Art transcends borders—until it doesn’t. In 2016, Ahmad Hammoud’s project Passport for the Stateless returned from an exhibition in Dubai to its origin in Cairo, and though the artwork’s central piece resembles a passport, it is obviously not a valid travel document. Yet, before it was allowed back into the country, Egyptian customs drew deep lines of red ballpoint pen across the booklet’s 32 pages and nearly tore it in half. When he discovered the work’s severely damaged condition, curator Mohamed Elshahed posted a picture on social media and succinctly concluded that this violation was “probably the best illustration for what (Hammoud’s) project is about.”

The story resonated but it also didn’t come as a surprise; over a decade of working in the arts in Egypt and the Gulf meant that I’d seen sculptures emerge from prolonged exposure to heat; tracking numbers leading nowhere; and shipping containers transporting whole works on canvas and paper suffering tears, slits, and punctures; photographs and oil paintings damaged by shipping with serial numbers and signatures scrawled in permanent marker across otherwise pristine surfaces; exhibitions mysteriously and irretrievably lost. Based on personal experience, negotiating this uncertain circulation permeates just about every aspect of working in the arts within the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region.

Reflecting on these circumstances led to conversations with artists who spoke generously of their experiences but often off the record due to a mix of social, political, and professional pressures. One artist critiqued the premise that there exists any relevance within or beyond the damage, and another didn’t want their work to be associated with its loss. Others welcomed the occasion to tell their stories publicly or to broach the general issue of the arduous circumstances that inform the precarious mobility of their creative work. Travel was also a frequent topic, specifically the discrepancy between the theoretical ability of artworks to cross borders while visas are typically denied the artists who create the works—a trend this exhibition was unable to break. Throughout these discussions it also became clear that the unpredictable outcome of surrendering artworks to shipping and customs can yield grave psychological repercussions. Effects range from a total creative block following the acceptance that a body of work has become lost or damaged beyond repair, to a subtler self-censorship that manifests over time, sometimes as an unwitting retreat into increasingly abstract imagery, or in the form of a pragmatic approach to making art that preempts travel related obstacles. With visual arts, this can mean shifting to digitally-transferable works, or making objects that deliberately fit into a suitcase to facilitate transport by commercial airlines, or strategizing around re-assembly or reproductions on the other side of a border.

With governments worldwide becoming increasingly focused on subversive movements to the point of defacing anything that looks unusual or unfamiliar, the circulation of art—like everything else that crosses borders—falls under the scrutiny of anything that looks unusual or unfamiliar, the circulation of art-like everything else that crosses borders—falls under the scrutiny of governments worldwide becoming increasingly focused on subversive movements to the point of defacing anything that looks unusual or unfamiliar, the circulation of art—like everything else that crosses borders—falls under the scrutiny of governments worldwide becoming increasingly focused on subversive movements to the point of defacing anything that looks unusual or unfamiliar, the circulation of art—like everything else that crosses borders—falls under the scrutiny of governments worldwide becoming increasingly focused on subversive movements to the point of defacing anything that looks unusual or unfamiliar, the circulation of art—like everything else that crosses borders—falls under the scrutiny of
while going through customs, the exhibition shows examples of works which have been reformatted post-incident to incorporate and accommodate damages; works that, though forbidden or mired by bureaucratic paperwork, have made it across borders; and works that incorporate incidental or intentional damages as a conceptual underpinning. In its entirety, Occupational Hazards showcases ways that the aforementioned Ahmad Hammoud have all found ways to reclaim agency following significant damages in their works. The resulting artworks that are featured in the exhibition have been revised by the artists—each of whom asserts their creative liberty to decide the final iterative forms and contexts in which their works are to be seen. Huda Lutfi’s installation derives from her 2003 work Carpet of Remembrance, which was made of 2,000 photographs of wooden boxes sent from Iraq to Egypt. While being shipped to Bahrain for an exhibition in early 2005, the work was confiscated by Cairo airport officials and deemed illegal. Several of the wooden boxes sent to Bahrain were returned to Egypt due to its portrayal of Egyptian police officers while working, a series of conceptual Mailed Paintings (2004–) consists of unprotected stretched canvases in various shapes and sizes that are mailed to multiple cities around the world. This is a variation of a technique he previously applied by temporarily covering nude paintings with white spray paint, in his own words “destroying them” on his own terms, but thus also enabling the works to be shipped abroad. This is a variation of a technique he previously applied by temporarily covering nude paintings with white gouache and Arabic calligraphy. Contrasting the severity of some stories is the anecdote around Carol Mathers’ broken shroud, a textile work that was damaged during transit in the British Council’s 1992–1997 touring exhibition All That Glisters, curated by Muriel Wilson. In 1994, when the work was sent to Phnom Penh, it was confiscated by the National Museum to London for condition checking and refurbishment. Mathers’ bare-chested mermaid was found writhing on the floor of Eastallop.

Artworks by Mohamed Ben Soltaine, Yassin Mohamed, Negar Tahsili, and Amir Farhad are presented in two states. Mostly in their original form, they occupy the space as artworks, while they are also an acknowledgement of the human particular and unlikely circumstances that govern their movement across borders. Mohamed Ben Soltaine’s mosaic triptych Centre l’oubli (Hommage à El Meikki) (2019) is dedicated to the prominent Tunisian painter Hatem El Meikki (1918–2003). The three panels show El Meikki’s signature, first in sharp relief and then fading away, a fate that Ben Soltaine says befalls even the best artworks in Tunisia due to lack of reflection on the country’s art-historical past and a dearth of art historians. As new local guards are photographed flanking the last photograph taken, the original Picasso is now but a speck in the background. In the context of this exhibition, the method of making bureaucratic illustration is an illustration reflective of the exhibition as a whole.

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