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A Gathering Place for Objects That Have No Place: Nour Bishouty's 1-130

'An object is a construction of the mind, sometimes with physical extensions', writes Nour Bishouty in her artist book *1-130: Selected works Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan* (2020). It could be the self-reflexive aphorism of a conceptually minded artist, or a diasporic meditation on loss — or, in Bishouty's case, both. In *1-130*, the Toronto-based artist evokes a constellation of absent objects, places, and people related to her late father, Ghassan Bishouty, a little-known artist who lived in Lebanon and Jordan after being displaced from Palestine in 1948. (The book's title enumerates the paintings, drawings, and sculptures selected and photographed by Nour.) *1-130* serves as an archive for an artist whose life was uprooted twice, by the Palestinian nakba and the Lebanese civil war, a reparative gesture of gathering in one place the pieces of a life scattered.

Achille Mbembe (2002, 22) has characterized the archive, ambivalently, as a 'struggle against the fragments of life being dispersed.' In the context of state archives, and museums rooted in colonialism, such centralization subdues unauthorized histories and unruly memories. But amid the ongoing deracination of Palestinian life, assembling errant objects restores continuity to personal and communal identity. By gathering her father's art, using certain recognized archival procedures, Bishouty lends it a degree of visibility and order. At the same time, she unsettles museological conventions and permeates her father's artworks and ephemera with her own acts of collage, ekphrasis, and storytelling. Her book obliquely reconstructs her father's work — and her relationship to it — through an array of forms and media, narrating his life in lists, anecdotes, poetic fragments, family photos, newspaper clippings, and video stills.

Among the ephemera Bishouty reproduces are everyday notes handwritten by her father. One of these, featuring directions for where to buy rubber above a sketch of a mosque, grabbed my eye: it includes my own family name, written in Arabic. The corner my grandfather's store occupied in Beirut's Furn El-Chebbak neighborhood was known by his name, and landmarks, not street addresses, orient Beirut's residents. This chance materialization of our families' partially overlapping trajectories infused our conversation on displacement, memory, archives, and Palestine — presented below in abridged and lightly edited form — with a personal significance amplified by the emotions recent events in Palestine have stirred.

Kareem Estefan (KE): How did this book begin for you?

Nour Bishouty (NB): *1-130* is part of an extended multimedia project in which I engage the artistic oeuvre and personal archives of my late father, Ghassan Bishouty, an artist largely obscure during his lifetime. My initial motivation was perhaps an instinctive desire to commemorate my father, to take care

of his work. But it was also clear to me that within that intimate act of commemoration there were other insistent questions to be asked, pertaining to obscurity and visibility, and cultural discourses on memory, trauma, and marginalized identities.

KE: What does it mean for you to take care of your father's work, in terms of your relationship with him, and with regard to the cultural memory of a Palestinian artist?

NB: My father dedicated his life to his artistic practice. He amassed a considerable oeuvre, first in Lebanon, where he lived after his family was expelled from their home in Safad in 1948, and then in Jordan, after fleeing the Lebanese civil war. Yet as an artist he was largely unknown.

The question of cultural memory is central to my work. I am particularly interested in thinking through the personal and collective circumstances, including but not limited to his experiences of war, injury, and displacement, within which his practice developed — and was obscured. So the sense of duty I feel is multifaceted: on the one hand, it is about preserving a collective cultural heritage that is constantly disappearing, and on the other, it is about excavating narratives from the materialities and histories of my father's personal belongings, his tools, notes, and sketches. Objects acquire a different weight and meaning when a person dies.

KE: You're working with a personal archive in a poetic way, even as you adopt certain institutional archival protocols. The precise index in your book's title, for example, proves to be misleading. Can you speak to this tension, and how you engage museum practices with this personal — or *interpersonal* — archive?

NB: Many of the book's ideas and forms emerged from the act of archiving. Although my aim was not to create an official archive, I was generating systems that mimicked the practices of institutional collections: sorting, categorizing, indexing, storing, and of course, evaluating and canonizing objects. But I use that institutional language to question its validity and push its boundaries. The book cover is designed with front and back full-page flaps housing an index of 130 artworks represented in thumbnail images. The presence of an index invites a process of referencing, but unlike a 'real' index, there's an erratic drift here. You have to ask yourself what this or that item in the index is pointing to and see what arises in the process of moving from the index to an uncertain reference point.

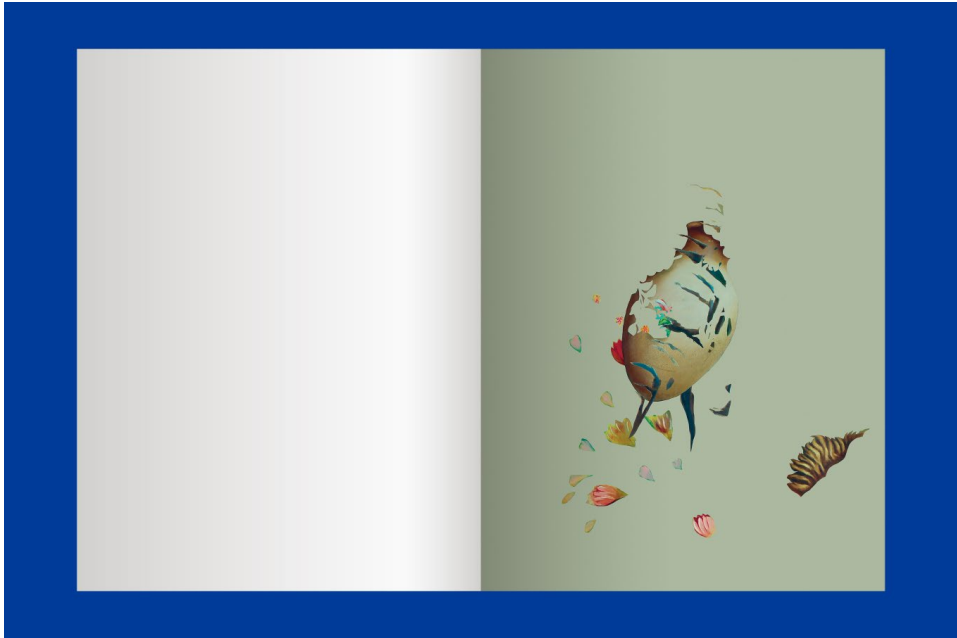
KE: Right, there's not a one-to-one relationship between the book's index and its content. A number might correspond to one of your father's artworks and to a collage of yours; one of your texts, with its poetic, personal, philosophical, and descriptive elements, may be prefaced with a range of numbers corresponding to a dozen of your father's artworks. The reader makes meaning out of these multi-pronged correspondences and intervals. In this sense, you're unraveling the informational or museological function of the book-as-archive.



1–130: Selected works Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan ed. Jacob Korczynski (Art Metropole / Motto Books, 2020) Digital mockup - Courtesy of the artist.



1–130: Selected works Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan ed. Jacob Korczynski (Art Metropole / Motto Books, 2020) Photograph: Sara Maston



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1-130: Selected works Ghassan Bishouty b. 1941 Safad, Palestine – d. 2004 Amman, Jordan ed. Jacob Korczynski (Art Metropole / Motto Books, 2020) Photograph: Sara Maston

NB: Exactly. The book contains many short pieces of writing — sometimes poetic and fragmented, sometimes descriptive or indexical — which tell parts of stories, but can only be understood in relation to other visual and written content. So, its pages disrupt the authority of the index and create a nonlinear layering of images and narratives. At the same time, the book itself, as an object typically read front to back, implies a kind of containment, something I deeply appreciate about the medium. The book acts as a repository, like a storage unit in the basement of a museum.

KE: The book is both protective and portable, qualities that point to vexed issues around cultural institutions for Palestinians. What can be built in conditions of ongoing settler colonialism, occupation, and exile? Of course, there is now a Palestinian Museum, near Ramallah, which grapples with how to serve a local, largely refugee population, as well as a regional and global diaspora, in the absence of sovereignty. Do you think of your book as a kind of archive for the displaced? Can an artist's book stand in — provisionally — for a Palestinian archive or institution, given Israel's recurrent invasion, looting, and destruction of Palestinian cultural spaces?

NB: In a sense, yes. I'm not placing my book on the same plane as The Palestinian Museum, but I think it functions in a similarly paradoxical manner. It is a gathering place for objects that have no place — in this case, for the artworks made by a man whose practice existed on the periphery of the prevailing cultural discourses. Many Palestinian artists of my father's generation who are celebrated today are discussed in the context of revolution and resistance. But what defines resistance art? Who defines it? And who is excluded from that or any other dominant conception of Palestinian art?

KE: What context, then, was your father making art in?

NB: My father produced works in many mediums and with varied aesthetics. Understanding the contexts within which he made his work, or why he made any of it, requires guesswork that is both investigative and imaginative.

KE: Can you talk more about that process of imaginative investigation? How do you collaborate with someone who's absent?

NB: Collaborating with someone absent necessitates a level of speculation. I think of this book as a collaboration, and I also like to imagine my father approves of using his life work as my own raw materials. But there's a contradiction here, because I know that when my father was alive, he rarely exhibited or shared his work. Why was he making it in the first place, then? And what does it mean for me to reveal it now? What kind of authority am I granting myself in making these decisions?

KE: To me, your questions imply a pressure to generate information about your father's art and its context, to render his personal legacy, as well as his displacement and dispossession, legible. Both of us, as people of Palestinian descent, feel an urge to expose what remains obfuscated by power — to say,

for example, that our grandparents were forced out of Jaffa, Safad, Jerusalem. But when my grandmother speaks to me about leaving Jerusalem, she tells the story differently each time. So, each time, I ask, when was that? Where did you first go when the fighting broke out? How did you get to Lebanon? Who went with you? Your book, I think, conveys the fragmented, disordered form in which our ancestors tell their stories, a form that is always relational, always collaborative, because you have to call forth memories they have displaced or repressed. If your book resists an informational function, maybe that's because memory and narrative do too.

NB: I remember hearing Ocean Vuong describe this fragmentation beautifully. He said that there's often a demand placed on an artwork, in his case the 'American novel', to be a cohesive statement of a generation, but that cohesion is not part of his post-9/11 generation's imagination (Vuong, 2019). In an entirely different context, but perhaps even more potently so, cohesion cannot be a part of my people's lexicon or identity. We are not only living our own experiences of displacement, but also those of our parents and grandparents.

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