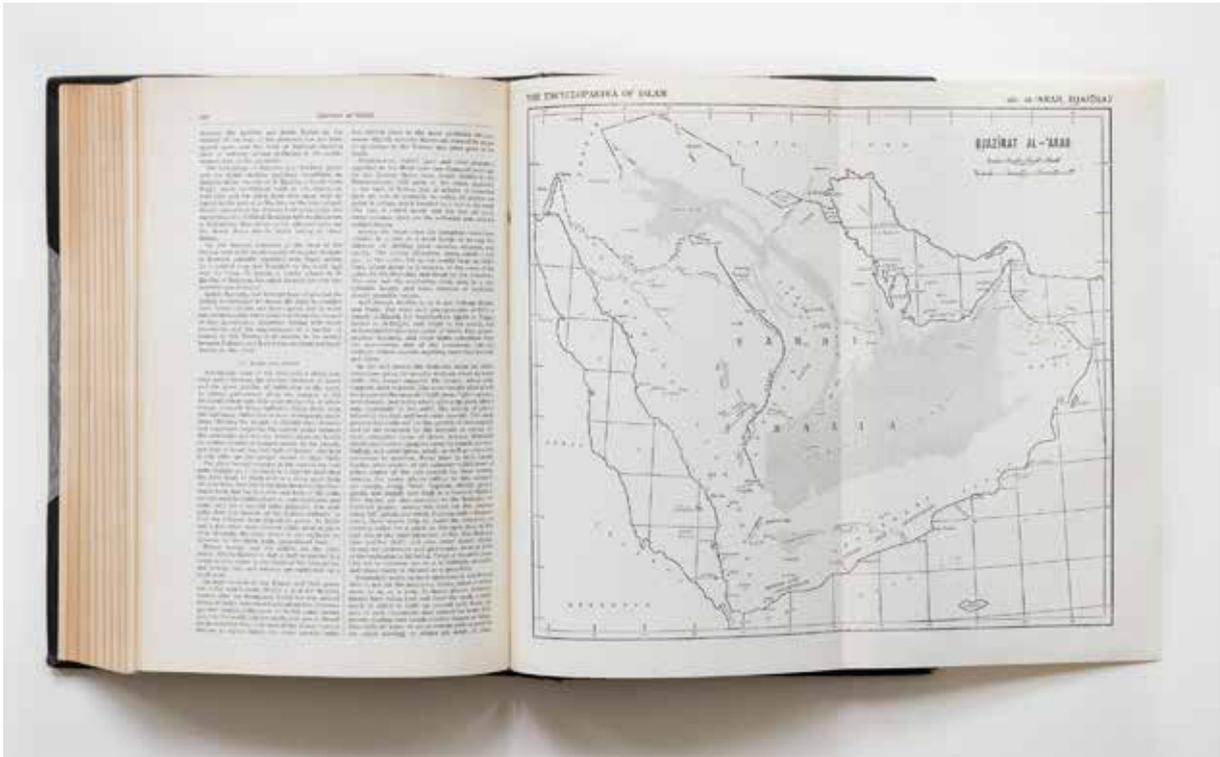
46. Founded in 1949 as *Aramco World*, the magazine was renamed *Saudi Aramco World* in 2000, and then *AramcoWorld* in 2015. See the special issue of *Brownbook: An Urban Guide to the Middle East* 66 (November/December 2017) commemorating *AramcoWorld*'s 68th anniversary.

47. Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2. For an overview, see Robert Vitalis, "Aramco World: Business and Culture on the Arabian Oil Frontier," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, eds. Madawi Al Rasheed and Robert Vitalis (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 153-181.

48. At least three different division names—Arabian Research Division (ARD), Arab/Arabian Affairs Division (AAD) and Arabian Research and Translation Office (ART)—appear in unpublished archival material and published accounts of the ARD. I have followed the designation preferred by Waheed. Vitalis uses Arab/Arabian Affairs Division.

49. For an account of this event see Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 92-95. For accounts of subsequent strikes in the mid-1950s and in 1967, see Claudia Ghrawi, "Structural and Physical Violence in Saudi Arabian Oil Towns, 1953-56," in *Urban Violence in the Middle East: Changing Cityscapes in the Transition from Empire to Nation State*, eds. Ulrike Freitag, Nelida Fuccaro, Claudia Ghrawi, and Nora Lafi (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 243-264; and Claudia Ghrawi, "A Tamed Urban Revolution: Saudi Arabia's Oil Conurbation and the 1967 Riots," in *Violence and the City in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Nelida Fuccaro (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 109-126.





War Information in Cairo, on which he modelled the ARD. In addition to translating and interpreting Arabic material for senior staff, the division was responsible for summarising current events, drafting policy reports and fact sheets, and researching and writing for a variety of publications including books and articles for both scholarly journals and popular magazines like *AramcoWorld*. The ARD also produced detailed ethnographies of the largely nomadic tribes in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, studying and analysing their language, culture and customs, and mapping out and defining the traditionally fluid boundaries of tribal lands, which became vital for asserting Saudi Arabia’s territorial limits and strategically resolving border disputes.⁵⁰ And, especially in the years immediately following workers’ protests, they helped survey key labour activists and political organisers.

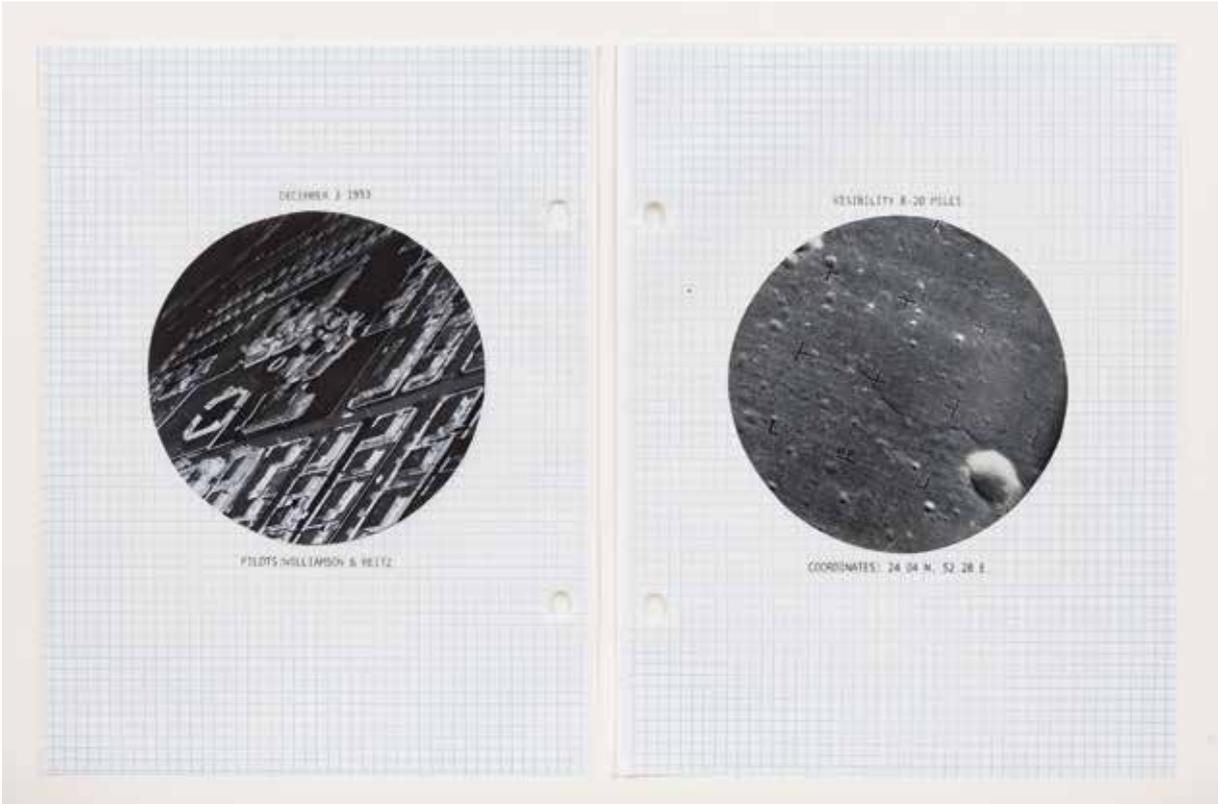
Waheed’s work also examines the role of key figures like Rentz and his right-hand man, William Mulligan. While bits of aerial photographs, topographical maps and geological diagrams index some of the division’s activities, other archival fragments focus on gestures and body language, private offices and confidential meetings, providing clues towards understanding the ARD’s culture and psychology. Anchoring Waheed's installation is a key historical artefact: Rentz’s annotated personal copy of Brill’s *Encyclopaedia of Islam*—an important scholarly resource to which he contributed 48 pieces between 1954-71—opened up to his entry on “Djazirat Al-Arab” or the “Island of the Arabs”, the traditional name for the

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| <p>↑ Above and previous page</p> <p>Hajra Waheed</p> <p><i>Encyclopaedia of Islam, Volume IA & IB (1954-1958): George Rentz, A Personal Copy</i></p> <p>2018</p> |
| <p>→ Following two spreads</p> <p>Hajra Waheed</p> <p><i>The ARD: Study for a Portrait</i></p> <p>1-28</p> <p>2018</p> |

⁵⁰ . The best-known example of this strategy might be a dispute over the Buraimi Oasis between Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi that began in 1949 and was not resolved until the 1974 signing of the Treaty of Jeddah. See Chad H. Parker, “Aramco’s Frontier Story: The Arabian American Oil Company and Creative Mapping in Postwar Saudi Arabia,” in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 171-188; and Michael Quentin Morton, “The Buraimi Affair: Oil Prospecting and Drawing the Frontiers of Saudi Arabia,” *Asian Affairs* 46, no. 1 (2015): 1-17.









JUNE 7, 1967 | 8:15 AM | WYANDOTT



MEETING PLACE: BUS LOADING AREA BETWEEN GATE 24 AND RICHMOND CAMP



1965 | HOUSING SURVEY
CHARLES MATTHEW | COMMITTEE ON SPECIAL STUDIES

→ Right and following pages

Manal AIDowayan

If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me
Photographs
2012

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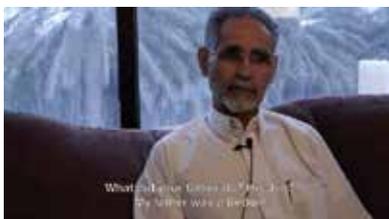
Manal AIDowayan

If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me
Video stills
2012



Arabian Peninsula. This text continues to be widely studied and referenced as a comprehensive historical overview of the region. However, such expert knowledge, presented as objective and authoritative, was constructed strategically to expand and protect the interests of Aramco, positioning the company as vital to the development and modernisation of Saudi Arabia. As Waheed dismantles and then reassembles the archive, an image of Aramco's carefully constructed history emerges, undermining its self-generated myth by gesturing towards what it omits. Presenting a more complex picture of Aramco's past, she forces us to question what has come to be understood as scholarly fact.

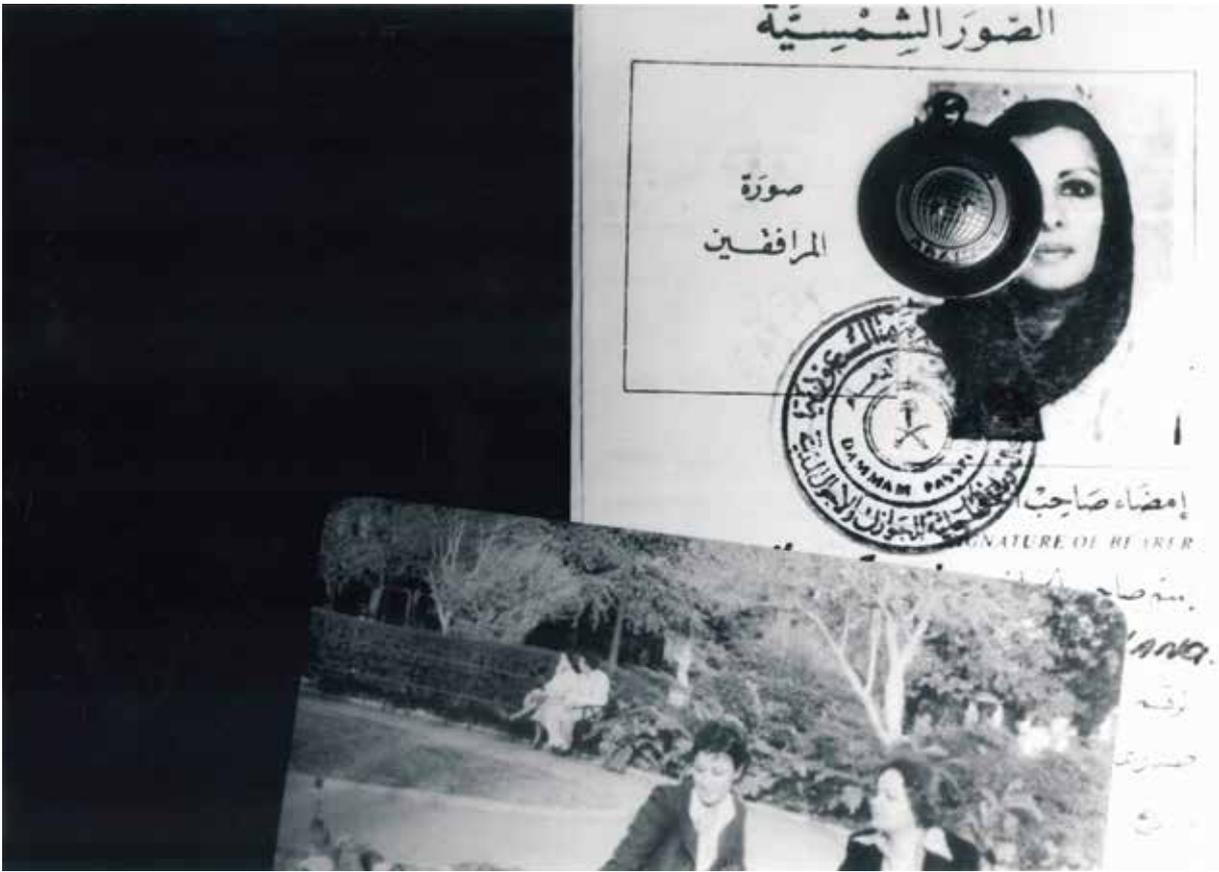
Manal AIDowayan's *If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* (2012) presents a personal perspective on the history and legacy of Aramco. It draws on the private archives and oral histories of pioneering Saudi Arabian oilmen and women educated by and



employed at the company, tracing, through their narratives, the ways in which the establishment and expansion of the oil industry transformed their lives and their society. As AIDowayan's title intimates, her project is intended as a "protest against forgetting", an attempt to record histories threatened by disappearance.⁵¹ It is a collective portrait of a singular generation that, as the artist notes, "straddled the divide between extreme poverty and extreme wealth".⁵² Simple and direct, the video interviews allow their subjects to narrate their own stories, recounting early hardships, unprecedented opportunities and novel experiences, racial and gender prejudices encountered and overcome. The accompanying black and white photographs are more oblique. Shot in their home offices, they focus on souvenirs and mementos of their professional lives, physical evidence that corroborates and complicates their testimonies. Together, the photographs and videos begin to reveal the human face of an otherwise invisible industry.

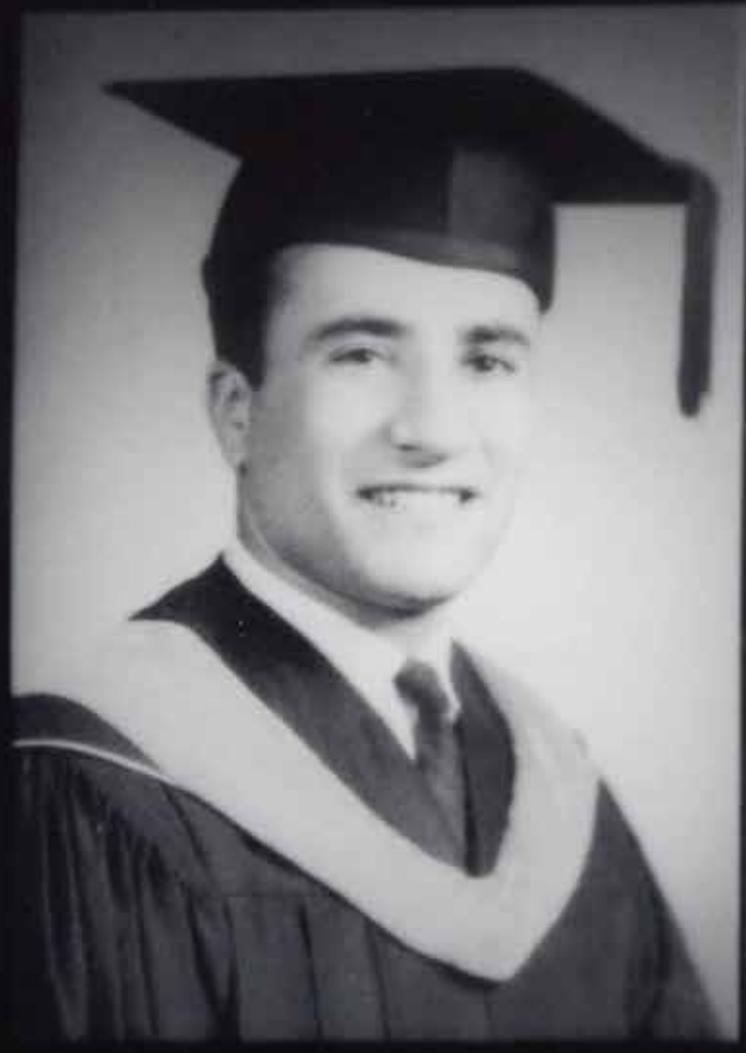
51 . See Bashir Al Shroogi, "Introduction – A Protest Against Forgetting," *Manal AIDowayan: If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* (Dubai: Cuadro Publications, 2012), 6. The phrase was coined by Eric Hobsbawm, see Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Protest Against Forgetting: Interviews with Eric Hobsbawm* (New York: Verso Books, 2013).

52 . Quoted in Al Shroogi, 6.



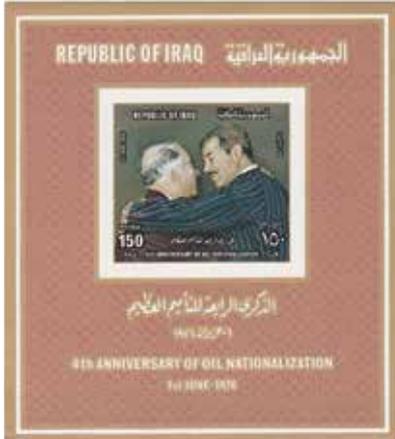
OIL AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE



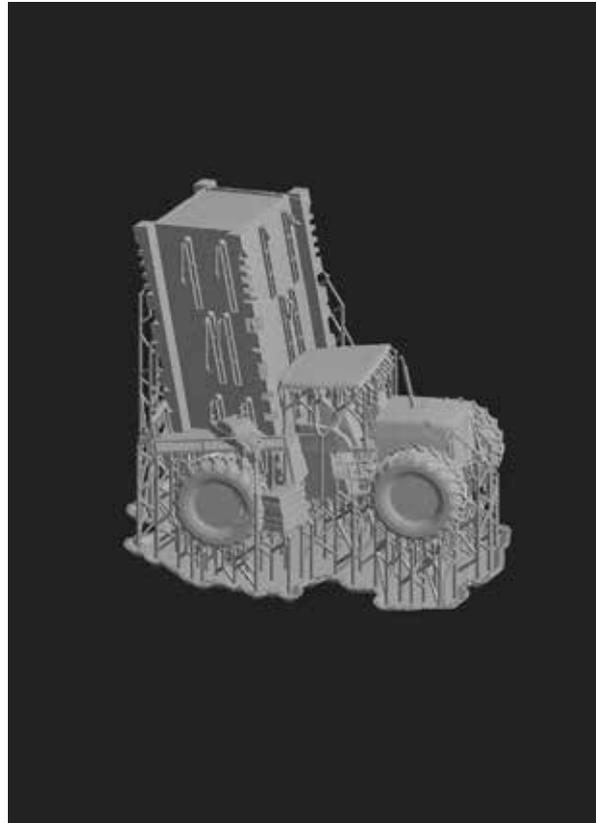
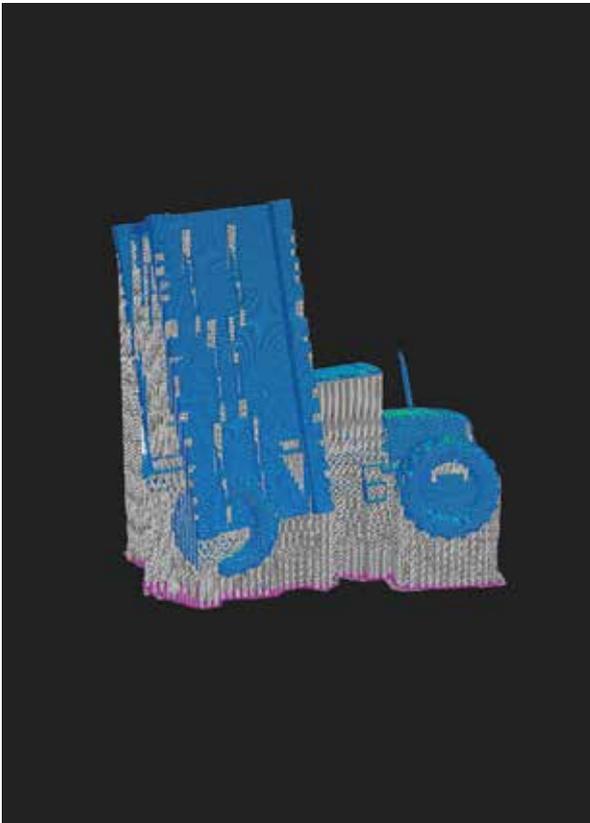


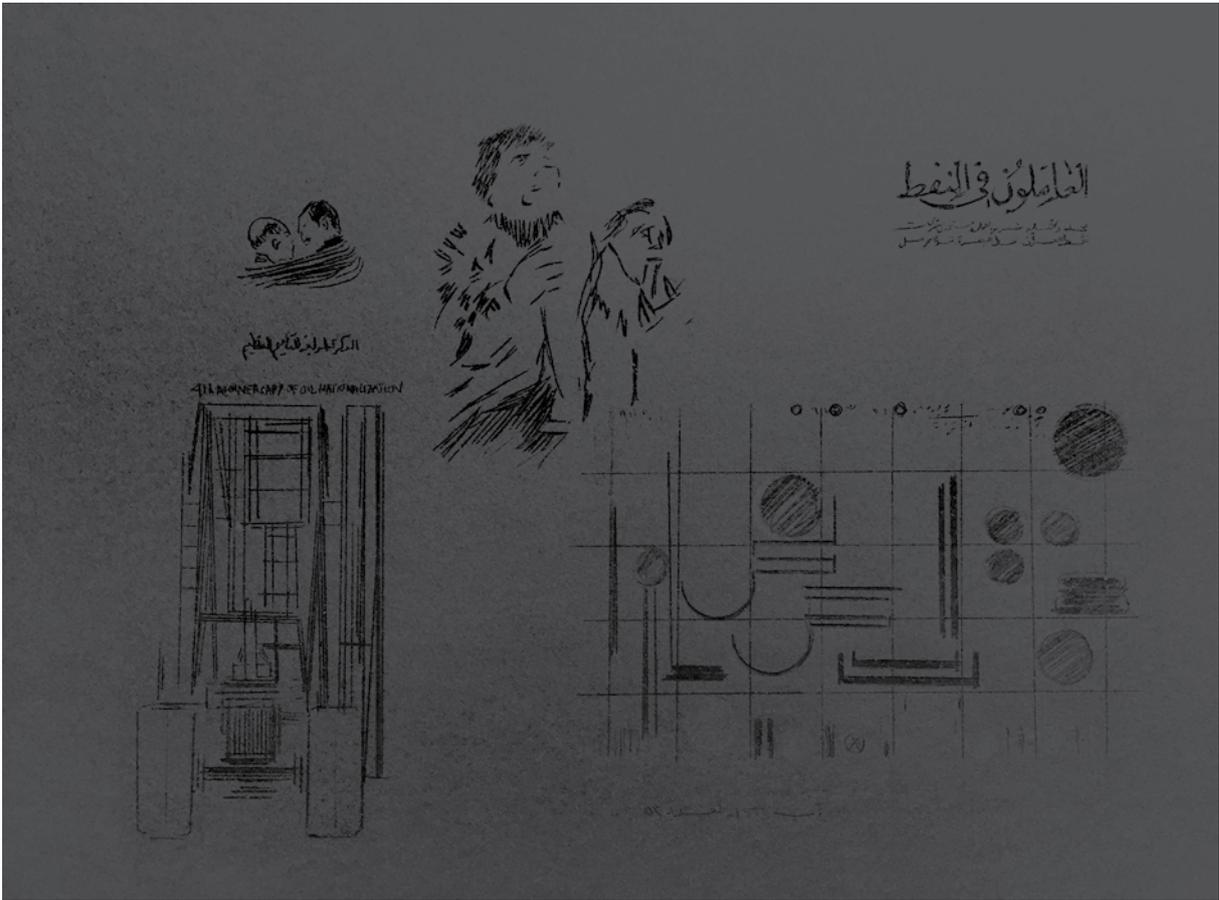
Below
 Ala Younis
Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad
 Detail
 2018

Ala Younis' *Al Bahithūn [the (re)searchers]* (2018) investigates oil as an engine for knowledge production, exploring the impact that its nationalisation in Iraq had on intellectual and academic life there. Younis' sculpture is named after an 1978 Iraqi film in which a group of men are hired to travel to the south in search of oil. Each has their own personal agenda. One seeks to avenge his father's murder, another is compelled by a fable about a lost treasure-filled paradise. After much adventure, they stumble upon the Rumaila oilfields, which Saddam Hussein had nationalised six years earlier—the real promised land, whose riches, now entirely under Iraqi control, far exceed those of legend. The film mythologises oil in the service of a renewed nationalism; the citizen is no longer just a passive beneficiary of oil revenues but is integral to its generation. Collaborating with a model-maker, Younis recreated the strange tractor-like vehicle used on this journey, merging it with scale models of some of the incentives—from high-rise apartment buildings and plots of land to Mercedes sedans and stacks of books and other research materials—offered by the state to scientists and graduates to ensure they stayed in or returned to Iraq after completing their education, building up local knowledge as well as the technical and industrial expertise necessary to maximise oil profits. However, throughout and after the Iran-Iraq War,



OIL AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE





as paranoia grew, such incentives gave way to more overt and sinister forms of coercion, eventually leading to the targeted assassinations of many scientists and academics after the fall of Saddam.

WELLS OF FIRE

Representing oil is tricky. Most contemporary attempts adopt one of two approaches, both relying on the documentary mode to reveal known but occluded truths about the oil industry. The first focuses on the vast technological and infrastructural networks necessary for oil's extraction, refinement and distribution, their unfathomable scale symbolising the depth of our petroleum addiction.⁵³ These structures are often represented after they have been abandoned, as ruins of our modernity and harbingers of inevitable environmental catastrophe. The second captures the aftermath of industrial accidents like devastating spills or spectacular fires. In such works, oil becomes representable only once its smoothness, its flow, its

53 . Edward Burtynsky is the best-known example of this approach. See Edward Burtynsky, *Burtynsky: Oil* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009). For additional analyses of Burtynsky's photographs see Catherine Zuromskis, "Petroaesthetics and Landscape Photography: *New Topographics*, Edward Burtynsky, and the Culture of Peak Oil," in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 289-308; Georgiana Banita, "Sensing Oil: Sublime Art and Politics in Canada," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2017), 431-457; and Clint Burnham, "Photography from Benjamin to Žižek, via the Petrochemical Sublime of Edward Burtynsky," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2017), 458-475.

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| ↑ Above |
| Ala Younis <i>Al Bahithūn [the (re)searchers]</i> Drawing 2018 |
| ← Previous page, bottom |
| Ala Younis <i>Al Bahithūn [the (re)searchers]</i> Sketches 2018 |



He has created this magnificent world



when he is merely mortal.



to answer the plea of His creation



the sun's beauty shines unabated



miss its quivering body



... for it has homes and rooms in the sky.



...so beautiful it rivalled the roses



tempting the thirsty.

“lubricity” is interrupted: when it exceeds or escapes the infrastructures and networks designed to contain and circulate it.⁵⁴ Some of the earliest known images of oil are photographs and films that documented well fires, like the Lumière Brothers’ famous short *Oil Wells of Baku: Close View* (1896). It is easy, in retrospect, to interpret this work as an early indictment of the acute ecological damage wrought by petroleum extraction. However, at the time of their making these images were understood more ambiguously, the sight they captured eliciting awe and wonder as much as horror and despair.⁵⁵

Werner Herzog’s *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) might be the best-known work of this genre.⁵⁶ Filmed in 1991, after the end of the Gulf War, it shows Kuwait’s burning oilfields, set ablaze by retreating Iraqi troops, an act that is widely considered to be one of the worst intentional environmental disasters in history. Much of Herzog’s film is composed of sweeping aerial footage shot from a helicopter, whose hovering shadow appears for only a moment. Building on the association of fire with hell, biblical references and operatic music frame and aestheticise the visuals, conjuring a specifically Western mood of apocalyptic doom, detaching the event from history and geography. Monira Al Qadiri’s *Behind the Sun* (2013), made a little more than two decades later, grounds the event back into its context through the use of contemporaneous local archives. The video is composed of shaky found VHS footage of the burning oilfields shot from the ground with a handheld camera by a local journalist, beginning with an extended sequence, shot from the driver’s side window, of a car speeding down a dirt road towards the fires. This footage is overlaid with a booming baritone recitation of Sufi poetry sourced from Kuwait’s national television archives, mystical verses that locate the divine in the sublime wonders of nature. The juxtaposition introduces a suggestive ambiguity into the image of the oil fire spurting vigorously and mysteriously out of the ground, activating both its demonic and divine connotations, such as the worship of fire in Zoroastrianism.⁵⁷

Hajra Waheed’s *Plume 1-24* (2017) is a series of found images of clouds of thick black smoke, carefully excised from their original context so that their exact source—fire or explosion, accident or conflict—remains uncertain. The serial presentation of this now generalised sign establishes it as a sublime typology of the formless, allowing us to read it through the title’s other meaning—an ornamental feather—recapturing some of the wonder of those early images of oil fires. However, repetition also compounds the sense of dread elicited by the image, which intimates both violence and the spectre of industrial pollution. Adopting a familiar conceptual art strategy, Waheed universalises her personal memories of the Gulf War; these ashen clouds simultaneously acknowledging the lingering trauma of that conflict while opening up to a multiplicity of alternative histories.

← Previous page

Monira Al Qadiri
Behind the Sun
Video stills
2013

→ Following two spreads

Hajra Waheed
Plume 1-24
2017

54. Mark Simpson, “Lubricity: Smooth Oil’s Political Frictions,” in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2017), 287-318.

55. For an analysis of the Lumière Brothers’ short, see Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Ecology and Popular Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 19-39.

56. For an analysis of Herzog’s film, see Imre Szeman, “The Cultural Politics of Oil: On *Lessons of Darkness* and *Black Sea Files*” *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 33-45.

57. Yergin, 24.







02



THE INFRASTRUCTURE SPACE OF OIL

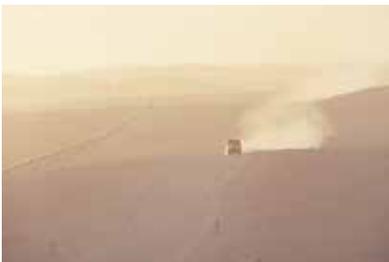
Across the Middle East, oil produced a vast and specific infrastructure: remote drill sites and offshore rigs, pumphouses and export terminals, refineries and company towns, networks of pipelines and roads snaking across barren landscapes. As Keller Easterling argues, infrastructure, “a site of multiple, overlapping or nested forms of sovereignty, where domestic and transnational jurisdictions collide”, can be understood as the medium of “*extrastatecraft*—a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities, outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft”.⁵⁸ Such activities have driven the historical expansion of the global

oil industry, where state and corporate interests have frequently intersected and overlapped. While oil itself might remain fluid and elusive, its infrastructure, though secluded and secured, provides tangible forms through which its history can be investigated. Artists can, through these fixed structural and spatial manifestations produced by oil, index some of its immaterial effects, especially the constructions and reconfigurations of power, authority and the capital they enable.

A scale model of an offshore rig, a primary but remote part of oil’s industrial infrastructure, GCC’s *Congratulant 5* (2013) is one of a series of faux-trophies that wryly critique the rituals and protocols of power in the region. Made out of glass and gilded aluminium, its scale and material domesticate a key structure of extraction, translating a site that is messy and chaotic into a kitsch tabletop keepsake. Such trophies are often presented as professional tokens of appreciation to mark milestones and celebrate achievements. Here, the cherished souvenir becomes a generic object, infinitely reproducible and customisable and, hence, emptied of all possible significance, personal or cultural. Reifying a social relationship, a gesture of gratitude coalesces into a tellingly transparent fetish. A material manifestation of the vagaries of *extrastatecraft*, it points to the inevitable inefficiencies of the vast and ever-expanding bureaucratic apparatus necessary to manage and redistribute oil revenues.

Established and built throughout the twentieth century, company

↓ Below
View of the Tapline and the
Tapline road
c.1967



58 . Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (New York: Verso Books, 2014), 15.

59 . Some of the best-known examples of company towns are Abadan in Iran, Kirkuk in Iraq, Ahmadi in Kuwait, Awali in Bahrain, and Dhahran in Saudi Arabia. For Abadan, see Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture Under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,” *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997), 341-359; Kaveh Ehsani, “Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan’s Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman,” *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003), 361-399; Rasmus Christian Elling, “Abadan: Oil City Dreams and the Nostalgia for Past Futures in Iran,” *Ajam Media Collective*, February 16, 2015, accessed on June 26, 2018, <https://ajamc.com/2015/02/16/abadan-oil-city-dreams/>; Rasmus Christian Elling, “When Iran’s Abadan was Capital of the World,” *Ajam Media Collective*, February 18, 2015, accessed on June 26, 2018, <https://ajamc.com/2015/02/18/abadan-capital-of-the-world/>; and Rasmus Christian Elling, “Abadan: Unfulfilled Promises of Oil Modernity and Revolution in Iran,” *Ajam Media Collective*, February 26, 2015, accessed on June 26, 2018, <https://ajamc.com/2015/02/26/abadan-the-devastated-harbor/>. For Kirkuk, see Arbella Bet-Shlimon “The Politics and Ideology of Urban Development in Iraq’s Oil City: Kirkuk, 1946-58,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 26-40. For Ahmadi, see Reem Alissa, “The Oil Town of Ahmadi since 1946: From Colonial Town to Nostalgic City,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 41-58. For Awali, see Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). And for Dhahran, see Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*.



towns were designed and presented as exemplary, even utopian, modern urban settlements.⁵⁹ They were often inspired by then-current Western planning paradigms, ranging from Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City to the sprawling suburbs of post-war America; models that were often completely incongruous with the arid desert landscape. However, these settlements were hardly egalitarian, replicating social and spatial segregationist policies previously perfected in colonial outposts, early mining towns, and across the Jim Crow-era American South.⁶⁰ Modern purpose-built villas were reserved for the company’s Western executives while unskilled local workers, at the bottom of the labour hierarchy, were left to fend for themselves, inhabiting dilapidated shantytowns located outside the compound walls. This essentially created two or more separate enclaves—based on race, ethnicity and class—with differential access to facilities, amenities, services and goods.⁶¹ In *Aerial Studies 1-8* (2013), Hajra Waheed charts key sites within the gated Aramco compound in Dhahran where she grew up. Using a map sourced from the company, she reprints sections of it on pieces of unexposed Polaroid film, as if a recently exposed or latent image

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| <p>↑ Above GCC <i>Congratulant 5</i> 2013</p> |
| <p>→ Following page Hajra Waheed <i>Aerial Studies 1-8</i> 2013</p> |

60 . See Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*. Vitalis has demonstrated the important role that race played in the organisation of oil production at Aramco.

61 . The dismal living conditions for local employees, who made up the majority of the workforce, only improved in response to organised labour protests that regularly took place in many of the early oil facilities across the region. See Mitchell, 86-108.



is only just developing into view. While these trace-like imprints index the uncertainty of childhood memories, they also gesture towards the conditions of secrecy, security and surveillance that defined life within the closely guarded compound. Waheed's fragmentation of the map across a series visually and symbolically recreates the compound's surreal spatial compartmentalisation, and the unshakeable sense of alienation it appeared to produce.⁶²

A vital part of oil's infrastructure, pipelines transport oil from remote extraction sites to refineries where it is processed, and on to export terminals from where it is dispatched to urban centres around the world and largely consumed. Cartographic abstractions in the service of capital, pipelines conquer the obstacles of geography by collapsing distance.⁶³ As Graeme Macdonald has argued, pipelines "contain" oil, both carrying and concealing it, naturalising our dependence on it by insulating us through distance from the deleterious effects of extraction.⁶⁴ The remoteness of the extraction site allows for limitless guilt-free consumption in the urban centre, "divesting the city from the environmental costs of urbanisation".⁶⁵ The tremendous expansion of cities during the twentieth century, both spatially and demographically, is one of the defining characteristics of modernity and would not have been possible without such geographic insulation, be it at a national, regional or global scale.

In the middle of the twentieth century, just as modern nation-states were being formed across the Middle East, the growing distributional demands of the oil industry necessitated the construction of pipelines. In the late 1940s, IPC constructed one between the Kirkuk fields in northern Iraq and the Syrian port city of Baniyas, its construction documented in the film *The Third River* (1952).⁶⁶ The Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline), which operated from 1950 to 1975, stretched from Al Qaisumah in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, where it connected to Aramco's local pipeline network, across Jordan and Syria to the export terminal in Sidon, Lebanon.⁶⁷ Such pipelines were transnational by design, compromising nascent territorial sovereignties by transgressing newly established borders in search of larger profits.

Tapline made the shipment of Saudi Arabian crude to Western markets faster, cheaper and

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| Views of the Tapline Terminal, Sidon, Lebanon c.1966 |
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| Installing the Tapline c.1964 |



62 . This logic of spatial segregation persists in the design of contemporary Gulf cities as an invisible fragmentation of urban space into discrete enclaves based on ethnicity, nationality, and class. In her urban history of Kuwait, Farah Al Nakib links the mid-twentieth century oil-fuelled suburbanisation process that emptied out the historical core of Kuwait City, exaggerating spatial segregation, to the growing social alienation and apathy within contemporary Kuwaiti society. See Farah Al Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016). In a review of Al Nakib's book, Waleed Hazbun suggests that her account of Kuwait's oil modernity might be read as tragedy or noir, an inevitable doom resulting from the discovery of oil. See Waleed Hazbun, "Arabian Tragedy, or Noir?" *Jadaliyya*, April 30, 2017, accessed on June 4, 2018, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/34245>.

63 . Rania Ghosn, "Territories of Oil: The Trans-Arabian Pipeline," in *The Arab City: Architecture and Representation*, eds. Amale Andraos, Nora Akawi and Caitlin Blanchfield (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture and the City, 2016), 166.

64 . For an extended analysis of representations of pipelines, see Graeme Macdonald, "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens's University Press, 2017), 36-77.

65 . Design Earth (Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy), "Geography and Oil: The Territory of Externalities," in *Infrastructure Space*, eds. Andreas Ruby and Ilka Ruby (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2017), 361.

66 . For a historical account and analysis of *The Third River* see Damluji, "Visualizing Iraq."

67 . Tapline was a joint venture between four American oil companies (Standard Oil of New Jersey, Stan-



K M 1205 33° 26' 30" N



more secure, providing an alternative to transport by tanker around the Arabian Peninsula and through the Suez Canal. In addition to the costly toll, growing anti-colonial sentiment and the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt made this route increasingly risky, with tensions coming to a head in 1956. Though archival in a sense, Rayyane Tabet's *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points* (2013) does not use the archive as a source of information through which to retell Tapline's specific history. Instead, he reactivates it materially, conceptually and phenomenologically through visual and sculptural works consisting of salvaged and repurposed artefacts and newly fabricated elements that repeatedly perform the pipeline's essential linearity. Decayed letterheads recovered from the company's abandoned offices in Beirut are arranged in a tight row on the wall. Freshly milled steel rings, made to the exact proportions of the Tapline and geotagged to index specific locations along its route, are positioned at regular intervals in a precise straight line. Transposing the pipeline into the gallery, Tabet challenges its logic of containment by opening it up to scrutiny, allowing unprecedented access to its basic physical structure. In these carefully calibrated arrangements, Tabet materially manifests what Imre Szeman calls the pipeline's "abstract indifferent logics" as abstractions, as questions or predicaments of form itself.⁶⁸

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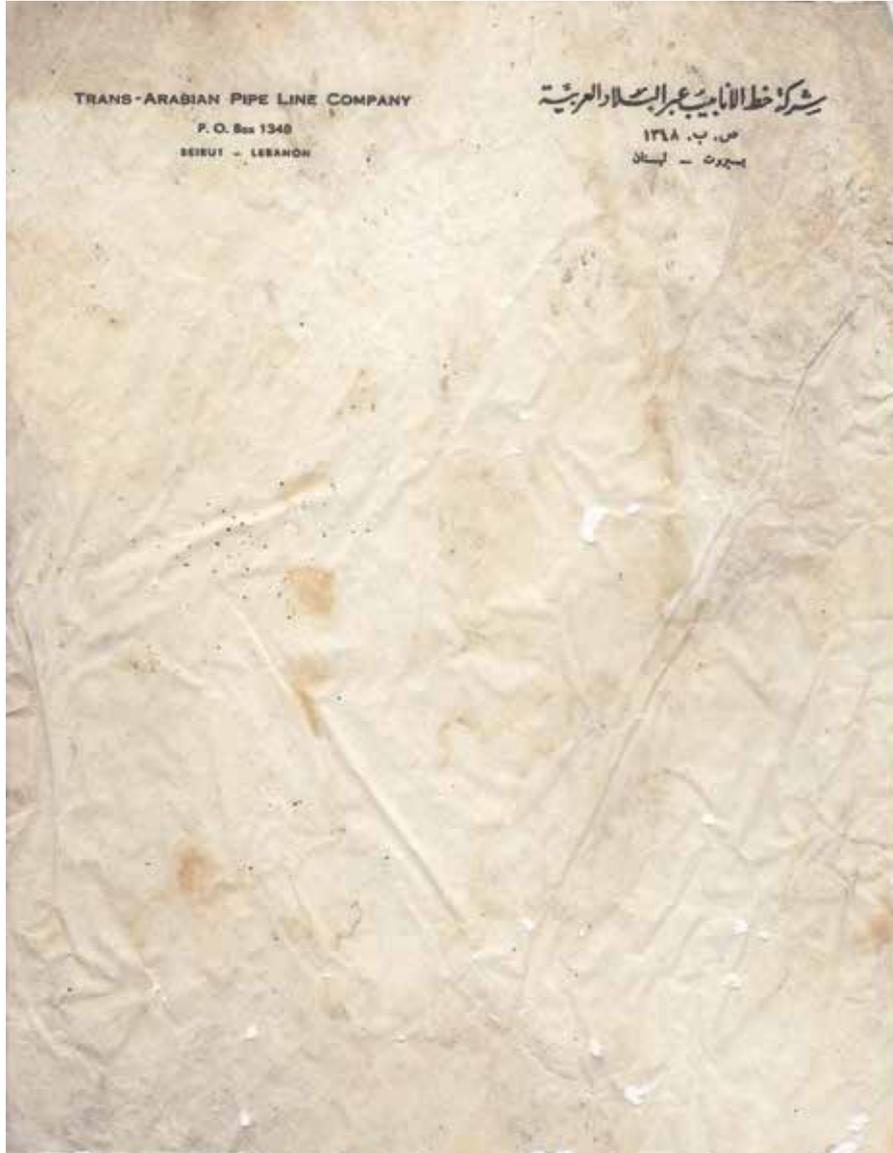
Rayyane Tabet
Steel Rings (from the series
*The Shortest Distance
 Between Two Points*)
 2013

→ Following page

Rayyane Tabet
Letterhead (from the series
*The Shortest Distance
 Between Two Points*)
 1950/2013

dard Oil of California, the Texas Company [better known as Texaco] and Socony-Vacuum Oil Company) that held shares in Aramco. For the company's own coverage of the pipeline, see "Barrel X Takes a Trip," *Aramco World* 11, no. 6 (June/July 1960): 3-5; Daniel Da Cruz, "The Long Steel Shortcut," *Aramco World* 15, no. 5 (September/October 1964): 16-25; and "Terminal," *Aramco World* 17, no. 5 (September/October 1966): 29-32.

68. Imre Szeman, "On the Politics of Region," *Dimensions of Citizenship*, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/dimensions-of-citizenship/178284/on-the-politics-of-region/>.





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Wael Shawky
Asphalt Quarter
 Video stills
 2003

THE OIL ENCOUNTER AND PETRO-MAGIC

In his landmark 1992 essay “Petrofiction”, Amitav Ghosh noted the surprising paucity of significant literary representations of what he dubbed “the Oil Encounter”, that transformative historical moment when Western companies seeking new sources of oil first entered the Arabian Peninsula and interacted with the people indigenous to it.⁶⁹ Ghosh’s essay was a review of *The Trench*, the second English instalment of Abdelrahman Munif’s sprawling Arabic epic *Cities of Salt*, which narrates the profound social and cultural transformations resulting from the discovery of oil in a fictional Gulf country named Mooran.⁷⁰ In it, he attributes this absence to an overall embarrassment about the imperial strategies used by the West to assure its cheap oil supply. Additionally, the inherent multicultural and multilingual character of the encounter and the industry it spawned makes it impossible to capture in a form like the novel, which is closely tied to a national culture, history and language. Ghosh’s text, which posits reasons for why the story of oil seems to resist literary representation and why “petrofiction” is a genre marked by lack, has become an inadvertent touchstone for energy humanities scholars.

Wael Shawky’s *Asphalt Quarter* (2003) is unique as the only artwork

69 . Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction,” *New Republic*, March 2, 1992, 29-34. While Ghosh’s account was provocative and generative, it did miss out one significant literary work that, while it may not be about the “Oil Encounter” per se, does qualify as a Great American Oil Novel: Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* First published in 1927, Sinclair’s book was the basis for Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*. For analyses of Sinclair’s novel, see Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary,” *New Formations* 69 (Summer 2010): 81-97; and Stephanie LeMenager, “The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*” *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 64-65.

70 . While Munif’s Arabic original was published as a quintet between 1984-89, its English translation was published as a trilogy. See Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage International, 1989); Abdelrahman Munif, *The Trench*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage International, 1991); and Abdelrahman Munif, *Variations on Night and Day*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Vintage International, 1994). For a biographical sketch of Munif, see Sabry Hafez, “An Arabian Master,” *New Left Review* 37 (January/February 2006): 39-67. For an analysis of Munif’s novel through the lens of petrofiction, see Graeme Macdonald, “Monstrous Transformer”: Petrofiction and World Literature,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 3 (2017): 289-302.





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Wael Shawky

Asphalt Quarter

Video stills

2003

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View of the Tapline Road

c.1967

↓ Bottom

Pearl divers singing and drumming

Mid-twentieth century



directly inspired by Munif's *Cities of Salt*. Foregrounded in the title is asphalt, a key petroleum by-product commonly used to surface roads—crucial components of oil infrastructure that provide access to isolated extraction sites allowing labour, building materials and heavy machinery to be brought in, and that run alongside pipelines ensuring their proper maintenance. Across a four-channel video installation, we see

a group of children manually laying down a short stretch of tarmac in the middle of a desert, intercut with footage of waves crashing ashore. Like Munif's text, the film straddles pre- and post-oil life in the Gulf, juxtaposing the fluid maritime realm of seafaring and pearl diving with oil's territorial locus. The soundtrack shifts from a woman drily reading out technical instructions for paving a runway—briefly echoed by a rowdy chorus of children—to the melancholic ebb and flow of *fidjeri*, the traditional singing style of pearl divers in the Gulf. Shawky's video installation feels uncannily prescient in the context of Dubai: its asphalt line in the empty desert is a reminder of the importance of air transport and trade in the city's dramatic transformation from a provincial trading post into a global aerropolis.⁷¹



71 . John D. Kasarda and Greg Lindsay, *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 287-326. Though a majority of global trade continues to be conducted across oceans, these networks of exchange remain largely invisible. Instead, it is Dubai's airports, and the ever-expanding global reach of its airline Emirates, established in 1984, that has literally brought the world to and through the city, establishing it as a quintessential twenty-first century global metropolis.

72 . Matthew T. Huber, "Refined Politics: Petroleum Products, Neoliberalism, and the Ecology of Entrepreneurial Life," in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 233.

Throughout the twentieth century, the petroleum industry advanced numerous technological and scientific innovations, first developed during the urgencies of war and then adapted for industrial expansion during peacetime.⁷² The growing demand for oil necessitated specialised equipment for the optimisation of its extraction, refinement, and distribution. Owing to the remote and secure nature of oil infrastructure, much of this industrial technology remains largely unknown to the everyday consumer. Monira Al Qadiri has produced





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Monira Al Qadiri
Flower Drill
2016

→ Following page

Monira Al Qadiri
OR-BIT 1
2016

a series of sculptural works, based on one such apparatus: the drill heads used to bore through the earth's crust to tap subterranean deposits. Made out of fiberglass, a material composed of petroleum-based plastics, Al Qadiri's *Flower Drill* (2016) is coated in dichroic automotive paint, recreating a two-tone effect popular amongst custom car enthusiasts. While the dark iridescent surface mimics oil's nacreous lustre—a quality it shares with pearls, the Gulf's primary source of wealth before the discovery of oil—it also makes the drill's futuristic design feel sinisterly alien.⁷³ These monstrous blooms, petroculture recast as natural efflorescence, are prognostications, foretelling the inevitable destruction of the planet due to our reliance on fossil fuels. Presenting this extractive technology as extraterrestrial and threatening, Al Qadiri also returns us to the moment of Ghosh's "Oil Encounter", when indigenous populations

first encountered the industrial machinery needed to extract oil, regarding it with both wonder and dread. Similarly, Al Qadiri's *OR-BIT 1* (2016), a spinning drill head that levitates mysteriously a few inches off its plinth, is a sort of "petro-magic" trick.⁷⁴ As Michael Watts notes, oil "harbors fetishistic qualities; it is the bearer of meanings, hopes, expectations of unimaginable powers".⁷⁵ *OR-BIT 1* presents oil, and the technology used to extract it, as "mythic" and miraculous.⁷⁶ The concentrated energy stored within it produces a fantastical condition of infinite growth and limitless possibility; it literally makes things come alive.

73. Monira Al Qadiri, "Choreography with Alien Technology," in *Fresh Hell: The Happy Hypocrite 8*, ed. Sophia Al Maria (2015): 36-41.

74. Michael Watts, *Petro-Violence: Some Thoughts on Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology* (Berkeley: Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics, Institute of International Studies, 1999), 7. Watts' term is a useful condensation of Fernando Coronil's influential analysis of the magical quality of the oil state in Venezuela. See Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

75. Michael Watts, "Violent Environments: Petroleum Conflict and the Political Ecology of Rule in the Niger Delta," in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, and Social Movements*, eds. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (New York: Routledge, 2002), 256.





OFFSHORING HERITAGE

Though Western entities had been manoeuvring to secure concessions in the region since the 1930s, oil was only discovered in what was then called the Trucial States two decades later.⁷⁷ Founded in 1971, the United Arab Emirates is only just beginning to reckon with the role oil has played in its history as a nation. While a museum dedicated to the industry does not as yet exist as it does in some of its Gulf neighbours, a recent special report in *The National* newspaper recounting the story of the discovery of oil in Abu Dhabi in the early 1950s tellingly appeared under the category of heritage.⁷⁸ This suggestion of oil as heritage marks an interesting shift, introducing it into a repertoire of signs, objects and practices traditionally associated with pre-oil life like camels and falcons, wind towers and dhows. Something only becomes worthy of heritage once it is understood as firmly being of the past. Positioning oil as such may be an anticipatory gesture towards the inevitability of a post-oil future.

In the context of the United Arab Emirates, the oil archive is only just becoming accessible to researchers and artists alike. Michael John Whelan's *Aqua Lung* (2018) is one of the few artworks to engage this history. In 1954, a young Jacques Cousteau—commissioned by the Abu Dhabi Marine Areas (ADMA), a joint venture between British Petroleum and the Compagnie française des pétroles (now Total), who was the minority partner—conducted an oceanographic survey of the Arabian Gulf aboard his famous ship, the *Calypso*.⁷⁹ Cousteau had helped develop the Aqua Lung underwater breathing apparatus, a technological innovation that allowed divers to obtain geological samples from the seabed.⁸⁰ The findings of this survey were instrumental in the eventual discovery of Abu Dhabi's offshore oil deposits.⁸¹ In Spring 2018, Whelan re-enacted Cousteau's expedition, returning to some of its coordinates with his own team of divers to non-invasively secure sand samples. This sand, which geographically and materially indexes this history, was then transformed into a series of glass sculptures whose forms reference Cousteau's diving cylinders. Handblown, and studded with tiny bubbles that evoke underwater respiration, the delicate vessels also suggest the fragility of the submerged human body. Entangled in this curious, obscure historical episode, and the glass

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Michael John Whelan
Aqua Lung
2018

↓ Below

Dive at a site of Jacques Cousteau's 1954 Anglo-Iranian Oil Company/British Petroleum Company sponsored survey
2018



76. Michael Watts, "Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity," in *Violent Environments*, eds. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001): 189-212.

77. David Heard, *From Pearls to Oil: How the Oil Industry Came to the United Arab Emirates* (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 2011).

78. James Langton, "Special Report: The Day the Oil Came to Abu Dhabi," *The National*, March 27, 2018, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/heritage/special-report-the-day-the-oil-came-to-abu-dhabi-1.716597>.

79. See Michael Quentin Morton, "Calypso in the Arabian Gulf: Jacques Cousteau's Undersea Survey of 1954," *Liwa: Journal of the National Archives* 7, no. 13 (June 2015): 3-28; and Michael Quentin Morton, "Sweet Crude: Abu Dhabi and the Discovery of Oil," in *Keepers of the Golden Shore: A History of the United Arab Emirates* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

80. Moments from subsequent missions were captured on film by a young Louis Malle in *Station 307* (1955). See Langton. This is just one of many examples of intersections between the oil industry and the history of avant-garde cinema, as some of the earliest works by important auteurs were company-sponsored films. See also Georgiana Banita, "From Isfahan to Ingolstadt: Bertolucci's *La via del petrolio* and the Global Culture of Neorealism," in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 145-168.

81. While Cousteau's subsequent fame makes this a compelling origin myth, Morton questions the historical importance of the survey and its findings, dismissing it as "only a colorful footnote." See Morton, "Calypso in the Arabian Gulf."



objects it inspired, are two seemingly incompatible histories, that of oil exploration in the region and of the marine conservation movement, of which Cousteau would go on to become a vocal and visible face.

The titular subject of Lantian Xie's *Chicago Beach Hotel* (2014-15) drawings was a beloved Dubai landmark, razed in 1997 to make way for the iconic Burj Al Arab. The structure was located in an area named after the Chicago Bridge & Iron Company, which built and launched giant underwater crude oil tanks or *khazzan* into the Gulf in the late 1960s, after commercial quantities of oil were discovered offshore in the late 1960s. The promise of that moment was short-lived as it quickly became clear that supplies were limited, stalling Dubai's petro-fuelled development plans.⁸² While neighbouring Abu Dhabi's vast oil reserves ensured its ascendancy as the capital of the soon-to-be-formed federation, Dubai refocused its energies on expanding its role as a key entrepôt in the region through infrastructural development and the establishment of Port Rashid in 1972, Port Jebel Ali in 1979, and the Dubai Drydocks in 1983.⁸³ Resisting the easy sentimentality of nostalgia, Xie does not simply re-present the razed building. Instead, he conjures up its memory through drawings, in faint coloured pencil, of two views of an unlikely proxy that shares its name: one of the grand hotels of Chicago's Gilded Age, built to accommodate visitors to the 1893 World's Fair. An oblique memorial to the demolished structure, Xie's spectral drawings also mark a pivotal but forgotten moment in Dubai's recent history, when oil, or its limited supply, decided the city's future, ultimately making it into the global metropolis it is today.



AYYAM AL-KADALAK (DAYS OF THE CADILLAC)⁸⁴

Among the countless technologies oil has enabled, the automobile, and the ease of individual and autonomous mobility it provides, might be the most important. The term “automobility” usefully extends our understanding of the cultural significance of the car beyond the machine itself to include a vast interconnected social, material, spatial, technological, and even juridical system.⁸⁵ Our reliance

82 . Todd Reisz, “Future Flyovers: Dubai in 1971,” *Architectural Design* 85, no. 1 (January/February 2015): 100.

83 . Stephen J. Ramos, *Dubai Amplified: The Engineering of a Port Geography* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

84 . Vitalis uses this phrase as the title of Chapter 5 in his book on Aramco. It is excerpted from an

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| ← Previous page |
| Lantian Xie <i>Chicago Beach Hotel</i> 2014-15 |
| ↑ Top |
| Lantian Xie <i>Advertisements for Chicago Beach Hotel, Golden Palm</i> 2016 |
| ↑ Above |
| Lantian Xie <i>Advertisements for Chicago Beach Hotel, Colony Room</i> 2016 |

on the car as primary means of transport has atomised social life, producing and reproducing a way of life characterised by individualism, privatisation and consumption. Stephanie LeMenager has coined the term “petrotopia” to refer to the American mid-twentieth century vision of urbanisation centred on the car and fuelled, literally and metaphorically, by petroleum consumption. This urban form included sprawling, low density, modern suburbs, gas stations and fast-food outlets, strip malls and shopping centres encircled by parking lots and multistorey garages, all connected by a network of local roads and interstate highways.⁸⁶ Though cracks had already begun to appear in this petroleum-fuelled dream by the early 1970s, the Gulf States imported this urban model wholesale, recreating “petrotopias” in the Arabian desert.

Newly built, and until recently, largely empty roads, cheap government-subsidised petrol and disposable oil wealth have together produced a deep love for automobiles in the region that rivals even that of mid-twentieth century America. The large number of cars and high percentage of gas-guzzling SUVs on the region’s roads clearly demonstrate this, and recent scholarship has posited links between automobility and the construction of national identity in various Gulf States.⁸⁷ The importance of automobility is also evident in regional cultural phenomena like the popularity of car-related action movie franchises such as *The Fast and The Furious*, whose seventh instalment was partially set and shot in Abu Dhabi, or the notorious video for M.I.A.’s “Bad Girls” (2012) inspired by online clips of young Saudi men performing elaborate and dangerous car stunts. These texts reveal a vibrant subculture of drifting and drag racing that Pascale Menoret has called “joyriding”.⁸⁸ Menoret proposes this subculture as a type of anti-authoritarian protest, an attempt to reclaim agency and autonomy by claiming control over the streets.

The negative effects of this automobile hegemony are increasingly apparent. While the lack of adequate mass transport has made the paralysing snarl of traffic inevitable, making automobile use feel more constricting than liberating, frequent accidents and alarmingly high numbers of traffic deaths are a growing public health concern across the region. The dominance of the automobile has fostered a sedentary lifestyle and an abiding love of fast food culture. This has not only resulted in increasing incidences of obesity, heart disease and diabetes, but also the recent expansion of the fitness and wellness industries, as new neoliberal consumptive regimes become necessary to curb the negative effects of other forms of consumption.

Raja’a Khalid’s *uberNEON II* (2017), a neon green custom car cover, relates local regimes of automobility back to the human body through desires, discourses and practices related to fitness and performance

anonymous communist leaflet printed in Arabic that littered the streets of Al Khobar in August 1954. See Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom*, 157.

85. For a succinct introduction to these ideas see Gordon Sayre “Automobile,” in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words on Energy and Environment*, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 54-56; Lindsey Green-Simms, “Automobility,” in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words on Energy and Environment*, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 57-60.

86. LeMenager, 64-65.

87. Natalie Koch, “National Day Celebrations in Doha and Abu Dhabi: Cars and Semiotic Landscapes in the Gulf,” in *The City as Power: Urban Space, Place, and National Identity*, eds. Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); and Martin Ledstrup, *Nationalism and Nationhood in the United Arab Emirates* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 43-62.



← Left
Lantian Xie
*Roast Beef & Cheddar,
 Hotdog, Super Star*
 2016

enhancement, as hinted at by the title’s prefix. Draped off bike storage hooks, it is made from high-performance sportswear fabric—comparable to Nike’s signature Dri-FIT—that cools the body by wicking sweat away from its surface. Screen-printed with a silver Lexus logo—whose ES 350 is the preferred model of Uber’s executive fleet in Dubai—*uberNEON II* evokes oil’s omnipresence in modern life through multiple registers. Its form evokes the car, though through its absence; it is composed of a synthetic textile made possible by the petrochemical revolution; and its colour, popular in athleisure fashion, is declaratively artificial. Entangling production and consumption through references to executive perks such as chauffeur car service and exclusive fitness wear, Khalid’s work materialises our complex relationship to oil in the age of neoliberal capitalism.⁸⁹

Cheekily collapsing moments from everyday life in Dubai into art, Lantian Xie presents a set of disparate works that together reveal local textures and economies of privilege, desire and consumption related to and enacted through cars and our dependence on them. An almost daily performance that consists simply of Xie driving his car around the city, *Patrol* (2017) simultaneously acknowledges the cult-status amongst local youth for the titular retro-styled SUV. “Everywhere you go has valet”, the pithy truism uttered by Cher, the bratty teen protagonist of *Clueless* (1995) applies as well to Dubai as it does to Beverly Hills. In *G33150* (2018), Xie claims the spot commonly held for VIPs—located closest to the lifts by which one enters a structure—in the Jameel Arts Centre’s underground car park for his *Patrol*, temporarily appropriating the class-based ease and privilege associated with it for the marginal figure of the artist. And finally, his *Roast Beef & Cheddar, Hotdog, Super Star* (2016), a delivery order from a local Hardees, brings the regional love of fast food into the art institution,

→ Following spread
Raja’a Khalid
uberNEON II
 2017

88 . See Pascale Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Uzma Z. Rizvi, “Whose Streets: Protest and Drifting,” *anthro[dendum]* (blog), December 15, 2017, <https://anthrodendum.org/2017/12/15/whose-streets-protest-and-drifting/>.

89 . For the link between oil and the rise and spread of neoliberalism, see Huber, “Refined Politics.”







reminding us of the widespread use of petrochemical preservatives and additives in such processed food. Oil's "lubricity" reappears as grease stains, its surplus energy redeposited in and as human fat.⁹⁰

A PLASTIC GULF?

↑ Above
Lantian Xie
Patrol
2017

The types of technologies that oil has produced are not limited to the infrastructural or the mechanical; they are also molecular and chemical. These are, arguably, crucial to ensuring our dependence on petroleum. In its natural state, crude oil—a

complex assemblage of hydrocarbons with varying biophysical qualities and uses—has limited applications. The discrete components of crude are separated based on their boiling points through a process called fractional distillation.⁹¹ This refinement process multiplies the possible use value and potential profit of oil and, aided by advancements in modern chemistry, birthed the petrochemical industry and a dizzying profusion of novel synthetic raw materials. As Matthew T. Huber notes, crude oil provides “a molecular drawing board allowing chemists to transfix molecules into thousands of useful commodities”.⁹² Like the automobile before it, the petrochemical industry aided the expansion of postwar consumer society in the West. It generated unprecedented material abundance by exponentially multiplying the spectrum of commodities

90. Rendered animal fat was commonly used as an energy source before fossil fuels were discovered. See Laurie Shannon, “Greasy Citizens and Tallow-Catches,” *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (March 2011): 311-313.

91. For an overview of the scientific process and its cultural and political implications see Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 65-70.

92. Huber, “Oil, Life, and the Fetishism of Geopolitics,” 34.

93. Though the expansion of consumerism that has resulted from petrochemical innovation is unprecedented, the discovery of oil significantly transformed consumer practices, commodity landscapes, and mass media in the decades preceding it. For a socio-historical account of such transformations in the region, see Nelida Fuccaro, “Shaping the Urban Life of Oil in Bahrain: Consumerism, Leisure, and Public Communication in Manama and in the Oil Camps, 1932-1960s,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 59-74.



manufactured and consumed.⁹³ During subsequent decades, this consumer culture was exported globally.

Andrew Pendakis has suggestively and persuasively argued for understanding oil as “*arche*”, as origin or beginning, as the ontological basis of modernity: “Oil is that upon which an enormous mass of extended, plastic Being directly relies for its beginning: it renders not just thinkable, but actualisable its very existence. There is an important double function here, at once epistemological and metaphysical: oil is simultaneously that *through which* the present becomes intelligible to itself *and* the very organising principle or vital fluid by which it subsists. The profusion of form made possible by oil’s plasticity renders it an *arche* in the precise sense of an ultimately underlying substance, one that literally provides objects with the physical condition of their own existence.”⁹⁴ Through petrochemical products—plastics and synthetic textiles, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, fertilisers and pesticides—oil has materially penetrated and permeated all aspects of modern life.⁹⁵ And at a molecular scale—from micro-plastics to residual bits of fertilisers and pesticides in food—it has even entered into, and will outlast, our own bodies. Whether we realise it or not, oil is literally everywhere, and forever.⁹⁶

The most important petrochemical product is plastic. Writing in the heyday of the plastic age, Roland Barthes incisively and presciently identified the key quality of this novel material: its

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| ↑ Above and following page |
| Hassan Sharif <i>Slippers and Wire</i> 2009 |
| ↓ Below |
| Hassan Sharif <i>Jute, Cloth and Rope</i> 1985 |



94 . Andrew Pendakis, “Being and Oil: Or, How to Run a Pipeline through Heidegger,” in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2017), 382.

95 . Huber, “Refined Politics,” 253.

96 . Janine MacLeod, “Holding Water in Times of Hydrophobia,” in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2017), 264-286.



mutability, its ability to shape shift infinitely into any form required: “More than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.”⁹⁷ Plastic is a paradoxical substance, light but resilient, simultaneously durable and disposable. While oil is fluid, slippery, natural and finite, plastic (and other substances derived from petroleum) is solid and stable, artificial and imperishable. As such, it comes to function as a tangible marker of the otherwise invisible ubiquity of oil in our contemporary daily lives. As Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis note, “oil relies on the illusions and aesthetics of plastic to ensure, but efface, its universality”.⁹⁸

This logic becomes apparent in the material trajectory of Hassan Sharif’s signature Objects. Over three decades, Sharif’s Objects indexed shifts in the United Arab Emirates’ commodity landscape, as a subsistence culture eventually gave way to one of abundance and excess.⁹⁹ While the earliest ones were made of organic substances like jute, coir, cloth and paper, by the 1990s, Sharif had begun to use cheap, mass-produced consumer goods, mainly made from plastic and rubber, purchased in bulk from local bazaars and wholesale shops. His *Slippers and Wire* (2009), a gigantic multicoloured mound of rubber slippers—cut, folded, bound, strung together and piled high—can be understood as a wry monument to the growing ubiquity of petro-derivatives, a critique of the rampant consumerism in Gulf societies brought on by sudden oil wealth.¹⁰⁰ Sharif enacts this critique both physically and conceptually. His sculpture is made through simple, obsessively repeated gestures of intimate, everyday violence enacted upon the commodity. By transforming these utilitarian objects into “useless” artworks, he eliminates their use-value, forcing us to reckon with their sheer plasticity.

This growing plasticity of the United Arab Emirates is also the subject of Raja’a Khalid’s *TROPHY* (2017), a life-size replica of a falcon cast out of neon-yellow resin and perched on top of the cardboard box in which the resin was imported. Admired for its speed and agility, the falcon is one of a group of animals linked to Bedouin cultural heritage.¹⁰¹ Long associated with power and prestige, falconry is a popular if somewhat exclusive hobby among elites. The bird has also been adopted as a logo for local fuel retailers like Emarat and ADNOC, transforming a living thing into an infinitely reproducible emblem. Khalid’s sculpture stages this abstraction materially,

97. Roland Barthes, “Plastic,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 97.

98. Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, “Vision of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil,” *e-flux journal* 47 (September 2013), accessed July 5, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/47/60052/visions-of-eternity-plastic-and-the-ontology-of-oil/>; and Amanda Boetzkes, “Plastic Vision and the Sight of Petroculture,” in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2017), 264–286.

99. In her detailed survey of his oeuvre, Paulina Kolczynska carefully traces shifts in the materials and resulting meanings of Sharif’s Objects. See Paulina Kolczynska, “Hassan Sharif: A Rare Bloom in the Desert,” in *Hassan Sharif: Works 1973–2011*, ed. Catherine David (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 56–67.

100. A set of early works by Sharif also seem to suggest an interest in automobility in the United Arab Emirates. *Counting Cars in Al Dhiyafah Road – Dubai* (1985) attempts to quantify car use on one of Dubai’s main drags. *Drum (Barrel)* (1985) and *Wooden Column* (1985) are full-size replicas of obstacles used by the police to prevent off-roading and to reserve parking spaces respectively. In these works, Sharif’s critique of authority is disguised through elaborate calculations and notes that foreground their forms over their functions.

101. See Natalie Koch, “Gulf Nationalism and the Geopolitics of Constructing Falconry as a “Heritage Sport,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 3 (2015): 522–539; and Natalie Koch, “Gulf Nationalism and Invented Traditions,” *LSE Middle East Centre* (blog), August 3, 2018, accessed August 28, 2018, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/08/03/gulf-nationalism-and-invented-traditions/>.





transposing the falcon from discourses of natural history and national heritage into that of petroculture, rendering this important symbol of power, both in terms of authority and energy, as undeniably petroleum-based and uncannily synthetic, emphasised through its entirely unnatural fluorescent colour.

A repeated emphasis on the intrinsic synthetic-ness of petrochemical products situates them firmly outside the natural. However, as Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson point out: “Oil in its myriad petrochemical manifestations does not simply loom menacingly over a passive nature; rather, it is an integral part of nature’s fabric, an ecological actor with pervasive influence on the ways we sense, understand, and survive.”¹⁰² Lydia Ourahmane’s *Land of the Sun* (2014)—a lemon tree planted in a tyre floating in a shallow Perspex tray filled with recycled engine oil—performs this by orchestrating a symbolic ecology that collapses the modernist opposition of the natural and the artificial. Bringing living and non-living things, the arboreal and the petroleous, into close proximity presents their encounter in such a subtle way that their incongruous materialities feel less like crisis than mere coincidence, quietly reasserting oil’s essentially natural origins.

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| ↑ Above |
| Lydia Ourahmane <i>Land of the Sun</i> 2014 |
| ← Previous page |
| Raja’a Khalid <i>TROPHY</i> 2017 |

102. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson, “Petro-Matters: Plasticity, Toxicity, Lubricity,” in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman and Adam Carlson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens’s University Press, 2017), 215-216.

→ Right

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck

Last Oil Barrel

Date postponed



ABSTRACT FUTURES

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbek's *Last Oil Barrel* (date postponed)—a miniature wooden barrel of oil whose price is linked to oil futures traded through the New York Mercantile Exchange (NYMEX)—reveals oil as an integral technology of global finance, and as a valuable but essentially finite natural resource. Balteo-Yazbeck's sculpture is only assigned value through its purchase, its deferred completion date and variable price, suggesting that this value is neither intrinsic nor fixed but entirely arbitrary, produced through social relations, in this case an elaborate and abstract financial transaction. As such, it sits within a tradition of simulated financial instruments and faux-commodities made by artists.¹⁰³ Oil, and the formalised financial system that creates its value, is used as a proxy through which to manifest the otherwise informal and immaterial value of artworks. Triangulating a relationship between the

worlds of finance, petroleum and modern and contemporary art, Balteo-Yazbeck reveals just how ubiquitous oil and its influence are: its wealth, generated and mobilised by finance, pervades and sustains the ever-expanding art world.¹⁰⁴

We have lived under the shadow of oil's scarcity and its inevitable disappearance since the 1970s, yet our reliance on and

¹⁰³ . Other examples include Marcel Duchamp's *Monte Carlo Bond* (1924), Yves Klein's *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* (1959-62), and Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (1961).

¹⁰⁴ . In recent years, the oil industry's direct and indirect sponsorship of modern and contemporary art institutions has begun to be challenged by art activist groups such as Liberate Tate. See Mel Evans, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

consumption of it has only grown. Though its finitude is established scientific fact, it is, as yet, hardly scarce. Throughout history, its supply has been strategically controlled by corporations and governments to maximize profits.¹⁰⁵ Historical crises precipitated through scarcity have been the result of geopolitical ambitions and capitalist greed, and scarcity should be understood as one of the many social relations through which our understanding of oil is produced. With its variable value, Balteo-Yazbeck's barrel questions whether oil's growing scarcity will make it more or less valuable in the future, as alternative energy sources displace the current hegemony of the fossil fuel industry. The assignation of value is presented not as an indisputable fact but a financial speculation and a collective negotiation, implicating all of us in the process. His gesture towards the future indicates what is truly at stake: can we even envision life "after oil?"¹⁰⁶

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

'Crude' attempts to narrate an account of petromodernity and its aftereffects in the Middle East, visualised through disparate artworks and the many entangled histories, ideas and discourses sedimented within them.¹⁰⁷ By beginning to unearth the repressed histories of colonialism and imperialism that accompanied Western endeavours to secure oil, these works allow us to trace the lingering impacts of these processes in the present. At the same time, 'Crude' seeks to initiate a long-overdue and much-needed regional conversation around oil and the deleterious effects—social and cultural, and environmental—of our petrodependence. The exhibition reveals some of the myriad ways in which the discovery of oil and the processes of modernisation, development and nation-building it inaugurated, impacted everyday life in the past and continues to do so in the present. The works on display challenge oil's insidious invisibility by engaging the vast infrastructure space it has produced, a space that helps sustain its inescapable influence. And, finally, it tracks oil's broader social and cultural effects through the new subjectivities and materialities that have emerged from it: automobility and car culture, suburbanisation and alienation, lifestyles pitched between the fast food and fitness industries, synthetic petroleum products and the expansion of consumer capitalism.

Somewhat paradoxically, by engaging with history, the exhibition, like Balteo-Yazbeck's barrel, cues us towards the future. This attention to the past is vital as it allows us to better understand how we arrived at our contemporary reality, creating a more informed position from which to begin to imagine alternative, more sustainable and just futures. Oil's influence is so pervasive that we cannot think culture in the present, or the future for that matter, without recognising

105 . Mitchell, 43-65.

106 . *After Oil 2015, After Oil* (Edmonton: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016).

107 . Such a project must remain tentative. As Jennifer Wenzel has argued, oil ontologically resists narrativisation, its capacity to "produce something out of nothing" negating "the working out of cause and effect" that is the logic of narrative. See Jennifer Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Unimagining and Reimagining the Niger Delta," in *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 212.

how profoundly our social existence has been and continues to be shaped by it. The works included in this exhibition acknowledge this condition. They are not simply oppositional, and do not dictate solutions. Embedded within petroculture themselves—historically, representationally, materially—they retain and project a critical, in both senses of the word, ambivalence. They call on viewers to evaluate for themselves the urgency and immensity of our predicament. Reflecting how deeply our everyday—especially the many conveniences and benefits of modern life we take for granted—is saturated by cheap and abundant oil, these works demonstrate exactly how difficult kicking our habit will be, and how great a sacrifice will be required. Admitting the extent of our addiction is the necessary first step towards achieving a transition away from oil and other fossil fuels, towards renewable sources and lower levels of energy consumption.

The journalist Ryszard Kapuściński famously wrote: “Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free...The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident, through the kiss of fortune and not by sweat, anguish, hard work. In this sense oil is a fairy tale, and like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.”¹⁰⁸ Oil shares this capacity for illusion—of conjuring something out of thin air, of miraculous transformation, endless potential, unlimited growth within both modernity and capitalism, hopelessly entangling their histories, as the works included in 'Crude' demonstrate. Revealing the depths and effects of oil's deceptions, in the past and the present, they entreat us to envision a future that is not as easily seduced by its insidious magic, that is not simply the “happily ever after” it has and continues to promise.

108 . Ryszard Kapuściński, *Shah of Shahs*, trans. William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 35.

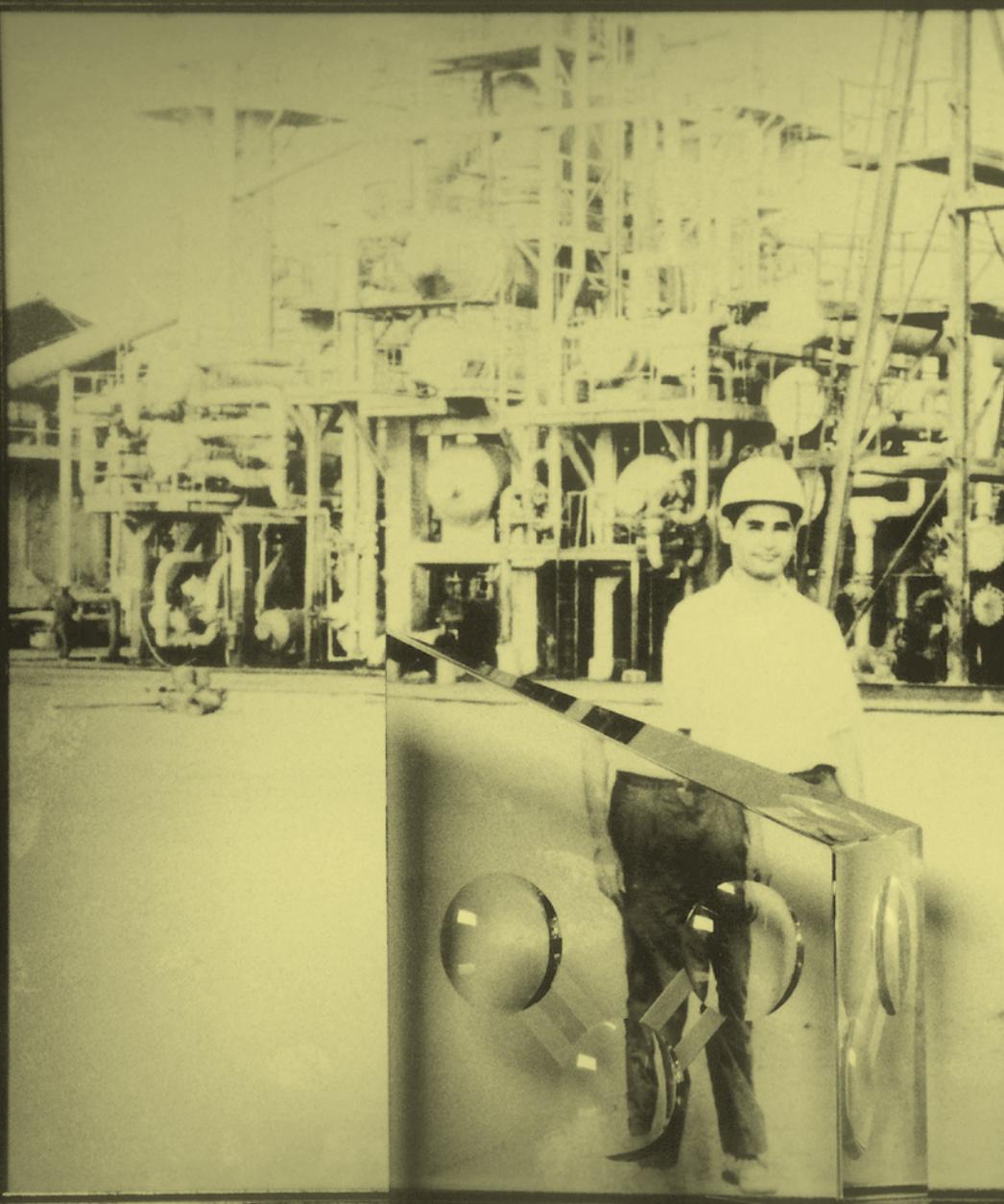
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Manal AIDowayan

If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me

Photographs

2012



١٤٠٧
1986

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND SAUDI ENGINEERS CONFERENCE
الاجل الوطني لبحوث المؤتمر الثاني للمهندسين السعوديين

1

١٤٠٧
1986

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND SAUDI ENGINEERS CONFERENCE
الاجل الوطني لبحوث المؤتمر الثاني للمهندسين السعوديين

2

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Latif Al Ani

Tire Repair, Baghdad, Iraq

1958

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

Date Packing Factory, Basra, Iraq

c.1960

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 90 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

Aerial View of a Housing Project in the Yarmouk Neighborhood, Baghdad, Iraq

1961

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

Aerial View of Tahrir Square and the Monument of Liberty, Baghdad, Iraq

1961

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

Building the Darbandikhan Dam, Iraq

c.1961

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

School Lunch, Baghdad, Iraq

1961

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Latif Al Ani

View of Rashid Street and the Mirjan Mosque, Baghdad, Iraq

1963

Digital print from gelatin silver negative on cellulose acetate film

60 × 60 cm

Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut

Manal AlDowayan

If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me

2012

Silver gelatin fibre prints and single channel video

Photographs: 40.64 × 55.88 cm each; videos: dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Cuadro Gallery, Dubai

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck

UNstabile-Mobile (from the series *Modern Entanglements, U.S. Interventions*)

2006

Paper documents, vinyl lettering, framed New Yorker magazine, and Calder-like sculptural model of Iraqi oilfields made of carbon fiber, plastic, metal, and Plexiglas

Dimensions variable

Teixeira de Freitas Collection

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, in collaboration with Media Farzin

Chronoscope, 1951, 11pm

2009-11

Single channel HD video (sound, 24 min 49 sec), sofa, table, and screenplay booklets

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artists and Green Art Gallery, Dubai

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck

Last Oil Barrel

Date postponed

India ink on sustainable wood, printed paper, and financial markets

3.5 × 2.5 (diameter) cm

Courtesy of the artist and Green Art Gallery, Dubai

GCC

Congratulant 5

2013

Crystal glass, acetate and brass trophy, silk-screened text, and Plexiglas vitrine with wood pedestal and marble veneer

168 × 50 × 50 cm

BDU Collection

Raja'a Khalid

Golf in Arabia

2013

Archival inkjet print

84 × 112 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Desert Golf I

2014

Archival inkjet print

25.4 × 35.4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Desert Golf II

2014

Archival inkjet print

25.4 × 35.4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Desert Golf III

2014

Archival inkjet print

25.4 × 35.4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Desert Golf IV

2014

Archival inkjet print

25.4 × 35.4 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Desert Golf V & VI

2014

Archival inkjet print

43.33 × 67.43 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

Fortune/Golf

2014
Archival inkjet print
81.28 × 111.76 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

TROPHY
2017
Resin, styrocubes, and carton
42 × 20 × 20 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Raja'a Khalid

uberNEON II
2017
Silkscreen on cool mesh tech fabric custom car cover for Lexus ES350 and bicycle hooks
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Lydia Ourahmane

Land of the Sun
2014
Perspex, recycled engine oil, lemon tree, and tyre
1.54 × 2.13 m
Courtesy of the artist

Houshang Pezeshknia

Untitled
1949
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood
50 × 43 cm
Private Collection

Houshang Pezeshknia

Mirage du pétrole
1950
Oil on cardboard
70 × 51 cm
Private Collection

Houshang Pezeshknia

Untitled
c.1958
Oil on wood
41 × 48 cm
Private Collection

Houshang Pezeshknia

Khark
1958
Watercolour on cardboard
51 × 70 cm
Private Collection

Houshang Pezeshknia

Untitled
1958
Ink and watercolour on cardboard
68.5 × 50.5 cm
Private Collection

Monira Al Qadiri

Behind the Sun

2013
Single channel video (sound, 10 min)
Dimensions variable
Realized with the support of Beirut Art Center
Art Jameel Collection

Monira Al Qadiri

Flower Drill
2016
Fiberglass and automotive paint
2 × 2 × 1.2 m each
Art Jameel Collection

Monira Al Qadiri

OR-BIT 1
2016
3D printed plastic, automotive paint, and levitation module
30 × 20 × 20 cm
Realized with the support of the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam
Art Jameel Collection

Hassan Sharif

Slippers and Wire
2009
Slippers and copper wire
Dimensions variable
Sharjah Art Foundation Collection

Wael Shawky

Asphalt Quarter
2003
Four channel video (sound, 14 min 59 sec)
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut & Hamburg

Nasrin Tabatabai and Babak Afrassiabi

Seep
2012-18
Mixed media installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

At Field

2012
Wood
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Bricks on Carpet

2012
Bricks and carpet
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Carved Stone and Bitumen on Console Table - From the Tells of Shūsh [Susa] and the natural oil seepage in Southwest Iran

2012
Stone, bitumen, glass, and steel
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Desk
2012
Wood
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

List in Progress - Western Collection from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

2012
Prints on transparency film
62.2 × 151.4 cm
Courtesy of the artists

Seep 1 - Unfilmable/Persian Story

2012
Single channel HD video (sound, 5 min 46 sec) and thirteen prints on sheets of A4 paper
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Seep 2 - Southwest Iran

2012
Single channel HD video (sound, 17 min 39 sec)
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Imprints - of natural oil seepage

2013
Crude oil, paper, and wire rope
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artists

Sloping Corridors and Ramp - Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

2012-18
Aluminum, copper, and paint
Courtesy of the artists

Rayyane Tabet

Letterhead (from the series *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points*)
1950/2013
Found printed paper and English-Arabic letterhead
29 × 21.5 cm each
Art Jameel Collection

Rayyane Tabet

Steel Rings (from the series *The Shortest Distance Between Two Points*)
2013
Rolled, engraved steel with km, longitude, latitude, and elevation marking of specific location on the Trans-Arabian Pipeline
78 (diameter) × 10 cm each
Art Jameel Collection

Hajra Waheed

Aerial Studies 1-8
2013
Xylene transfer and ink on un-exposed polaroid
16.51 × 8.89 cm each
Courtesy of Sheikhha Hoor Al Qasimi

Hajra Waheed*Plume 1-24*

2017

Cut photograph, ink, and archival tape on paper
43.18 × 30.48 cm each

Courtesy of the artist

Hajra Waheed*The ARD: Study for a Portrait 1-28*

2018

Collage, cut photographs, mylar, archival tape,
xylene transfer, and ink on graph paper
Twenty-four units: 37.1 × 42.55 cm; Four units:
37.1 × 32 cm

Commissioned by Art Jameel

Courtesy of the artist

Hajra Waheed*Encyclopaedia of Islam, Volume IA & IB (1954-1958): George Rentz, A Personal Copy*

2018

Found object

Vol. IA: 26.42 × 18.42 × 5.33 cm; Vol. IB: 26.42
× 18.42 × 4.83 cm

Commissioned by Art Jameel

Courtesy of the artist

Michael John Whelan*Aqua Lung*

2018

Blown glass objects, made out of sand obtained
from the site of Jacques Cousteau's 1954

British Petroleum sponsored dive

Dimensions variable

Co-produced by Art Jameel and realized with
the support of Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal,
Alserkal Residency, Dubai, and Peter Kuchinke

Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Lantian Xie*Chicago Beach Hotel*

2014-15

Colour pencil on paper

23 x 30 cm

Private Collection

Lantian Xie*Chicago Beach Hotel*

2014-15

Colour pencil on paper

23 x 30 cm

Courtesy of Shumon Basar

Lantian Xie*Roast Beef & Cheddar, Hotdog, Super Star*

2016

Hardees delivery menu, receipt, staple, and
brown paper bag

23 × 17 × 11 cm each

Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Lantian Xie*Patrol*

2017

2016 champagne colour 2-door Nissan Patrol
and city of Dubai

Duration variable

Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Lantian Xie*G33150*

2018

Reserved parking space, paint, floor-mounted
barrier lock, and intermittent Nissan Patrol

Dimensions variable

Commissioned by Art Jameel

Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise, Dubai

Ala Younis*Al Bahithun [the (re)searchers]*

2018

Painted plastic, oil pastels and carbon transfer
on paper, and found object

Dimensions variable

Produced by Art Jameel

Courtesy of the artist

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Murtaza Vali is a critic, curator and art historian based in Sharjah and Brooklyn, and a member of Art Jameel's Curatorial Council. His ongoing research interests include ex-centric minimalisms, materialist art histories, ghosts and other figures of liminal subjectivities and repressed histories, and the weight of color. A recipient of a 2011 Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for Short-Form Writing, he regularly contributes to various international art periodicals and to publications for non-profit institutions and commercial galleries around the world. His essay "Objects at/of Play," on pioneering Emirati artists Hassan Sharif and Abdullah Al Saadi, appeared in the book accompanying the National Pavilion of the United Arab Emirates at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

Curator of the 2013 Abraaj Group Art Prize, Vali's other recent curatorial projects include: *Mohammed Kazem: Ways of Marking* (Aicon Gallery, 2018), *Vikram Divecha: Minor Work* (Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, 2017), *Between Structure and Matter: Other Minimal Futures* (Aicon Gallery, New York, 2016), *Formal Relations* (Taymour Grahne Gallery, New York, 2015), *Accented* (Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah, 2015), *Geometries of Difference: New Approaches to Abstraction and Ornament* (Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, New Paltz, 2015), *PTSD: Shahpour Pouyan* (Lawrie Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, 2014), and *Brute Ornament: Kamrooz Aram and Seher Shah* (Green Art Gallery, Dubai, 2012). He is a Visiting Instructor at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, and a Lead Tutor of Campus Art Dubai.

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 في الصف الأول ركوع من اليمين
 انتهى الصف الأول . في الصف
 الدخيتير ، ثم سعد الدخيتير



عبدالله عبد الكريم ، ثم وراه فؤاد محتسب ، ثم خلفه عنان حمال بنظارة شمسية
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RESEARCH

Computed Tomography of Congenital Brain Malformations

SARWAR

Yin-Chiu
 and
 Chiu

ATLAS OF OBSTETRICAL ULTRASONOGRAPHY



RADIOGRAPHIC ATLAS OF THE GENITOURINARY SYSTEM
 NEY AND FRIEDENBERG
 LIPPINCOTT

HEALTH
 DISEASE
 SAUDI ARABIA
 THE ARABIAN
 EXPERIENCE
 1960s - 1970s
 OIL WORKERS? ART WORKERS

VOLUME

U D D E

Oil is magical and insidious. As the most valuable, highly coveted and finite natural resource, it was and continues to be a powerful agent of geopolitical upheaval and socio-economic transformation. Oil has been a trigger for misguided colonial adventures, imperial endeavours, wars and coups, a catalyst for nation building, modernisation and development, and a cause of terrible ecological disasters and irreversible climate change. Though it is the essential fuel of capitalist modernity, literally propelling the unrelenting expansion that characterises this period, it remains elusive. Crude offers a corrective, making oil visible through artworks that engage with the many archives, infrastructures, and technologies it has produced.

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