

**THERE IS NOTHING IN THIS  
WORLD AS INVISIBLE  
AS A MONUMENT.<sup>1</sup>**

ROBERT MUSIL

**WHEN WE NAME AN EVENT,  
CALLING IT FIRE, WE SPEAK  
PROLEPTICALLY; WE DO NOT  
NAME AN IMMEDIATE EVENT;  
THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE. WE EMPLOY  
A TERM OF DISCOURSE; WE  
INVOKE A MEANING, NAMELY,  
THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCE  
OF THE EXISTENCE.<sup>2</sup>**

JOHN DEWEY

# **FALLING FORWARD: SPECULATIVE PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONAL REALISATIONS**

ANTHONY DOWNEY

My first encounter with *After 12 Years* (1995–2008), a project installed by Khalil Rabah at Bluecoat gallery as part of the 2008 Liverpool Biennial, was a discombobulating experience. As an exhibition, complete with vitrines, wall texts, captions and a twenty-four-page newsletter, the installation presented a legal case that related to a series of events, all of which had begun some years previously when, in 1995, Rabah dug up five olive trees from the red-clay-based soil – known as ‘terra rossa’ – that surrounds Ramallah. These trees were subsequently replanted in the park that houses the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). Initially featured in an exhibition that commemorated fifty years of the United Nations (UN) as an organisation, the trees were intended as symbols of peace and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup> However, as we duly learn from the official newsletter that accompanied *After 12 Years*, they were later removed, unbeknownst to the artist, and most likely – except for one tree that ended up in the Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Geneva – destroyed.

The disappearance of these olive trees, it seems, was largely credited to protests made on behalf of the Israeli delegation, which raised objections on the grounds that they did not want Palestine to be represented at the UN.<sup>4</sup> Proposing that the trees in question had a legal right to be granted Swiss citizenship, the case contained within *After 12 Years* is based on a directive in Swiss law that states the following: if ‘after 12 years residence, all relevant criteria are met then individuals have the right to apply for and can be granted Swiss citizenship’.<sup>5</sup> However improbable this proposal may seem, the dislocated plight of the trees in question effectively presented an opportunity to petition for the legal right of the trees – under stated laws of naturalisation – to be granted Swiss citizenship.

As a project, *After 12 Years* intervenes with multiple issues and ongoing concerns – including, but not limited to, displacement, citizenship, asylum and exile – that leverage, in turn, the apparatuses of the art world. These structures include institutions (museums, biennials and cultural organisations), critical frameworks (newsletters and arts journals), models of engagement (education programmes and talks) and, more broadly, the exhibition-like infrastructures and contrivances of display. Presented in the style of a subdivision, or ‘department’, of *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind (PMNHH; 2005–ongoing)*, the legal-case-cum-standalone-artwork contained within *After 12 Years* raises numerous concerns related to the facts of violent deracination. This is all the more evident when we consider the historic and symbolic contexts of forced displacement in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Despite the purported intentions of the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords to propel the peace process forward and provide for the meaningful expansion of self-rule, systematic forms of dislocation across Palestine have continued to this day.<sup>7</sup> Framed in the style of an end-of-year report itemising ongoing activities, successes, failures and longer-term ambitions, the presentation of ‘evidence’ here engenders these and other concerns. Our engagement with the project thereafter, becomes both more particular and, indeed, more expansive: Can the apparatuses of art-making and its



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institutions be deployed as viable means to gain critical purchase – legal or otherwise – on the conditions of forced displacement and historical emergency?

Rabah’s self-reflexive enquiries, I will suggest throughout what follows, are intentionally complicated by their presentation in contemporary art institutions and affiliated events. To the extent that the art world is an apparatus, complete with artefacts, curatorial remits, international markets, critical networks and pedagogical associations, projects like *After 12 Years* engage such mechanisms to pursue political, social and historical debates. From the oscillating shifts in the mise-en-scène of the art world’s apparatuses – that is, their institutional and discursive markers of authority – to the mise en abyme of international legal discourse and the politics of dispossession, we encounter here the historical ruptures and political fractures that exist in any discussion of the traumatic forces that underwrite the violence of forced displacement. What does it mean, we therefore need to ask, when an artist promotes a legal case, a museum or a biennial – or, for that matter, a design agency or national airline, all being projects that Rabah has initiated – that critically examines the historical legacy and complexities of displacement from *within* nominative institutional structures? How do we accordingly respond *to* and position ourselves *within* such structures? What happens, specifically, when an artist’s output generates mimetic and performative organisational structures, drawn from the display and institutional apparatuses of the so-called ‘art world’, to both showcase and critically probe the political and associative value of cultural artefacts and organisations in the context of, in this instance, historical forms of dispossession?

In raising these questions, Rabah’s practice, as we will see, is not an exercise in promoting culture as a sustainable means to engage social, political and historical agency in the face of displacement. Nor, crucially, is it an enthusiastic form of advocacy-cum-artwork that endorses art practices as means to ameliorate the fact of displacement in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, Rabah anticipates, entangles and co-opts – through prototypes of performative mimeticism – the apparatuses of the art world to invoke their authority and simultaneously question their capacity to contend with precisely such questions. Offering, as it does, an apparently practical and realistic methodology for exploring perennial questions around, for example, dispossession, whilst deconstructing the framing devices that articulate such methods, this strategy (needless to say) courts countless risks. It nevertheless also concentrates a series of questions into one overarching investigation: Is it in the face of jeopardy and institutional improbability that we find the emergence of a practice that remains both responsive to the extenuating circumstances of displacement and yet, significantly, resistant to reductive templates of interpretation, compartmentalisation and political platitudes?

### MIMETIC REALITIES AND (PRE)OCCUPIED FUTURES

The events surrounding the removal of the aforementioned olive trees – amply evidenced throughout *After 12 Years* – remain comparatively unfathomable and occasionally lost to the vagaries of time and memory. Promoting an investigation into the concomitant questions of citizenship and naturalisation, the project offers a prototype of sorts for preserving, cataloguing and archiving the legal rights of plants *and* for articulating the parameters that frame the rights of citizens and communities, displaced or otherwise. The explicit parallels here with the withdrawal of rights (for the trees) and the absence of the legal ‘right to return’ (for Palestinians) are, of course, fully intended.<sup>9</sup> To this end, the performative legal authority that underwrites *After 12 Years* insists on the symbolic context of olive trees in Palestine and what they stand for: the autochthonous rootedness of a population that, like the drought-resistant olive tree, has remained resilient in the face of ongoing dislocation since the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> The confirmation of the reasons behind the destruction of the trees, intentional or otherwise, nevertheless remains at best circumstantial: Was this *just* an oversight or a case of shoddy mismanagement? Or was it a politically motivated, mean-spirited removal of otherwise blameless trees? Moreover, does their disappearance – given that they are natural objects that symbolise endurance – metonymically call to mind the blatant and continued contraventions of international law in the case of Palestine?<sup>11</sup>

The mandate that underwrites the case presented in *After 12 Years* – its escalation from a grievance suffered by the incidental loss of some olive trees to an international legal petition – relies in large part on the expert mimicking and expansion of an apparatus that has its foundational function in the museum-like display mechanisms of the art world. To this end, we need to observe that Rabah’s deployment of mimicry – the mimetic co-opting of the apparatuses of the art world – is a highly complex process. It suggests, in the first instance, the usurpation of the voice of the other: mimicry is associated with the deflation, through often dialogic and carnivalesque forms of ridicule, of the authority associated with the mimicked voice.<sup>12</sup> As an act of extended enunciation, it involves a destabilising practice of doubling and estrangement insofar as – through invariably mischievous echolocation – it locates, duplicates and dislocates the original vocal event. Ventriloquised by the mimic’s own voice, the sovereign voice (of the other) is co-opted and simultaneously elided through the duplicitous force of repetition. In its foregrounding and obfuscation of the other’s voice, the mimetic function is, nonetheless, explicitly not *just* about questioning authority; it is about short-circuiting, adapting and rerouting authority, all acts that remain key to understanding Rabah’s practice.



**AFTER 12 YEARS  
EVIDENCE OBJECTS CASE**



**AFTER 12 YEARS  
INSTALLATION VIEW**

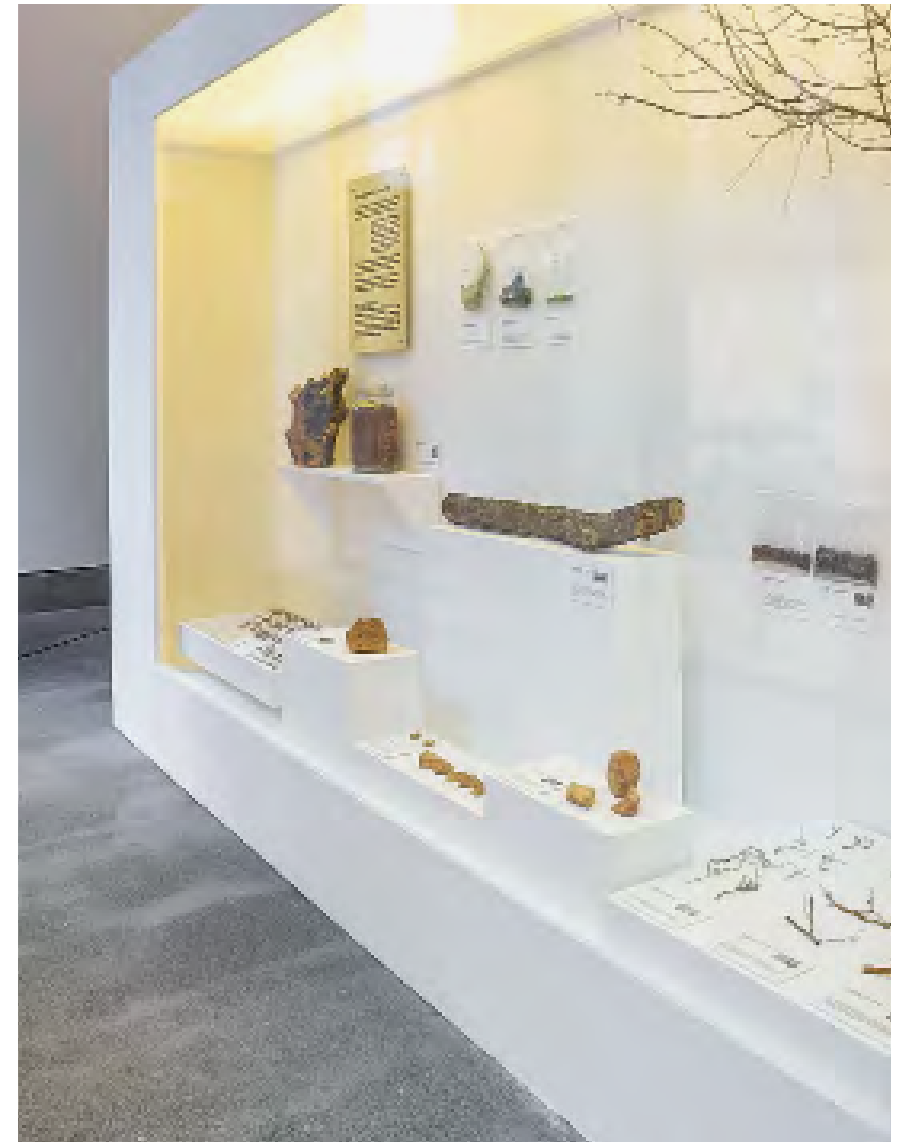
To comprehend this more fully, we could observe here the degree to which, in evolutionary biology, mimicry denotes an event that is exemplified by a superficial resemblance between two elements, biological and natural, that are fundamentally unrelated in taxonomic terms: one element takes on the appearance of another in order to survive within a given (invariably hostile) environment. It is tempting to allude to the role of camouflage here – or, indeed, the chameleon-like gesture that internalises the spectacle (display) of an object to avoid detection – and how Rabah’s practice repeatedly substantiates its presence under the cover of more formal institutional standards of display. We should also keep in mind here a significant, if not organisational, feature of the mimetic function that remains crucial throughout *After 12 Years* and a number of Rabah’s other works: mimicry is always hypersensitive to its social, cultural and political milieu. It is not only contingent on localised factors for the form that it ultimately assumes, it is performatively attuned to and in tune with the urgencies of respective historical epochs. Operating as a means to engender an event or frame a speculative artwork, the mimetic impulse in works as diverse as *After 12 Years*, the *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction* (2004) and *The United States of Palestine Airlines (USPA)* (2007–ongoing), as we will see, operates from within and responds to historical contingencies, nowhere more so than when we consider the absence of internationally recognised legal rights that can address the injustice of deracination.

With these ambitions in mind, *After 12 Years* remains a convincing institutional statement of an apparently objective fact: the olive trees, for whatever reason, disappeared and were probably destroyed. The case for reparation, made from *within* and based *upon* the apparatus of artistic production, intersects with the socio-politics of a suspended statehood and the absence of national self-determination. The evidence has been compiled, itemised, displayed and disseminated, but – in spite of their symbolic standing and historical affect as natural objects – the case in question obviously has more to it than the fate of some trees, regardless of their importance. Do the boxes stacked on shelves in *After 12 Years* actually contain ‘evidence’, and does it indeed matter whether or not they do? This is another way of asking whether the case for reparation – or the ‘right to return’ – could be brought before a court of law, international or otherwise, when the observable fact of displacement and the continued acceptance of rights violations have become the norm rather than the exception. Which rights can an artwork or institution effect when, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, the historical rights on offer to displaced communities appear to be the de facto rights of the *right-less* – a mere sop, at best, to international sentiment and political expediencies?<sup>13</sup>

Complete with its ‘evidence’ of cultural (if not arboreal) malfeasance, the formal display of *After 12 Years* gives credibility to the adversarial ambitions at work throughout this project and others, including the *PMNHH*. The pres-

entation of gathered artefacts and objects conspires to endorse the veracity and material realities of the ‘proof’ presented before us. The deployment of shelves, as we see in later works such as *Recovered* (2018), which consists of stacked shelves, and the quasi-platform for the project *Workshopping the 5th Riwaq Biennale* (2014–22), the latter being a series of inaccessible workstations, stage their presence as actual constructs. Insinuating their display mechanisms (*infra-structures*) into the edifices of a museum or an organisation (*ultra-structures*), they are mimetic assemblies that both fit within and yet disrupt the broader apparatuses of the art world. This uneasy fit produces an intervention that raises questions about both the institutional context and the armature of performative mimicry. In foregrounding the actual display mechanisms – shelves, workstations, computers, vitrines – as objects of consideration in their own right, this apparent transparency merely serves to complicate matters further. Drawing attention to the fact of artifice and performance, and their overt and blatant display as *infra-structures*, the strategic appropriation of an object (shelving) or event (workshop) effectively questions its constitutional status (as an object and/or event) and its *de facto* authority as an institutional artefact.

This returns to us an earlier point: in order to question configurations of power and authority, mimicry is an insistent process of deconstructing, adapting and rerouting, rather than solely adopting, aspects of institutional agency. The mimetic impetus of Rabah’s practice has a dual function: it generates an uncanny reality – the ‘display’ or ‘exhibition’ – in which the overdetermined markers of institutional command are presented as a means to provoke, if not rebuke, questions surrounding cultural dominion and curatorial agency. An emerging institution, a Palestinian museum, for example, throws into the relief the absence – largely due to displacement, dispossession and the absence of legal representation and self-determination – of such institutions and the lack of social, political and economic foundations to support such structures. As a speculative institution, the nascent realities of the *PMNHH* stage a performative enquiry into what possible form – under the conditions of political, social and historical uncertainty – an actual museum could assume. These ambits of the mimetic function reveal here, in part, a fundamental strategic gambit in Rabah’s practice: the performative adoption of an art institution – a museum or a biennial, or the accoutrements of a semi-official workshop – can adapt, through the mimetic function, the very agency of such *ultra-structures* in order to summon them into being *for real*, so to speak. Such developments can generate a heuristic minefield, inasmuch as mimicry, in these instances, can embrace and implement the operative authority of an institution both to bring it into being and to question its apparent realities as an (absent) organisational structure.



**AFTER 12 YEARS  
EVIDENCE CASE**



**AFTER 12 YEARS  
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To the degree that Rabah's mimetically inclined practices question institutional realities and the display mechanisms of the so-called 'art world', they also give rise to the all-too-real, fully functioning and viable institution. This was the case with the internationally renowned Riwaq Biennale, which was conceived and launched by Rabah in 2005. Rendered in formal contexts that are sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of respective historical eras and socio-political contexts, the mimetic performance of a nominated institution such as the Riwaq Biennale – or, for that matter, the *PMNHH* – ensures its impending reality through a series of feints, schemes and stratagems. Consider this: in 2003, the nominal inauguration date for the *PMNHH* (although a number of works that now compose the overall project predate that), there was no national museum in Palestine. This, in turn, begs the question: To what extent did Rabah's project proleptically predict – through the functioning of mimetic projection – the manifestation of such an institution in all but name?

If we consider that the historical absence of a Palestinian museum, in retrospect, spoke to the absence of national self-determination, at least in part, we must also allude to the overt perils of overidentification, not least when we consider how the ambitions of statehood – that is, the understandable longing for self-determination – can co-opt cultural practices into a process that ensures they inevitably respond, in the eyes of curators, critics and other cultural professionals, to the absence of nationhood. In this framework, cultural practice invariably catalogues the turmoil and vagaries of living in an occupied territory and, thereafter, reflects upon the state of inhabiting a non-realised political, social, and economic form of autonomy. Intentionally or otherwise, culture can be reduced in this schema to agitprop and denuded of its speculative potential to reframe and expand upon a political imaginary that can potentially recalibrate the relationship of cultural practice to history. Questioning the very logic of promoting art as a means to engage such concerns, Rabah's practice pushes at the conceptual boundaries that inform current debates about how the apparatus of art – its institutions, practices, discourses, networks – responds to national, historical and contemporary states of emergency.

The proleptic calling into being of a museum, the performative anticipation of a future event as if it already exists, suggests a latent potential in the stratagem of proposing, however mimetically or hypothetically, the artifice of a foundational institution and its viability as a sustainable national, if not international, project.<sup>14</sup> We return here to the questions raised about the mimetic functioning of art practices that leverage institutional – and, occasionally, legal – and national infrastructures, and how they can, in their fusion with the networked apparatuses of an international art world, question political, cultural and social agency *and* the logic of such systems. These interventions lack certitude, for sure, but they do not lack conviction: as mechanisms for engaging the complexities of displacement and the legacies of dispossession,

Rabah's projects ask whether practice can effectively garner purchase on the complexities of history and, crucially, the realities of a potentially (pre)occupied future. Is the sphere of art as a practice a viable means to pursue such questions? Or does it merely throw into sharper relief the pitfalls of utilising cultural practices to motivate political debate?

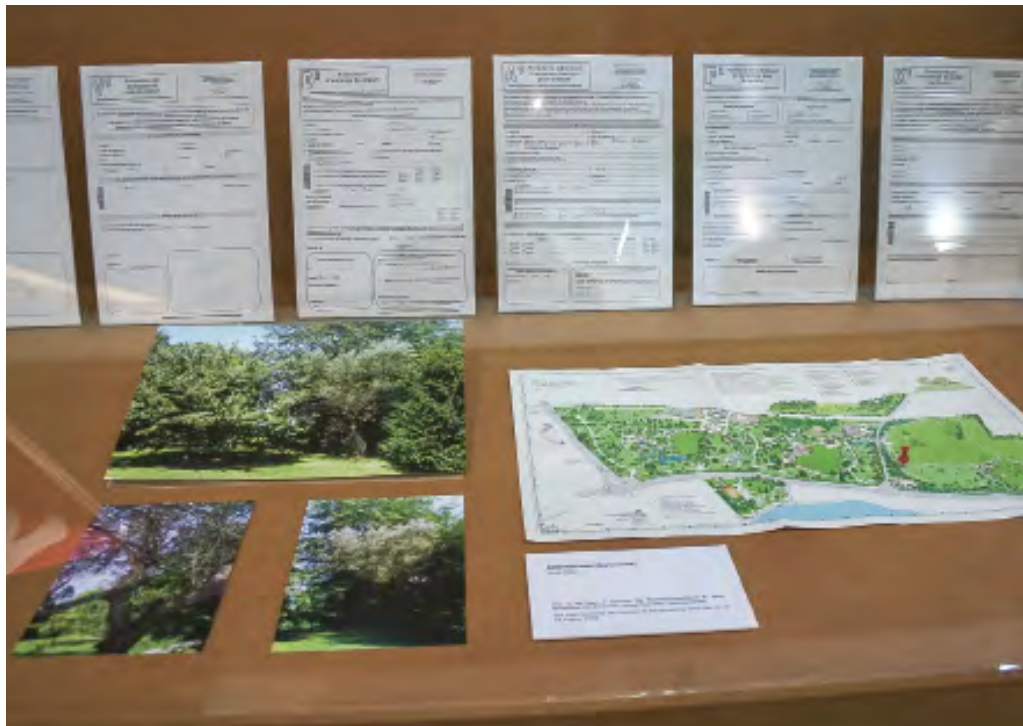
### THE ART WORLD AS (PRODUCTIVE) APPARATUS

A system of production that involves organisational structures, management systems, legal practices, vested interests – be they private, semi-official or national – and procedures of governance, the art world is an apparatus that has long defined what can and, perhaps more importantly, what cannot be achieved through visual culture and its practices. The economies of scale involved in its global enterprises ensure that, as a discursive and material ideal, the art world can give momentum to ideas and projects that would be deemed too scandalous, if not politically sensitive, for consideration.<sup>15</sup> Throughout this nexus, the combined roles of artists, critics, collectors, curators, editors and other agents are imbricated within structures – museums, periodicals, galleries, academies, auction houses, biennials, and so forth – that underwrite an expanded ideal of the art world as a model of production, distribution and consumption. To this end, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, an apparatus, such as that which supports and produces the economies of institutional practice, can reveal a network that draws upon 'discourses, institutions, buildings...to create a concrete strategic function [that] is always located in a power relation'.<sup>16</sup> Aware of such relations of power and what they bring to the fore (in particular, how the apparatus of the art world reveals conditions of historical power relations and influence), Rabah's practice generates its own epistemological realities and systems of generative, if not provocative, knowledge. In producing events and artefacts, it is a practice that can identify the power relations in operation at a given moment in time and how, in the context of the art world, they confer authority to certain ideas and debates – or, perhaps more crucially, delegitimise certain claims and statements.

When we examine the productive context of an apparatus, the extent to which it can create a 'concrete strategic function' that reveals *already existing* power relations, we can see how projects such as the *PMNHH* function across multiple registers. These include, but are not limited to, the production of a 'truth' value – or a claim on a given reality, however tentative it may be – that is associated with forms of legal, cultural, political and historical redress. How, we might want to ask, could an adequate claim for political representation and agency be made from within cultural practices? If we consider the violence of forced displacement and the intergenerational trauma associated



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with the loss of a homeland, the desolations of colonisation, and the ongoing indignities associated with partial self-rule, what form could such a claim take today in legal, political or cultural discourses? Despite ongoing forced displacement, illegal occupation, rampant discrimination and the territorialisation – if not terrorisation – of communities under conditions of hyper-surveillance, what political, moral and legislative capacity exists today to hear such evidence regarding the Occupied Palestinian Territories?

With these points in mind, we could enquire here into whether *After 12 Years*, in rehearsing its case, albeit an idiosyncratic one, for reparation, performs the levels of frustration, if not downright despair, associated with repeated attempts to seek redress for dispossession and displacement. If we do pursue this understanding of the operative logic of such a project, we nevertheless need to state clearly that this is neither a defeatist gesture nor a disingenuous ploy: considered from within the power relations that exist amongst the infrastructures and networks of the so-called ‘art world’, the *productive* context of such projects is produced from *within* the emergencies of a given historical moment and in direct response to such an ‘urgency’ or ‘urgent need’.<sup>17</sup> This is to recall, as outlined by Agamben, another definition of the apparatus and its function: ‘what is at stake here [in an apparatus] is not a particular term that refers to this or that technology of power [but a] set of practices and mechanisms...that aim to face an *urgent need* and to obtain an effect that is more or less immediate’.<sup>18</sup> The failure of ongoing efforts to find a commensurate level of compensation and reconciliation arguably calls forth here a practice, as evidenced throughout Rabah’s projects, that can respond, without fanfare, accusation or overdetermination, to the international abnegation of a fitting response to ongoing deracination.

As in the case of the mimetic impulse, apparatuses are, crucially, sensitive to their milieu, extrapolating their efficacy as a mechanism of power from within a given historical urgency. Utilising the apparatuses of the art world, including research, artefacts, vitrines, newsletters, captions, ‘collections’, archives, design and display methodologies, methods of knowledge production and transfer, documentary and museum-inclined affect, auto-curation and allegorical forms of authenticity, Rabah’s interventions summon realities from within such relations of power. Again, it is the productive functioning of the art apparatus – that is, the discursive, epistemological, critical, theoretical, institutional and political structures – that can potentially provoke a reality and bring it into being *through* mimesis. It is therefore no coincidence that Rabah chose the paradigm of an auction, the apex of the art world’s speculative systems of power and capital, to assemble a performative event at the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah in 2004. Despite the fact that the first and second iterations had yet to occur, the *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction* was a live event that auctioned artefacts – uprooted trees, the debris of hous-



es, barbed wire and building materials – produced from the residual rubble that resulted from the building of the so-called ‘partition’ or ‘barrier’ wall that quarters Palestine.<sup>19</sup> The barrier wall, which was begun in 1994, was and remains contentious and – according to the International Court of Justice – qualifies as a violation of international law.<sup>20</sup>

Recalling the mimetic function apparent in other works, the verisimilitude of Rabah’s auction on the evening in question produced a considerable degree of confusion as to whether – complete as it was with actual lots and bids – it was ‘real’ or not. Some participants bid on items in the hope of receiving them, whilst others bid as a gesture. Such confusion was further augmented by the fact that the audience (the buyers) could not see the objects (the consignments), as these were stored elsewhere in boxes and only ‘accessible’ through a livestream broadcast on a television on the upper floor of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center. Needless to say, the *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction* worked as a provocation, but it also questioned the operative logic of the art world as a system: How, in sum, do objects accrue value, and why? As we saw with mimicry as an event, it is never just about adopting authority; rather, it is about adapting and rerouting its function towards different, often ludic, but nonetheless socially and politically sensitised, ends. Once more, as in *After 12 Years*, the questions of dispossession and displacement are understood from *within* the apparatus of a specific institution and in light of historical and contemporary states of both emergence and emergency.

## ARCHIVING ARCHIVES

The *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction* and the third edition of the 5th Riwaq Biennale (amongst other projects) mimetically restage an auction and a biennial, respectively, to question their logic and their assumed authority. These projects, as evidenced in their titles, also deconstruct chronological time: Where were the first and second iterations of this apparently annual auction? And where, if at all, did the first and second editions of the 5th Riwaq Biennale take place? The elision of time and chronology suggests an invented tradition that prevails across the context of large-scale projects such as the *PMNHH*. In a move that foregrounds not only chronologies, but the function of archiving such events, these artworks are frequently presented as separate subsections or ‘departments’ of the *PMNHH* or the Riwaq Biennale. This becomes all the more apparent in projects such as *50,320 Names* (2006), which – in a manner similar to the impact of restaging an auction or a legal case – raises significant and recurring questions about how archives function as registers of cultural dispossession.

Displayed in 2007 as part of the *PMNHH* at Brunei Gallery in London, *50,320 Names* is comprised of several discrete components, including a video, book and large-scale photograph of an archive. The latter image of an archive is emphatically *not* an archive; however, it is a symbolic representation of an archival structure. Likewise, Rabah’s *50,320 Names* is not only *not* an archive, it is a discursive reflection on the historical functioning of archives. This is evident in the fact that the basis of this work included an ongoing endeavour by the nongovernmental organisation RIWAQ – which has partnered with Rabah on a number of projects – to record and conserve villages and houses from across Palestine. Between 1994 and 2003, RIWAQ generated a Registry of Historic Buildings from 420 villages in Palestine and, as a result, identified 50,320 heritage houses and buildings in the registry that had been named after their long-term residents.<sup>21</sup> Putting to one side the importance of such an archive as a data source for the conservation of historical buildings in Palestine, this unprecedented undertaking highlighted an ‘anomaly’ of sorts: despite their historically legitimate claims, the 50,320 names affixed to such properties cannot be used in official documents as they are not necessarily interchangeable or commensurate with actual proof of ownership. Given the politics surrounding cadastral surveys and land ownership in Palestine from the late nineteenth century onwards (if not before), this registry of eponymous ownership comes complete with its own archival politics of proprietorship that foregrounds the stark realities involved in conserving the buildings and the contested landscapes of modern-day Palestine.<sup>22</sup>

To the extent that an actual archive exists under the auspices of RIWAQ, which is an authoritative starting point for considering cultural heritage and the ownership of land and property, Rabah’s approach to archiving the archive generates a critical distance of sorts. In projects such as *50,320 Names*, a sense of an interstitial detachment, or an askance view from afar, functions as a commentary on the role of archives produced from within states of emergency: What role, this project asks, does an archive perform in a given setting or historical context that is defined by displacement?<sup>23</sup> This questioning of the archive as material fact becomes more apparent if we consider that the photograph noted above has an oddness to it: the archival infrastructure, the presentation of the literal shelving holding the actual archives – a recurring feature in Rabah’s practice – is placed centre stage as a key component, if not primary element, in this work. Echoing our earlier discussion of *Recovered* and *Workshopping the 5th Riwaq Biennale*, the very sub- or infra-structure that enables the presence of an archive and its organisational principles becomes *the* focal point in the discussion, rather than a latent feature of an archival process.

The archive as a material document is further abstracted when we consider what the broader installation incorporates into its overall presentation: foot-



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age displayed on a nearby monitor shows Rabah reading from a volume with the names of all the families that resided on the properties under consideration as part of RIWAQ's ambition to preserve such buildings. Consisting of 412 pages, with the eponymous 50,320 names included therein, the volume is on display in a nearby dais, which creates another form of double take, or displacement. These recursive gestures can be disconcerting, as noted, but if we allow that the sense of unsettledness, or interpretive anxiety, is generative rather than reductive, we can further engage with a number of key questions: Rather than being fixed records of the past, are archives inevitably future-oriented gestures, or performative processes *in the present*, that seek to project contemporary concerns *into the future*? And if so, are archives, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida, the means by which we respond to and register states of emergency so that we can, in time, assume responsibility for them and hold others to account for the injustices of historical displacement and disenfranchisement?<sup>24</sup> These questions can appear weighty and, given their contexts, rightly so. But what if the 'weight' of history – and the indifference and apathy we associate with the realpolitik of global governance and the self-interests of national sovereignty – can only ever, with discouraging regularity, usurp an effective response to the fact of historical dispossession?



The institutions that platform, support and maintain the art world are robust, often financially independent and, with good reason (given the dubious sources of finance that circulate within its systems), guarded when it comes to issues surrounding transparency, equality and diversity in the art world. Global institutions, as a result of such robustness, can absorb critique – whether in the form of so-called 'institutional critique' or decolonising practices – as a key component of their modus operandi. Critical speculation about art institutions is correspondingly often acknowledged as part of a debate about the utility, function and future of art as a practice. The concern here is that cultural interventions into the political imaginary are reducible to the more generalised preoccupations of a culturally ambitious but politically ineffective art world. In this environment, the avowed determination to impact social and political debate is invariably rendered in terms of gesture, at best, if not a mere alibi for actual engagement. With such points in mind, Rabah's practice consistently proposes a counter-apparatus: a performative, staged, mimetic, overdetermined demonstration of how an artwork can productively engage the politics of dispossession without becoming reduced to the art world's gestural politics of engagement.

As we seek to decolonise knowledge and pluralise epistemological and historical certainties, the function of clandestine interventions such as Rabah's assiduously raises concerns about the boundaries and efficacies of art as an institutional apparatus. Projecting a practice based on strategic intervention and contingency, the institutional permutations, if not convolutions, of framing, exhibition-making and the infrastructures of display could be seen to simultaneously question the value, political or otherwise, of the very apparatuses that the artist deploys. Offering, as Rabah does, the apparently substantive 'proof' of a given reality (a legal case, an archive, a museum, a biennial and so forth), alongside the potential mechanisms to deconstruct the apparatuses supporting such structures, we are left here to decipher whether the apparatus of art – its institutions, practices, discourses, networks – can sustainably respond to historical and contemporary states of emergency. And if so, how can its practices potentially lay claim to (or progressively occupy) the future?

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INSTALLATION VIEW 8<sup>TH</sup>  
LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL, 2008  
COURTESY OF LIVERPOOL  
BIENNIAL

- 1 Robert Musil, 'Monuments', in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. P. Worsman (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1987), 61.
- 2 John Dewey, *Experience and Nature in the Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 1 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925), 150.
- 3 The group exhibition *Dialogues of Peace*, held from 3 July to 24 October 1995, featured works installed at various sites in the United Nations Office in Geneva, Switzerland. It was 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.
- 4 Since 2012, Palestine has had the status of a 'non-member observer state' in the United Nations. The State of Palestine is recognised by 138 of the 193 UN members.
- 5 *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind Newsletter*, ed. Nicola Gray, Autumn–Winter 2008, 6–7.
- 6 For a concise account of the nomenclature of displacement as it relates to Palestine today, see Jamil Hilal, 'Rethinking Palestine: Settler-Colonialism, Neo-Liberalism and Individualism in the West Bank and Gaza Strip', *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July–September 2015), 351–62.
- 7 The Oslo Accords are two consecutive agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) that were signed in Washington, D.C., in 1993, and in Taba, Egypt, in 1995. They have since become a source of much concern and critique insofar as the 1993 Oslo I Accord involved the de facto partitioning of Palestine into three areas: A (under Palestinian Authority control), B (under joint Israeli and Palestinian Authority control) and C (under Israeli control).
- 8 Employed to define the territories of the former British Mandate for Palestine, the term 'Palestinian territories' refers to land occupied by Israel since the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. This includes the West Bank (along with East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) commonly refers to the West Bank, again including East Jerusalem, as 'the Occupied Palestinian Territory' and, as of its advisory opinion of July 2004, the term has been adopted as a legal definition by the ICJ. The designated term 'Occupied Palestinian Territory', or 'OPT', is likewise used by the ICJ, the European Union and the United Nations – alongside, in the case of the latter, the State of Palestine – to refer to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967.
- 9 The issue of the 'right of return' for Palestinians stems from the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, when approximately 750,000 Palestinians were displaced and became refugees. As early as 11 December 1948, under its General Assembly resolution 194 (III), the United Nations stated that Palestinian refugees 'wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible'. *Proceedings of the 178th United National Plenary Meeting*, 11 December (1948), 21–24. A facsimile copy of the original United Nations resolution 194 (III) and its broader context can be found here: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/ip-ares-194.php>.
- 10 For contemporary details regarding the impact of displacement and Israeli settler expansion in Palestine, see 'Settlement Expansion Fuelling Violence in Occupied Palestinian Territory, Middle East Peace Process Special Coordinator Warns Security Council', *United Nations Security Council Meeting 14836*, 22 March 2022. The full UN report is available here: <https://press.un.org/en/2022/scl4836.doc.htm>.
- 11 To date, a series of United Nations resolutions has been issued to the effect that Israeli settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, initiated in 1967 but still proliferating, are in violation of international law. An overview of such violations, as they pertain to illegal settlements, is outlined in UN Security Council resolutions issued in 1979, 1980 and 2016, respectively. The latter declaration reaffirms – under the aegis of UN Security Council resolution 2334 – that 'Israel's establishment of settlements in

- Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, had no legal validity, constituting a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the vision of two States living side-by-side in peace and security, within internationally recognized borders'. See: *United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, Proceedings of the 7853rd meeting of the United Nations Security Council*, 23 December 2016. The full document is available here: <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>. See also Ilan Pappé, *The Biggest Prison on Earth: A History of the Occupied Territories* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017), 198–212.
- 12 For fuller discussions of how the act of enunciation operates regarding mimicry, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).
- 13 'The calamity of the rightless', Arendt argues, 'is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion – formulas which were designed to solve problems within given communities – but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever'. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt: New York, 1994; orig. 1951), 299 and 295–96. For an extended discussion of how these 'states of exception' are interpreted through cultural practices, see Anthony Downey, 'Exemplary Subjects: Camps and the Politics of Representation', in *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Tom Frost (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 119–42.
- 14 As we will see in Chiara De Cesari's contribution to the present volume pp. 215–239, this anticipatory logic is key to Rabah's practice. See also De Cesari, 'Anticipatory Representation: Building the Palestinian Nation(-State) through Artistic Performance', in *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12/1 (2012): 82–100.
- 15 The question of Palestine and the politics of representation, at the time of writing, were very much at the forefront of

- debates surrounding antisemitism and anti-Palestinian racism in the context of documenta 15 (2022), which was curated by Jakarta-based artist collective ruangrupa. See the group's statement in 'Antisemitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor', *e-flux*, 7 May 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/467337/antisemitism-accusations-against-documenta-a-scandal-about-a-rumor>.
- 16 Agamben further observes that apparatuses 'always imply a process of subjectification, that is to say, *they must produce their subject*'. See Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11 (emphasis added).
- 17 It is important here to note the extent to which Agamben draws upon and extends Michel Foucault's theorisation of the apparatus (*dispositif*). For Foucault, the apparatus 'is the system of relations that can be established between these heterogeneous elements... Thus, a particular discourse can figure at one time or another as the programme of an institution, and at another it can function as a means of justifying or *masking a practice* which itself remains silent, or as a secondary re-interpretation of this practice, opening out for it a new field of rationality... [It is a] formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*'. See Michel Foucault, 'Confessions of the Flesh', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), 194–95.
- 18 Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?', op cit., 3 and 6–8; emphasis added.
- 19 By 2004, when the *3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction* was held, a Human Rights Watch report stated that 'the barrier imposes arbitrary and excessive restrictions on the freedom of movement of tens of thousands of Palestinians and violates Israel's obligation under the Geneva Conventions to ensure the welfare of the population under occupation'. See 'Israel: West Bank Barrier Violates Human Rights', Human Rights Watch, 22 February 2004, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2004/02/22/israel->

- west-bank-barrier-violates-human-rights.
- 20 On 9 July 2004, the International Court of Justice, that is, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, found that 'the construction by Israel of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its associated régime are contrary to international law'. See 'Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory', International Court of Justice, 9 July 2004, [https://web.archive.org/web/20040902090629/http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/ipresscom/ipress2004/ipresscom2004-28\\_mwp\\_20040709.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20040902090629/http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/ipresscom/ipress2004/ipresscom2004-28_mwp_20040709.htm). The wall has often been cited as an example of an apartheid structure at work in Palestine. See 'A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution', Human Rights Watch, 27 April 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>. See also 'Israel's Apartheid against Palestinians: A Cruel System of Domination and a Crime against Humanity', *Amnesty International*, 1 February 2022, accessed 1 February 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>
- 21 RIWAQ is a nongovernmental, non-profit organisation established in 1991 in Ramallah, Palestine. It mainly focusses on preserving the cultural and natural heritage in Palestine through projects that involve the restoration, regeneration and documentation of villages and houses. For a discussion of Rabah's projects with RIWAQ, see Tom Holert, 'The Riwaq Biennale as Antinomy: Khalil Rabah and the Knowledge Politics of Cultural Heritage', in the present volume pp. 475–488.
- 22 Cadastral surveys relate to land recordings of real estate or the boundaries of a country. Often referenced to determine property rights, these surveys have been used to settle disputes and lawsuits between landowners. Originally compiled for purposes of taxation, an early example of cadastral surveying in England would be the Domesday Book, produced in 1086,

- which sought to determine taxes owed to the Crown based on land ownership. Apart from ownership of land, cadastral surveys are also concerned with land usage and, crucially in the contexts being addressed here, the occupancy of a land or territory. See Dov Gavish, *The Survey of Palestine under the British Mandate, 1920–1948* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), passim. See also Dov Gavish, 'An Account of an Unrealized Aerial Cadastral Survey in Palestine under the British Mandate', *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 153, no. 1 (March 1987): 93–98. I am grateful to Heba Y. Amin for drawing my attention to these sources.
- 23 For a nuanced reading of archival production under conditions of emergency, see Lara Khaldi, 'The Impossible Museum', in *Off(f) Our Times: Curatorial Anachronics*, ed. Rike Frank and Beatrice von Bismarck (Berlin and London: Sternberg Press, 2019), 188–92.
- 24 '[T]he question of the archive', Derrida writes, 'is not...a question of the past... It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow'. See, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36; emphasis added.