

Open Sesame

January 17-March 2, 2013

Ganzeer, Jeanno Gaussi, Rheim Alkadhi, Mekan Collective (Diala Khasawnih and Samah Hijawi)

Organized by Ola El-Khalidi

**apexart**

Open Sesame

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and the Gulf wars that ensued, contributed to violence that is still very much a part of the region today, twenty-two years later. These wars have shaped the future of a generation of teenagers from the region, whom I call the *Open Sesame* generation, a generation of which I am a part. Now adults, many members of this generation's lives were dramatically changed by the invasion, in one way or another, and refer to it as a turning point, the end of childhood; the end of the age innocence. The exhibition *Open Sesame* opens in New York on January 17, 2013; on January 17, 1991, an international force led by the U.S.A. started a war, which became known as the First Gulf War, against Iraq, to reverse the invasion of Kuwait.

"What happened on August 2, 1990?" was the question that instigated the conversational interviews that I conducted with a group of people who were affected by the events of that day, a day that changed everything for them. As part of my own personal history and as a significant episode in the history of the region, these conversations were like zooming in from the contemporary big picture to a segment of the past that is drenched in nostalgia, trauma, and utopianism. These journeys did not only result in conversations, but also in a wealth of objects that their owners kept over the past two decades as souvenirs of lives that ceased to be. These objects, windows to unfathomable unconscious choices in times of crisis, are worthy of their own cabinet of curiosities.

Open Sesame is an attempt to give value to experiences



Rheim Alkadhi, *Approximate view of a moment within an expulsion* (from the archive of Amal K., who left Kuwait at that time), 2013

that were shamefully swept under the carpet of loss, to unearth answers, to see the personal faces behind the dust, and to find connections to the contemporary.

The artists in the exhibition, Ganzeer, Jeanno Gaussi, Rheim Alkadhi, and Mekan Collective (Diala Khasawnih and Samah Hijawi) are, with the exception of Hijawi, outsiders to the intimacy of the conversations and objects collected for this exhibition. Instead, the artists were presented with these stories and mementos to reflect on and work with. The nonlinear, multidimensional process of imagining and developing the works is as much part of *Open Sesame* as the final manifestations that will be on display in the show. Although a sincere attempt at documentation, the exhibition will surely add another opaque layer between the present and that moment in 1990.

In an attempt to invite the reader into this process, the following text is a historic narrative of nonlinear stories and memories taken from these conversations, the characters are mixed up, the series of events are collaged, and the scenarios are confused. What is truly left is but a glimpse of that time.



Makan Collective (Diala Khasawnih and Samah Hijawi), *Twenty Two Years Today*, 2013

What happened on August 2, 1990?

They had plans to go to Tunisia and Greece. All they could think of on that day, when their mother woke them with "Saddam entered Kuwait!" was that their long awaited summer plans just got canceled. Usually, during the month of August, many of the residents of Kuwait leave for summer vacation to avoid the heat. Those who stayed that year witnessed the invasion.

On a small Greek island with no access to TV or radio, they had been the last to know. They packed their belongings and travelled to Amman, thinking it would just be for a few days before they could go home to Kuwait. Their furnished-apartment landlady in Amman was very welcoming. The kids, brother and sister, spent the days playing UNO, while their parents attempted to manage the unknown and to postpone, as long as they possibly could, informing their kids that they will never go back to their home or to their toys.

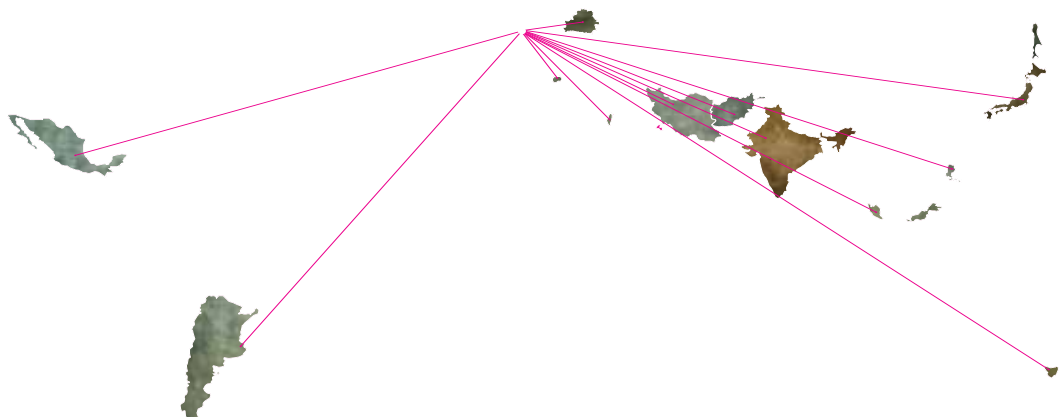
They lived by the sea. One of the brothers snuck outside and went to greet the Iraqi soldiers, who were very nice and looked thin and malnourished. On that day, he had been eager for *Open Sesame* (the Arabic version of *Sesame Street*) on TV as he was to appear in that day's episode. He had been waiting for that day for so long and

now, because of the invasion that morning, he had lost his chance to be seen on TV.

Her mother had promised to support her dream of studying at the Sorbonne University in Paris. She wanted to be an interpreter; she wanted to travel the world. She had to walk six kilometers to school everyday. That's how she lost weight. She ended up studying finance in Jordan. Her main concern was how to locate her friends from Kuwait—they had said goodbye thinking they would meet again in a few months, after the holiday. All she had was a list of phone numbers that had become disconnect-

ed. Now, with Facebook, she was able to track down some of her old Egyptian friends. They exchanged a few messages reminiscing about the Kuwait days, and shared some stories and pictures from the past twenty-two years. After a few days, with no more to say or share, the exchanges came to an end.

The father worked at a bank in Kuwait and he had all the keys because most of the employees were out of the country. He had to go to the bank for the first few days after the invasion but then he just stopped. Her father managed to get food from his friend's farms in Kuwait. Live chicken



Jeanno Gaussi, *Source Map*, 2013

was brought to the house; they learned how to pluck it. Her childhood was over when the invasion happened. The liver her mother ordered, in a restaurant near the border, was full of blood. She could never eat liver again, ever.

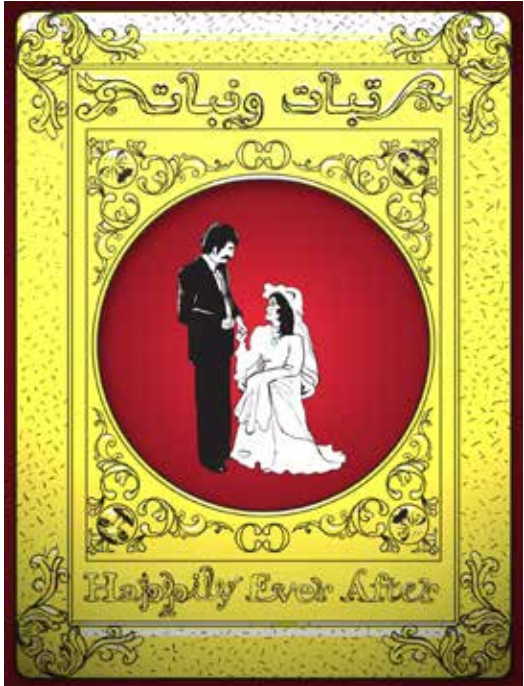
The family decided to go to Baghdad for a few days, where they had some relatives, until things became clearer. The kids enjoyed themselves; they went swimming everyday. It felt like vacation. The people of Baghdad were nice; they treated them well. When they ran out of money, the boy and his father went to Basra, south of Iraq, to sell their furniture. Baghdad seemed to her like a beautiful woman who got old quickly and was really tired.

She was in Cairo visiting her mother's cousin. Very early that morning, her son called from the U.S.A. and informed her of the invasion. She was one of the first to know. She went insane thinking that all of her family was in Kuwait.

With an unshaven beard and scruffy clothes, the father arrived, with a truck full of worn out furniture and boxes of random things he managed to collect, resembling their eighteen years together. The mother started crying. He had left the toys behind, but brought the dog and all their VHS videotapes and photo-albums. His face was scarred forever, he got the *Baghdad Boil*—a name the U.S. soldiers came up with, the scientific name is leishmaniasis (a disease spread by the bite of a female sandfly).

The uncle, visiting from the U.S.A. and thinking he was still there, was cleaning the car topless in the street with the radio on, was the first one to hear the news. The father disappeared, it has been days, he was supposed to follow his family who was spending the summer in Amman overseeing the construction of their new house. The mother ran out of money and started selling her jewelry.

The boy had a collection of *Majid* magazines (a magazine in Arabic for youth published since 1979), which he was very proud of. On their way out of Kuwait, his mother threw them all out to get rid of any traces of their life in Kuwait. His neighbor had admitted her love on a Christmas card; although it was only August, it



Ganzeer, *tabaat we nabaat*, 2013

was the only card she could find. She wrote him "remember me." And they parted.

In their '80s Oldsmobile, the family of five drove with a convoy of fifteen cars and trucks. The trip from Kuwait to Amman through Baghdad took four days. Half way through the trip, the younger brother wet himself and the car stank for two days. It was freezing at night. When they arrived to Amman the son shouted "Bananas!" Kuwait was the land of dreams. They missed the good old days, when everything was available, life was easy, neighbors cared, and families were close. Kuwait had become the utopia of a time that once was.

Thank you for going back in time.

Sally Shalabi, Deema Shahin, Mohammed El-Khalidi, Muna el-karmi, Mohammed Al-Qaq, Mohammed Al Nabulsi, Lama Hazboun, Reem Abdel Wahid, Saeda Jubran, Ghassan Qutob, M.L., Dina S. Noora Kassem.

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