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Abbas Akhavan

Extended text

*Under the evening moon
the snail
is stripped to the waist.*

-Kobayashi Issa

ON EMPTINESS

All we have are cavities.

Or, all we *are*, are cavities. We know that the human body is comprised of multiple cavities that carry our insides, completing our bodies through their absence, never visible from the exterior. Cavities are markers of decay, gapes in the smooth enamel of our teeth, that allude to underlying breakdown. Some of us will lose 'em all (a mouthful of cavities, as the song goes). The list of tangible cavities is long – the orifice of a tree, the gap between our walls, underground caverns. Then there are the less perceptible ones, like nebulas, or the electromagnetic energy between the surface of the Earth and the inner edge of the upper atmosphere, *55 kilometres up*, or what lies beneath our disintegrating glaciers. A cavity itself is a falsehood, a hole inside a whole.

“8 April, Tuesday: The museum staff leave, Fedayeen, or members of a militia, take over the grounds of the museum and start shooting at US troops – the external walls of the museum are pitted with the impact of bullets. The staff tried to return to the museum but were unable to because of fighting in the area. There was also a sniper shooting from a second floor room in the museum.”¹

¹ All quotations are from a timetable of events excerpted from: Selma Al-Radi, “The Destruction of the Iraq National Museum,” *Museum International* vol. 55 (2003): 103-107.

How do we define a cavity of time? It is all the space in between that gives shape to our existence. There's coffee and thin cigarettes and walking and walking and sleeping too early and waking too late, going to the studio and not staying at the studio, there's stretching and eating and more walking and more coffee, there are flashes of guilt and trips to the chiropractor, storytelling and forgetting names, reading and forgetting names, considering the productive potential of neglect while admiring a blue winged bird, more walking, and more coffee. There is a lot of discussion about bad art and how to make bad art good art, there are beelines from one park to another, sewn together by attentive steps along sandy edges, it's dancing alone, staying inside, a claustrophobia only cured by foliage and fauna. It is boredom, getting empty, feeling empty, being empty, working less, having less, being with less. Finding what is visible to be made invisible, what is left, what is lost, what we have, what we will never have again, what we cannot find, what we do not know, what belongs to whom, when what is from when remains undefined. When it is and it isn't. Nothing and everything, a hole inside a whole.

"9 April, Wednesday: The statue of Saddam is pulled down (watched by millions of television viewers worldwide), perhaps providing a perfect cover for a heist. Two 'armored personnel carriers' were seen in the museum grounds by the local population who all seem to agree on that fact. A number of people went into the museum and stayed there 'for two hours,' according to the general estimate. They came out carrying many boxes and then left (there is no confirmation for this story from other sources). They apparently went in through the small side door of the museum for which they had a key (this door was still open on 10 April). The back door was also open – someone had forgotten to lock it."

Cavity living involves a degree of slipperiness, in which the parameters of time feel hazy. It is unclear whether we are in now or then, in the way that we are uncertain if these vitrines possess anything inside of their cabinets (or if they are cabinets at all). Walls and pillars are hollowed out, an escape hatch is blocked, plywood has the contour of a gate but is cut like a frame. Artifice is the vernacular, as told by this painting that is in fact a green portal, a futuristic form that indicates we may be elsewhere rather than here. The architecture, in its exposure and impairment, renders vulnerability and injury as much as absence and disappearance. We are in a beautiful and bruised sentiment.

“10 April, Thursday: Looting by the mob begins. Some people apparently went in through a small door which was open at the back of the museum. Later, the mob opened the small door near the main entrance and broke down the main door from the inside. Muhsin, the guard, tried to convince the American tank crew positioned nearby to come and protect the museum – they came once and drove off the looters but refused to remain, saying that ‘they had no orders to do so.’ Muhsin tried to chase away the mob, was frightened, left the museum and set off home.”

ON INJURY

On occasion we fail to remember the origin of a chronic injury. Or we recall with exactitude the moment of injury, but its manifestations have morphed into new, unrecognizable forms that feel disconnected from its provenance. Elbow pain, first associated with stress, can transform into intermittent spasms from overexertion, eventually making itself known as a pinprick of pain each time the humidity drops. There is a phantom injury that connects said elbow to your knee, inexplicably. It is all too familiar, a tingle, a veil of soreness, a well-trodden ache that functions like clockwork. What is true for the elbow and the knee is true for the heart and the head.

“11 April, Friday: Local mobs continue to loot the museum. The glass doors leading to the administrative offices are broken down by the mob, who go through and start pillaging the office furniture. Tables and chairs, computers, and other office equipment are hauled away. The curator’s safe was professionally drilled and opened, the salaries of the staff for the next two months were taken, as was her personal money – she had left it in the safe for safe-keeping. The keys of the museum were also taken from her safe.

A sharpshooter who had set up in a room on the second floor, fires at the US troops below through a small window – a rocket-propelled grenade was found there, and many spent cartridges. It is a strange place for a sharp shooter, safe and secure, but the view through a very narrow slit, is limited. Colonel Bogdanos’s opinion was that he could have shot towards the other side of the street, just to create general mayhem.”

There are many injuries that never fully heal, lingering like ghosts. This we know, as our lives are composed of plenty of partings. Many of us grew up in the shadow of conflict, with the consequences of war and its aftermaths being foundational to our existences. We traversed countless kilometres (as many as it took) to other cities in different countries to seek reprieve from incessant violence. We learned new languages, we built homes, we worked, we waited, we listened while you exclaimed with incredulity, *I cannot believe the news today!* It is pain that crosses lands and knows not of time. Burdened in one century and unburdened in the next, only to be reburdened in the one after. Our lives are part of a long-term, collective reconciliation with no promise of cure. To this day, many of us have yet to return to where we began.

And what is a refusal to return, if not an open wound?

“12 April, Saturday: Mobs hit the museum again, taking the remaining chairs and tables, and smashing every office door with axes. Showcases in the galleries are smashed. All the cameras of Donny George, Research Director of the museum – his personal collection – are taken from his steel safe. He used them for museum purposes and thought they would be safer there than in his house. Filing cabinets are smashed.

The storerooms are ransacked by the mob; a third was only entered but left undamaged. Many objects are taken from these storerooms but the tally will not be known until the museum staff complete checking every object against the inventory. That will take many months as there are more than 170,000 objects with Iraq Museum (IM) numbers, as well as an immense collection for study purposes.”

We imagine what an injury looks like to a museum, a place that holds our secrets and our histories, or, as they are lesser known, our fraudulent, erroneous, and partisan pasts, the expressions and byproducts of cultural and political dominance that we rarely confront as our legacy. Before we consider the injury to the museum we must first acknowledge the injuries it has inflicted. These are houses of laurels, built on narratives that justify and concretize occupation and imperialism. Conquest, destruction, and pillaging are ingrained in institutionalized dispossession, and many museums – built by robber barons and sustained by their children and their children’s children – are keepers of the spoils of military superiority. *A mouthful of cavities.*

“13 April, Sunday: The museum personnel return to work. The Director-General of Antiquities Dr Jabber and Donny George find the keys to the safe in the grounds of the museum. The mob is still milling around but they manage to drive them off the grounds. The museum restorer again asks the US troops stationed nearby to protect the museum – to no avail.”

Even still, we must reconcile with the reality that these spaces also have the capacity to heal, their restorative potential dissuading us from complete divestment. And some of these places themselves have endured monumental pain. Nineteen years ago, during the Invasion of Iraq, looters ransacked the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. Pleas to US forces to secure the building were ignored, and over the course of 36 hours thieves walked away with 15,000 objects, many of which were artifacts thousands of years old. Ritual vessels and busts, amulets and ivories, and sculptures of headless kings tumbled down the marble steps, later found in trunks of cars, wrapped in garbage bags, and dug up from backyards, only returned under the promise of amnesty. It was a place of protection left exposed, cavernous and bare.

“16 April, Wednesday: American tanks finally take up position in museum grounds. A few days later, two men come into the museum and return the Statue of the Assyrian King, Shalmaneser the Third, in three pieces, one of the Ubaid Reliefs and a few other items.”

ON FULLNESS

While some mourned this devastating plunder of “mankind’s heritage” from the “cradle of civilization,” others interpreted this loss more facetiously. At a press conference the day after the event, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked, “My goodness, were there that many vases? [Laughter.] Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?” His glib response underscored the belief that the Iraqis are a civilization devoid of nice things and undeserving of them at the same time, justifying the rape of their history as the price paid for their “liberation.”

“Local mobs looted the museum between 10 and 13 April – the guard Muhsin left on 10 April when the situation became too dangerous. During those three days, somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 objects went missing from the museum. Among them are some of the most famous objects in the collection – including the Warka head and the Ba Sidqi statue. It was discovered afterwards that the whole collection of seals had been taken too – that meant another 4,800 objects were missing. A lot more had been broken in the general mayhem of the looting.”

How do we determine fullness? 50 vases? 180? 1,200? 750 but half are over 6,000 years old and all are heavier than 500 pounds? By the 171,000 objects that lived inside, above and underground, even if 30% were potentially fakes and only 53% were confirmed real and 17% were undecided? Is it by the 8,000 that went missing or the 7,000 that were returned? How do we even begin to measure what is lost to the cultural ether, perhaps never to be recuperated? And how do we quantify the value of stolen objects, the trophies of injury, that are cared for in perpetuity for our pleasure?

Perhaps we can accept fullness as a type of embodiment or animism, in which the materials we see – minerals, plants, and wood – are all charged with their previous lives, waiting to be roused. Or as variations on immensity and accumulation, where the dust collects and a heap of grass, clipped from decommissioned military sites, grows and sinks under its own weight. Or as an imperfect and porous memory cast across the room, permitting us to be disloyal to the real. How quickly our pictorial understanding of a place falls apart when flat planes are given forms and what is round is morphed into façade. We release ourselves from the obligation of authenticity and the expectation of authority. The curtain begins to bend beyond the edges of our recollection. We untie the lion from power.

“A steady trickle of returning objects has been taking place since Colonel Matthew Bogdanos declared a general amnesty for anyone who brings back an object. Therefore, at the time of publication, more than 2,500 objects have been returned, largely by people who live in the immediate neighborhood. They come to the museum and say, ‘I went in with the mob, and I took this to save it and here it is.’ The Warka Vase was returned, cracked but virtually intact. It is possible that some of the other important objects may resurface someday.”

ON GHOSTS

The process of healing can be an uneasy affair, as we are burdened not only by what it means to be liberated from pain but by what it means to be free at all. As stated by Rumsfeld, “Freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things. They’re also free to live their lives and do wonderful things. And that’s what’s going to happen here.” There goes that tinny drip, like a persistent pang.

Pillagers, plunderers, conquerors, pirates, looters, robbers, aren’t we all? Under the guise of care we possess, we control, we manage, we dominate, we colonize – these are the foundations of freedom. It has always been a one-sided negotiation. We are all complicit in the dispossession of land, in validating the circulation of objects that do not belong to us and continue to not belong to us, in knowingly and unknowingly oppressing others. To be free of pain we must first uncover a breed of freedom that is not dependent on the subjugation of others.

Until then, we are haunted.

It is possible there is no recovery from injury, as to ruin a life is to live amongst ruins. It means to be ruined. Our only option is to weather the pain.

But in this stark inevitability we are still reminded of the words of Rumi: *the wound is the place where the Light enters you.*

There just may be wholes inside of these holes yet.

– Kim Nguyen
Commissioning curator



Abbas Akhavan: cast for a folly is on view at the Contemporary Art Gallery from June 3 to August 28, 2022.

Abbas Akhavan lives and works in Montréal. Recent solo exhibitions include Mount Stuart House, Isle of Bute (2022), Chisenhale Gallery, London (2021); CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco (2019); Fogo Island Gallery, Fogo Island (2019); and VIE D'ANGE, Montréal (2018). Group exhibitions include Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2022); Momenta Biennale at Phi Foundation, Montreal (2021); Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (2018); SALT Galata, Istanbul (2017); Sharjah Biennial 13, United Arab Emirates (2017); and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2016). He is the recipient of the Fellbach Triennial Award (2017); Sobey Art Award (2015); Abraaj Group Art Prize (2014); and the Berliner Kunstpreis (2012).

cast for a folly (2019/2022) was originally curated by Kim Nguyen and commissioned by CCA Wattis Institute. This text first accompanied that presentation.

Timetable of events excerpted from Selma Al-Radi, "The Destruction of the Iraq National Museum," *Museum International* vol. 55 (2003): 103-107.

Image page 15: The main lobby of the Iraq Museum, 2003. Photo: Corine Wegener.

At the Contemporary Art Gallery, we carry out our work on the ancestral and unceded lands of the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Sḷwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. We are engaged in an active learning process about our responsibilities to the stewards of the land we occupy.

The Contemporary Art Gallery is generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council and the BC Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch. We are also grateful for the support of Vancouver Foundation and our members, donors and volunteers.

We gratefully acknowledge the generous multi-year support of BMO Financial Group.

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