Falling Forward / Works (1995–2025)

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ON WHAT GROUNDS KHALIL RABAH IN CONVERSATION WITH ANTHONY DOWNEY

Anthony Downey (AD): I want to start with *After 12 Years* [1995–2008], which I saw at the Bluecoat as part of the Liverpool Biennial [2008]. I recall this was a subsection or a category of a planned museum, *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* [*PMNHH*; 2003–ongoing]. It was very convincing in the way it presented the apparatuses of the art world: the artefacts, vitrines, wall hangings, alongside the evidentiary materials, all of it made for a very compelling installation. If I remember rightly, there was also a newsletter and, central to the project, an olive tree. Can you talk a little bit about the actual materials and how they were central to your practice at the time, especially as it related to institution building?

Khalil Rabah (KR): *After 12 Years* came about from the work *Grafting* [1995]. In 1995, I dug up five olive trees from the surrounding countryside of Ramallah and replanted them in a park in Geneva that houses the United Nations offices [UNOG] there. These trees were later removed, and I wanted to document that removal. *After 12 Years* was, therefore, a separate project from the *PMNHH*, but the museum has a performative aspect for me, regardless of whether it accomplishes that or not, that includes other works. In *After 12 Years*, the vitrine, the documents and the newsletter are trying to construct a spatiality; the works want to become architectural elements. Even the transparency of the windows is creating this tension of a layer, an image, a true light between what could have been and what is presented physically. There's this content of looking for the trees, finding the trees, and then it wants to present itself as a legal case, trying to look at what happened, understanding it through legal discourses. I was interested in this performativity of the law, in this context.

AD: Could you explain the role of the olive trees? Because that's integral to understanding the evidentiary aspect of the work. What happened to the olive trees? What was the plan? And how did you find out that they were missing?

KR: I learnt that the trees had been removed two years before this project was developed in 2008. The trees had been part of an art exhibition in Geneva, and I would have expected them to stay there amongst the other trees.¹ But, at the end of the day, the context was art, and maybe art did not allow that. It was not simply planting trees. They were sculptural when they were presented, trimmed, treated with white paint, and they looked like cultural symbols. They were olive trees brought from Palestine via the Mediterrane-an. Whether they were exiled or not – by choice, by force, by movement, by migration, by whatever – was part of their appeal. When I look back at the way they were removed from Ramallah and travelled through the Mediterranean, it is very metaphorical. But I also wanted them to be understood as cultural things, as artworks.

After the six-month duration of the exhibit, they looked like regular trees that naturally existed in Ariana Park in Geneva [the location of the UNOG in the city]. The grass grew on the earth around them, and it felt like they had been inhabiting this place. I found out through the company that had planted them that they had been removed. One was moved to the Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Geneva and the other four disappeared. I don't know what happened to them. I did the research, going into the rights of trees and who represents trees, and how law and legalities for living things can be interpreted in different ways under Swiss law. Trees are living things in Switzerland, and they had the right to stay there. These trees had the right to be naturalised. One of them, at least the one that survived there, had contributed – according to Swiss law – to the environment, as it had been there for twelve years. What, therefore, were the legal rights of this [remaining] tree?

AD: I want to think about this further, the legal discourse around the disappearance of the trees, and the way in which they were grafted and displaced from one place to another in the hope that they lived, stayed there, had a right to remain, so to speak. Bearing in mind that we are using a phrase here – *the right to remain* – that has considerable political purchase in the context of Palestine, do you see the project in evidentiary terms?

KR: In the case of *After 12 Years*, perhaps it was. But when I present that project now in an exhibition, these objects or artefacts are also presented as architectural elements of the museum. The original materials, evidentiary and otherwise, are now on shelves, which is a way of trying to understand the project as a form of knowledge production or as artefact production, which could have a legal dimension.







3RD ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION INSTALLATION VIEWS KHALIL SAKAKINI CULTURAL CENTRE, RAMALLAH, 2004









3^{RO} ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION INSTALLATION VIEWS KHALIL SAKAKINI CULTURAL CENTRE, RAMALLAH, 2004

AD: There's obviously a documentary *effect* to the work, but there is also an *affect*, an emotional context here. It is about displacement; it is about loss. There is also the question of what happens to the artefact after it outlives its purpose within the framework of a museum or an art gallery or an exhibition.

KR: For the exhibition in Sharjah, I used the captions from the original project to indicate what happened following *After 12 Years.*² I had copies of several captions put on the covers of boxes to highlight how the captions perform now, over a decade later. It's the captions of that particular installation that became the subsequent work, and this idea of the performativity of a certain aspect of it gives it a future. So, yes, this is about displacement, but also recuperation.

AD: We will come back to that because I think the linguistic scaffolding that's being used in the context of *After 12 Years* is important; it further frames the discourse that produces the overall impact of the work. Would it make sense, for now, to also understand some of the original vitrines as a Duchampian gesture or akin to the museum projects that Marcel Broodthaers produced in the 1970s? I'm thinking about the museum-ification or the vitrine-ification, for want of a better term, of an artefact and how that gesture or process adds authority or agency to the object.

KR: Yes, that is an element here. For my exhibition in Sharjah, I attempted to do a direct work in the exhibition made up of the collection of my works from the 1990s – the museum in a box – and there are references to these ideas of museum-ification throughout the exhibition. ³ This notion of what is being contained and what is a container is very architectural to me, like a scale modelling of something, which is an architectural act, but also a container for the artefact of the model.

AD: When I think about Marcel Broodthaers's work, for example, it often poses the signifiers that produce the authority of a museum – you'll often find in his work the word 'fig.': 'fig. one', 'fig. two', 'fig. three', for example. It might not even refer to an actual object; but the authority of that particular language printed as a caption gives a museumlike authority to the object. I was also thinking of Duchamp earlier and how he was not only the producer of his work, but also the curator. He curated the production process and created the edifice within which it was framed and presented. I'm thinking here of your other works in this context, say, *The United States of Palestine Airlines [USPA*]. When I saw this installed in 2007, it was obvious that it was very carefully curated, almost like an act of auto-curation.

KR: I'm recognising more and more that there is this curatorial aspect that I'm involved with. As if curation is part of the artefact, itself. Going back to the 'fig.' reference thing, for instance, for the show in Sharjah, I wanted to have alumin-

ium signs with engravings that said: 'Botanical Department' or 'Geology Palaeontology Department'. I wanted them to behave as indicators, as if these objects had been curated. But then, when I wanted to place them, I realised that these 'indicators' and signs were objects in themselves, and they were like every other artefact there. They not only signified the thing, but they became the thing, itself.

AD: Just applying that to the *USPA*, did you see yourself as the curator of that show?

KR: Yes. Let's say, curation as a methodology. Maybe as medium. A signifying event in itself.

AD: Thinking about the content of that show, you mimicked or re-enacted not so much an airline, but an airline office, which I find interesting inasmuch as it shows a projection or flight of fancy, so to speak. I'm wondering about what role mimicry played here, the performative gesture behind the production of a very convincing airline office.

KR: For me, this was something of a personal experience. Nowadays, you reserve online and take a flight and, you know, that is the experience. Growing up, it was a special experience going to airline offices. Going to pick up the ticket was almost 90 per cent of the journey. That experience of an airline agency was a kind of travel on its own that allowed a certain kind of imaginary mobility at that time. Just that image of an office space embodies a lot of this sense of an imaginary mobility and becomes a vehicle of movement before movement.

AD: The office creates an imaginary that is associated with the fact of travel, but it's also a projection into the future of travel, the act of travelling. I'm wondering if that makes sense in the context of what you're talking about here, the sense of anticipation and extrapolation into a potential future or a version of it.

KR: Yes, of course, it has that aspect of anticipation, of excitement. I remember we printed about 200 to 300 invitations for that *USPA* show that you saw in London. The invitation was like a boarding pass, and it was printed with old machinery to add to that effect of movement and mobility. Perhaps there are other ways to talk about mobility now, but *USPA* was also an architectural space, a made-up, staged kind of space. It reminds me a lot, in a strange way, of when Duchamp decided just to do models of his works and put them in boxes. At one point, there was a proposal, and we almost brought a real airplane. We were supposed to get it done during Frieze [2008], and at another point, we were supposed to do it in AlUla, in the desert, so as to have an actual plane land there or just exist there. I don't know what that would have accomplished exactly, or whether this work is about *accomplishing* something as such.







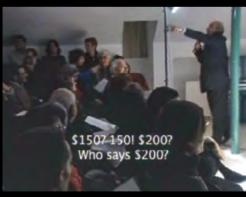
3RD ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION PERFORMANCE KHALIL SAKAKINI CULTURAL CENTRE, RAMALLAH, 2004













3^{RO} ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION STILLS 2004 TWO-CHANNEL VIDEO WITH COLOUR AND SOUND 7 MINUTES 22 SECONDS PP 314, 317

AD: The boarding pass seems to be akin to the captions we mentioned earlier—there's a performative element that gives more authority to the project overall. If you were to have an airline or an airplane, and you accomplished the goal of actual flight, it would seem to defeat the purpose of the work inasmuch as the work seems to be explicitly about deferring anticipation of closure. I'm thinking of that in terms of failure, too. Proactive, productive failure. And I don't want to idealise failure. There's failure and then there's Failure. But it seems to me that you are actively courting failure: you do not want these works to become templates for an airline, for example. You want them to imagine or anticipate a projected future within which that might be eventually possible. But, obviously, it's not your job to develop an airline. I'm just wondering if you could talk about notions of failure in your work: you want to be close to it, but you don't want to be too close.

KR: It has to do with, maybe, the notion we have talked about, the idea of 'falling forward'. Failure, in the sense of what is not accomplished. And is it then about the impossibility of a project being accomplished? There were technical and logistical problems regarding having an actual plane land in the desert, but I think even if that would have happened, it would have been grounded. It would not have functioned as an airline, and it did not want to function as an airline. It's not a damaged airline, but there are aspects of it that are not necessarily functioning. There are other things that are present. Even in the absence of the airline itself, they are present.

AD: I think there's a high degree of speculation here, by which I mean an imaginary gambit at work here. The artefact is important, but it's also the speculative presentation of the artefact. I want to consider this in relation to *Untitled, All is Well* [2017]. There is a painted element and a sculptural element to this work. Could you tell me how you first came across the story behind the project, more generally?

KR: This work refers to an iconic painting by Sliman Mansour, *Jamal Al Mahamel*, which he first painted in 1973. This was such an iconic painting that it was never really experienced within our consciousness as a painting – if that makes sense. We mostly saw a representation of it or a poster. Growing up in the 1970s, when Mansour produced this work, we also could only experience it as a representation because it apparently had been destroyed. It was in the collection of Muammar Gaddafi, and one of the stories is that it was destroyed by the US air strikes on Tripoli in 1986. The experience of a painting as an actual painting was, therefore, not there. It was missing. Apparently, Sliman Mansour later attempted to make another one. It's really a horrible painting, in truth, but it's so iconic that you cannot say it's a horrible painting. When considering it as the basis of *Untitled*, *All is Well*, I wanted to start with the human figure: Who, exactly, is this person in the image? And can he come out

from this painted setting and become a real thing again? I wanted to bring a reality to the painting that was not a reality in itself. I had to create that figure to create a new work.

As I was undertaking this research, I came across a small JPEG on the Internet of a photograph someone took whilst Sliman Mansour was attempting to repaint *Jamal Al Mahamel* in 2014. But again, here, the image is not complete, with parts of it yet to be painted. The sculpture in my installation, in a sense, comes out from the painting. It's almost like a [3-D] movie, when something steps out from the screen. Or maybe it's a model posing to be painted, so the sculpture comes before the painting. The image of Jerusalem, which was an iconic part of the original painting, is not complete in the JPEG image that I worked from. Like an airline, the later painting, produced in 2014 by Mansour, becomes a form of agency in itself, a way to look at what is absent, what is present, what is being constructed – and how it operates in that fluid space.

AD: You've not chosen to reproduce the painting here; instead, you've chosen to reproduce the processes behind the production of the painting, the artifice of production. And then, you've restaged it as part of *Untitled, All is Well,* complete with the platform, the plinth, the apparatus, the structure and the easel that supports the authority given to the painting *as a painting.* When we look at *your* painting of this painting process, there are actually three paintings of the porter in it, and all of them seem to be further distancing, or relativising, our relationship to the original. It becomes like a hall of mirrors, a mise en abyme. You also take the two-dimensional figure of the porter (the painting) and create the three-dimensional one (a sculpture), and show it in the same space which produces an uncanniness to the whole and, crucially, a distance that allows for considerations of the performative aspect of painting, rather than its 'finished' material reality.

KR: Yes, it's how this performative space is also playing with history. We don't have to say that it is a Palestinian painting and all of that, but *it is* a Palestinian painting. It is about Jerusalem, it is about the land and it is about how artists think of these subjects and the history – and how to represent them as artefacts, or paintings. In *Untitled, All is Well*, these questions are not just represented, they want to come out of that space and make a new space, a conceptual space for rethinking the authority of presenting a painting in a museum, or giving it legitimacy.

AD: Let's push it a little bit further because this is a really important point. Let's think about the original painting. It had a symbolic presence, but that 'presence' has to do with loss and displacement. You seem to be deconstructing that symbolism of loss and displacement?















3RP ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION
ABOUT THE MUSEUM
2004
WOODEN BOX, GLASS, 11 OLIVE
TREES, TEXT
208 X 208 X 60 CM
INSTALLATION VIEW SHARJAH
ART FOUNDATION, 2022
GUGGENHEIM ABU DHABI
COLLECTION

On What Grounds 319

KR: Yes, it is a very, very symbolic thing. And anything you do to it is tied to this symbol. Like with the olive trees and the *After 12 Years* project: How do we decipher these symbols of loss, and how do we understand them? I see my projects as means to provide a way of thinking this through, mechanisms for thinking and representing the symbolism and reality of loss.

AD: The *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction*, which you held at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in 2004, laid bare that process of loss and disenfranchisement. I am particularly interested here in how the staging of an auction – a key event in the so-called 'art world' – gives legitimacy to certain artefacts that personify the process of loss. Could you talk about the idea behind that auction, what it meant to you at the time?

KR: The barrier wall in Palestine is an interesting case in point: it had already existed as a wall before it was completed. It seemed to be projected into the future of our imaginations. That's why I gave the auction of artefacts from the building of the wall a history, a third year, as a means to provide a mechanism to think about its future as a fact of living.

AD: The use of a television in the context of that auction also displaced the reality of the actual event onto a mediated reality, a televisual reality. I heard that some people thought it was a real auction. And some people did bid, but they didn't believe real money to be involved. Was part of your intention to create that confusion?

KR: Not at all. Well, maybe. Of course, having the lots upon which people were bidding absent from the actual auction room – and only accessible through the mediated fact of transmission – did create confusion. That might need more context: When people entered the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, there were objects in a truck outside. On the first floor, which is usually used for exhibitions, there were marks similar in design to the marks used on the land when it was confiscated to build the wall. But there were no objects on the marks. People had to go through that space and through the administrative offices on the second floor. And then to the third floor, where public programming and performances usually happen. So, the objects to be auctioned were effectively absent throughout the proceedings.

The auction then happened on the third floor, and people placed their bids. During the auction, the objects from the truck were moved to their locations on the first floor, where the marks were, and an exhibition happened with these objects displayed. But the people at the auction had only ever viewed these objects via transmission, via another reality. Only after the auction was over, and the people were leaving the building, could they physically experience the actual objects and the exhibition. So, yes, again, there was an

element of confusion at work, but it was also about asking a simple question regarding the displacement of objects and how we can address it critically in the space of an exhibition or auction.

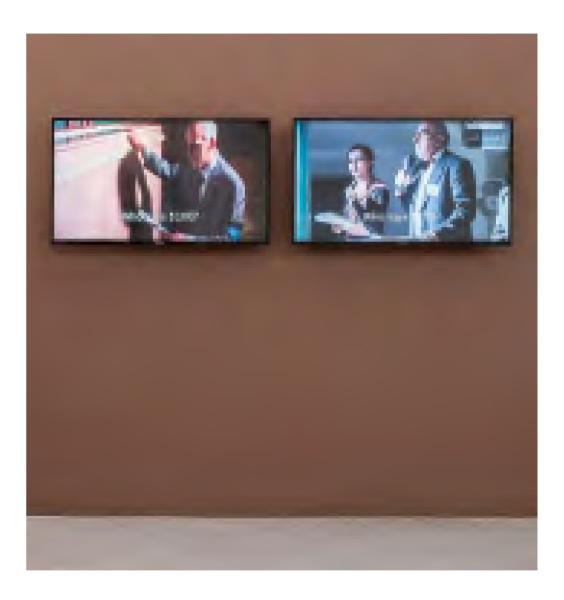
I was summoned by the Palestinian Ministry of Culture after I completed this work. I was asked to go and meet with a minister, whose name I can't remember. And some artists were upset that I had even announced that there was an auction. They said I had no right to auction the wall, and they wrote in the newspapers that I, as an individual, had no right to make a museum, because I had auctioned the wall in the name of the *PMNHH*. The minister said [the government is] supposed to make the museum, not me. So, this idea of a museum, or an auction, is about authority and who can assume it.

AD: A lot of what we've been talking about thus far has been about how your practice produces artefacts, which you then curate using the apparatus of the art world to present them with a degree of agency and authority, which can be discombobulating for the viewer. Are the mechanisms real? Are they fictional? Are they autobiographical? Are they historical? All of these and more questions seem relevant here.

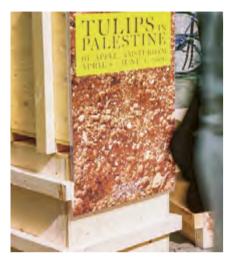
KR: My interest in art and architecture is always in a type of friction. I like working with design, architecture and art. When working with the organisation RIWAQ, I saw the potential or the possibility to exile the object and make it immaterial, almost to dematerialise it and look at the object again.⁴

AD: I was also particularly interested here in how the Riwaq Biennale operates, specifically as an architecture and apparatus of cultural production.

KR: I always want to engage art and architecture together – the mediums, the disciplines, the objects, the public-engagement activities - [and] make public work that can develop with the viewer. When I worked with RIWAQ, I was amazed by the 50,320 buildings that had been surveyed.⁵ It took ten years to complete this survey, which is mind-boggling! But what does this number mean? Do we realise that we still have, in a sense, 50,320 historic buildings? To me, that was the number we could start with. When I asked for meetings with different organisations about the potential of how they could work with art institutions, I was asked if this was a performance. It was not a performance, as such, but it was received by them as one. The project that came out of this collaboration, 50,320 Names [2006], engages with these and other questions, not least of which is how we engage with the historical aspects of conversation and preservation in the future. It also asks whether RIWAQ as an organisation and other projects, my own included, are concerned with architectural conservation or if they are producers of culture, too. This also, I believe, forced RIWAQ to rethink itself as an institution and what it meant



3⁸⁰ ANNUAL WALL ZONE AUCTION 2004 TWO-CHANNEL VIDEO WITH COLOUR AND SOUND 7 MINUTES 22 SECONDS INSTALLATION VIEW SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION, 2022











to be a cultural producer. So, 50,320 Names became an apparatus, in a sense, to both instigate and entangle certain issues. I also suggested going to the villages as a means of moving from a place, thereby creating a process wherein a presentation happened in a very real way. I realised then that a onetime visit or few-day event wouldn't suffice. There are a lot of places and, by going to them though work, I learnt a lot about the villages and rural areas in the context of what remains of Palestine.

From there, I started to get involved with the nature of what we were doing and what we were learning. There was, admittedly, a concern that the project, RIWAQ, risked becoming a purely art event. When I was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale in 2009, I asked if RIWAQ wanted to be part of that show, which was, on my part, an attempt to understand what a biennial can be and what it can accommodate. We cannot represent ourselves as a nation, but we can present ourselves as a biennial. Around that time, it also became an institutional 'burden' of sorts, inasmuch as my own practice became more and more institutionalised in administrative processes concerning fundraising and so forth. I wanted to avoid that. Even though the 5th Riwaq Biennale was the last one, the biennial continues. To me, it has an agency: it is an apparatus – like a museum, like a painting, like a sculpture, like a container.

AD: I was considering two further elements here: how the apparatus of the 'art world' can generate momentum around cultural heritage and, to that end, how it can be both productive and inclusive. But it can also exclude a lot of people through its discourse, its framing, its objects, its edifices, and its hierarchies. I saw your work at Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace, *Workshopping the 5th Riwaq Biennale* [2014–22], and I was taken by the fact that, to begin with, it mimics the space of HomeWorks and its industrial square windows. It looks like it should exist in the space, that you can readily access it and learn from it. But it nevertheless excludes you from that process: you cannot get into it or sit at the table or be part of that platform. Was that part of the tension you were exploring in that work and more broadly within your practice?

KR: Yes, that is important. Parts of these processes want to mimic a sort of informal setting of education, for example. *Workshopping the 5th Riwaq Biennale*, as an installation, has an actual foundation and is wrapped in glass like a cocoon. There is transparency to it, with all that glass, and you can look at the accumulated archival material contained within it. But there is always this possibility to be physically excluded from that process. It's also about authority and about deconstructing the structures, as opposed to just destroying them. It's about productively unpicking the structures and seeing what you're left with.

AD: I was very taken by the work *Recovered* [2018], which presents stacked shelves as an art object. They seem functional, but in their collapsed state they're simultaneously dysfunctional. They reminded me of a minimalist gesture, like a Donald Judd sculpture, but with more political and social resonance. I wanted to consider *Recovered* in relation to your latest project, *On what grounds* [2022], and how they both communicate ideas that include the apparatuses of mapping and how you often auto-curate the relationships between your works over time.

KR: Recovered is actually one of my favourite new works. To me, what's present is not what's on the shelves, but what could be on the shelves or what is not on the shelves. This works in a similar way to Acampamento Villa Nova Palestina [2017], where the human figure is cut out, and yet, despite its absence, it's very present. Recovered is, in part, about this memorialisation of that which is not. Also, for On what grounds, I like to refer to the 'remains' and the 'remaining' that this project evokes. I had to go back to very simple things, like drawing, with this project. The most basic way to do architectural drawing is by completing a floor plan. You document, or you design, a floor plan, and the drawings refer to horizontal or vertical sectional elements of a space. In On what grounds, the ground is made of traditional tiles that no longer present traditional patterns. Instead, they present segments of rooms that mimic floor-plan drawings. The new patterns are almost like archiving or documenting what is no longer there, the actual rooms or what is about to be there. The handmade woven rugs in *On* what grounds are also presented like site plans. The installation engages with the cartography of a certain geography; yet it is not necessarily about Palestinian villages or houses, but the prototypes of these things. This notion of the prototype is important for me because it relates to the structure of the museum and the structure of the biennial. The floor plans, data, maps, surveys - these were things that I've been involved with through my interest in architecture are the elements I needed to consider in producing various institutional projects. The Riwaq Biennale is also an archive, in a sense - maybe an unfinished archive or a possible archive or a potential archive. The same way that the PMNHH has future potential in its growing collection.

AD: If you think about those floor plans, they are mappings on one level but they are also projections into the future that engage the apparatus of representation in order to explore potentiality. And this is not about fixing anything, it's about opening up a space within which that potentiality can come into being, or at least suggest a horizon to which we can look to understand the present.

KR: It has a lot to do with that. In a sense, it's a kind of liberation. For me, this is where the museum, the biennial and other projects come together to embody potential. It's like finding a way of living in the present.





- Dialogues of Peace was a group exhibition curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg on the invitation of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the United Nations in 1995.
- 2 Khalil Rabah's survey exhibition, What is Not, was on view at Sharjah Art Foundation from 4 March to 4 July 2022.
- 3 The Future of Ethnographic Collection (1995–2002) is an assemblage of various works produced in the 1990s.
- 4 RIWAQ is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organisation established in 1991 in Ramallah, Palestine.
- 5 A trained architect, Khalil Rabah worked as researcher with the Riwaq Centre and later as the initiator and artistic director of the Riwag Biennale (2005-ongoing). The project 50,320 Names (2006) was made in response to a survey of 420 villages across Palestine, undertaken from 1994 to 2003 by the Riwaq Centre. This survey documented the structures of 50,320 heritage houses and buildings, each named after its long-term residents in the documents of ownership. This provided valuable data for the conservation and rehabilitation of historic centres; however, the names of these houses could not be used in any official documentation because these were not interchangeable with actual proof of ownership.
- 6 Workshopping the 5th Riwaq Biennale was Rabah's project for Setups/Situations/
 Institutions, the Home Workspace Program hosted by Askhal Alwan in Beirut in 2014–15. For further information, see: https://ashkalalwan.org/program. php?category=3&id=15.

TULIPS IN PALESTINE
2006
PLASTIC TULIPS IN VARIOUS
LOCATIONS ACROSS PALESTINE
INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHS
PP 325, 327

