

# Ali Cherri

## A Taxonomy of Fallacies The Life of Dead Objects

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Ali Cherri's work is a reflection on our contemporary moment, where catastrophe bubbles just below the surface of everyday life. The exhibition *A Taxonomy of Fallacies: The Life of Dead Objects* presents part of a recently produced body of work looking at the intersection of scientific knowledge and histories of violence. Using material gathered from archaeological digs, wildlife parks, and auction houses around the world, the two works presented here question the epistemic structure and function of archeology, opening it up to reveal the darker, sometimes violent, impulse at its core.

A discipline born in the murky times of colonialism, archeology is the science of both the creation and preservation of ruins. Still unable to fully shake off its colonial roots, the field of archeology and its attendant spaces, including the museum and the archeological site, continue to be implicated in discourses of nation building, ethnic authenticity, and claims to territory. Filmed in the UAE, the video installation *Petrified* explores archeological and museological spaces within which national imaginaries are fabricated.

While dealing with "dead objects," archeology, as a field of inquiry and a mode of value inscription, produces lived realities through the authentication of national claims to culture and territory. Dead objects are brought to life through their inscription within a field of knowledge, where their attributed symbolic value doubly inscribes them into the material value chain of the antiquities market. This double inscription contains a seed of violence made manifest through the circulation of artifacts, whether exiled to the halls of European museums, pillaged from museums in Iraq to living rooms in Lebanon, or gruesomely harvested from archeological sites in Syria.

Presenting both real and fake artifacts sourced at various auctionhouses, the installation *Fragments* questions the value we place on historical artifacts and asks us to reflect on the lives of these dead objects, from their unearthing to their circulation on the antiquities market. What do these ancient artifacts tell us about our contemporary value system? How are we complicit in their life and death?

**Nora Razian**

Head of Programs and Exhibitions, Sursock Museum

# A Taxonomy of Fallacies or Who Will Excavate The History Museum

Ali Cherri and Lina Mounzer

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake and tsunami hit northern Japan, killing over 15 thousand people and causing enormous damage to cultural heritage sites, including museums, some of which housed collections of over 20,000 archaeological relics. The Rikuzentakata City Museum was completely destroyed by the tsunami when waves struck the building from three directions. A wall of water flooded the second floor, bursting through the ceiling, rushing down to the first floor and then receding in a great suck, dragging with it back out to sea a great number of artifacts, including those on exhibition and in storage, and taking with it the lives of six members of the museum staff. A team of archaeologists joined the rescue workers who rushed to the site. They worked side by side, slogging through the debris, trying to recover the dead bodies, trying to salvage the artifacts.

In April 2016, the six-month archaeological clearing of the site north of Martyrs' Square began, in preparation of the construction of the *Beirut City History Museum*.<sup>1</sup> The museum is comprised of a building and an archaeological park that integrates the remains in situ. Renzo Piano, the starchitect who designed the building, chose to bury the museum under street level, creating a procession into the bowels of the city.

A few years after the museum's opening, on an otherwise calm and cloudless morning, one of the plates that makes up the Mount Lebanon fault line that runs just off the coastline of Lebanon slips and strikes the adjacent plate.<sup>2</sup> The Centre for Geophysical Research of Bhanne is given very little prior indication of the event by their readings. Before they can issue a warning, a tsunami swells off the shore of Beirut and crashes into the coastal city, collapsing and sinking the newly built History Museum.

When the water cleared up, the ruins of the museum looked more like a cemetery. Teams of archaeologists, along with historians, linguists, librarians, and taxidermists tried to salvage what they could from under

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<sup>1</sup> A project for the Ministry of Culture in partnership with Solidere and the Kuwait Fund.

<sup>2</sup> In 551 an earthquake hit Beirut of an estimated magnitude of 7.6. It triggered a devastating tsunami that affected the coastal towns of Byzantine Phoenicia, causing great destruction and sinking many ships. About 30,000 people were reportedly killed in Beirut alone. In a study published in the journal *Geology*, Dr. Elias Ata of the National Center for Geophysical Research in Beirut and his colleagues suggest that the recurrence time for this destructive quake is 1,500- to 1,750-year, so it's now reaching the end of its cycle.



“Please do not take away museum properties. They are important treasures for restoring Takata’s nature, history, and culture. (City Board of Education).” So reads the note. But most of the Board of Education employees died in the disaster; none could have left this message. Regardless of who may have written it in the board’s name, it was profoundly significant.

Photo by Maekawa Saori. All rights reserved.

April 21, 2011, the first floor exhibition room of Rikuzentakata City Museum that was filled with rubble by the tsunami of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Photo provided by Rikuzentakata City Museum. All rights reserved.

the mud and silt that had reburied the underground museum. Fragment upon fragment were extracted, and carefully brushed of the dirt that encrusted them. The moment an object was unearthed, like Hamlet in the gravedigger scene holding Yorick's skull and addressing it, or, like *The Opening of the Mouth* ritual in ancient Egypt, they asked each object to open its mouth for the last time, to tell of its origins, to speak of its life and provenance.

The objects, however, remained stubbornly silent, their ruined countenance revealing nothing, not even the source or cause of that ruin. It was up to those who had found and laid them out then to author answers on their behalf. But the depth of the objects' silence was matched only by the clamour and intensity of the arguments that followed. The archaeologists clashed with the historians, with the former arguing that the objects should be dated according to their original excavations, while the latter said that it would be better to date them according to this most recent one. The librarians interjected to say that this wouldn't do at all because no one would be able to tell past from past, and the linguists countered to say that while tenses made language easier, they were not an imperative for a properly functioning system. The taxidermists wished to restore everything to its former living glory, and upon this suggestion, another argument broke out as to whether this meant repainting and rebuilding, or recreating the eroded state in which the objects had



The site where Renzo Piano's Beirut History Museum will be located

Photo by Nada Ghosn, April 2016

originally been when housed in the museum. The Assembly of Representatives issued a statement to say that it didn't matter how the objects were classified, only that the provenance of each one should clearly be marked as the Republic of Lebanon.

Finally, a mathematician was brought in, to break the stalemate. She suggested that twelve piles be made, and that each object be sorted into one of these twelve piles that together would include everything. The group then set about creating classifications for letters (a) through (l), as follows: (a) objects that have lost a right arm, (b) objects without shadows, (c) those that inspire music, (d) objects found buried under 10cm of mud, (e) those that require silence, (f) those that look like their original creator was severely ill at the time of creation, (g) objects embalmed alive, (h) revenants, (i) those that are drawn free-hand, (j) those that look good in the sun, (k) objects that resemble humans but aren't, (l) vice-versa.<sup>3</sup>

When all was said and done, all the objects had been neatly classified and placed on a huge, brightly lit table in a three-by-four grid that delighted everyone involved. They all agreed that even though the future museum of Beirut City had ruined the old ruins, it had nevertheless managed to produce lots of new ones.

And there the objects remained, once dead and buried, then unburied and thus undead, displayed under a clean light, so white it was almost blue, a spectacle of continuously-and-forever-dead. The simple past made past perfect.

Archaeology, in accordance with Bruno Boulestin and Henri Duda's suggestion of the word archaeothanatology,<sup>4</sup> could finally become necromancy.

*For Khaled al-Asaad, in memoriam*<sup>5</sup>

**Lina Mounzer** is a fiction writer and translator born and raised in Beirut. Her first short story, "The One-Eyed Man," appeared in *Hikayat: An Anthology of Lebanese Women's Writing*, published by *Telegram Books*. Her work has also appeared in *Bidoun*, *Warscapes*, *Chimurenga*, and *The Berlin Quarterly*. Mounzer has taught Creative Writing at both the American University of Beirut and the Lebanese American University. She has been awarded several international fellowships, including the 2010-2011 Akademie Schloss Solitude literature fellowship in Germany and the 2014 UNESCO-Aschberg writing fellowship in Brazil.

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<sup>3</sup> After the ANALYTICAL LANGUAGE OF JOHN WILKINS, Jorge Luis Borges - *Otras Inquisiciones* (1937-1952).

<sup>4</sup> This term was first used at a round table held at Sens in 1998 and whose proceedings were published in 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Syrian scholar and archaeologist who lost his life protecting the ruins of Palmyra in August 2015.

# The Taste of Earth

Uzma Z. Rizvi

*"Inevitably, as archaeologists, we are always eating or consuming dirt."*

*"Muslims are not supposed to eat the dirt; it is like being a cannibal."*

*"But you eat khaak-e-shifa<sup>1</sup>...?"*

*"Only a pinch – you cannot eat the soil because we are of the soil."*

Conversation between the author and a Pathologist, Sharjah, UAE

The taste of earth is umami.

It is, in fact, the definition of earthiness; each soil sample carries with it its own distinct landscape of flavor. I have spent much of my life trying to understand landscapes of earth and their distinct tastes. There is something deeply intimate about savoring a landscape, tasting the soil. What makes that act cannibalistic is also the same that makes it so very sensual. It is about recognizing through my senses both being and belonging. My tongue becomes a landscape through which I am held accountable for my assumptions. I expect the sand from the coast to be salty, and yet it is dry and granular.

The desert is different. The deserts hot sand stings the tongue in way to reveal nothing about flavor; it is only heat that I encounter. The sand does not only burn my tongue, but also my eyes and skin. In its heat it viscerally resists any formulation of empirical observation. Growing accustomed to that heat entails growing accustomed to the taste of heat. There are few archaeologists I know who work in the desert who are unaccustomed to the taste of heat. In recognizing the grains of landscape as resistant, our approach to them becomes nuanced. We reconsider our intimacy with the earth, and even if we do not speak of our ingestion, we all then know that it is not the dirt that is dirty.

What better way to rearrange colonial orderings of the ancient world than to employ a methodology that rides the line between disgust and desire. An impulse to decolonize archaeological methodology is one that recognizes that the invisible hierarchies of knowledge construction are considered normative empiricism. And that ability for science to make

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<sup>1</sup> Khak-e-Shifa translates to the sand/dust/soil of healing; *khaak* being sand/dust/soil and healing, *shifa*. The khak I am referring to in this exchange comes from Karbala, Iraq. For an extended conversation related to this and other ingestions by author and theories related to that, see Rizvi, U.Z. 2012 Ingesting the Material from Ganeshwar to Karbala: Reconstituting the Analytic and Recognizing Centrifugality in Archaeological Theory. *Archaeologies*. Volume 8, Number 1: 77-84.

inequity invisible is what is really dirty, disgusting and epistemically unjust.<sup>2</sup> The masking of such inequity impacts every form of landscape. This encompasses not only flavor profiles and more commonly, the geomorphological, but also, landscapes of research, of memories, the intangible and of the people themselves.

It is on such a fine line that this essay rests as it attempts to understand deeply and intimately a landscape of fluidity and urbanity. The process of knowing this landscape is necessarily slow because when I am close to the earth, time collapses, pushing me away. I find myself trying to articulate the third millennium BCE eastern coastline of the UAE, and yet, without time, the landscape itself slips in and out of focus, resisting my archaeological gaze and silencing my study. I am forced out of teleological formulations of how the archaeological survey is constructed. I find myself balancing on a sliver, a stance that allows me to employ an archaeological understanding of a concern with the contemporary as being singularly of this time yet resolutely employing a critical distance.<sup>3</sup>

Early in my affair with the UAE, and perhaps one of my favorite such moments was at the site of Tell Abraq – an archaeological site in the emirate of Sharjah. The earth was excavated by men wearing shalwar kameez, speaking in various languages from South Asia. As I walked through the site with my driver, they stopped their work to watch a woman wearing a shalwar kameez walk onto the site and discuss its antiquity with the project and field directors. I could hear them talking amongst themselves about who I was. My driver, who was born on this land when it was still a part of the Trucial States, but holds a passport of Bangladesh, began to explain to them what I was doing, “She’s looking for people like us from a long time ago,” and in the ensuing conversation, my research agenda of locating Harappan sites in the UAE unfolded in the vernacular. Later, I asked the driver about the conversation and he said they all thought it would be amazing if you (an archaeologist) can show the world that people from South Asia have been here for 5000 years. I pointed out that culture changes and we cannot make a direct link between what may have happened 5000 years ago and what is happening today. Yes, he said with a barely perceptible smile, but it would be great to know that we may have built that culture change on this land. I was silenced by this sliver of a smile and continued to wipe the sand off my brow. Our faces were covered in the earth and sweat; it had been a particularly windy day at the site.

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<sup>2</sup> Rizvi, U. Z. 2015. Decolonizing Archaeology: On the Global Heritage of Epistemic Laziness. *Two Days After Forever: A Reader on the Choreography of Time*, edited by Omar Kholeif, Sternberg Press. Reader for the Cyprus Pavilion, 56th Venice Biennale.

<sup>3</sup> Agamben, G. 2009. *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 39-54.



**Jibrail Jabbur**  
Syrian Desert, Syria, Undated  
Gelatin silver negative on film, 6×6 cm  
Norma Jabbur collection. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation.

There is something unique to the umami of the earth; it leaves one's tongue heavy and reluctant. I suspect that affect is partially to blame for the attribution of cannibalism which is probably also heavily reluctant. It is also probably why I feel uniquely violent every time I take a big swing at the earth with a pick or dig too deep with a shovel. I thought my preference for slow surveys was just old age but perhaps it is simply because I have eaten too much dirt and am beginning to feel its pain. I believe there is some wisdom in this empathy, but I am not experienced enough yet to recognize it.

Driving along the east coast near Kalba, I recently stopped near some inland fishing areas and spoke to some men who looked like they were fishing. We spoke in vague Hindustani about the coastline and my desire to learn the landscape. As we talked, I lifted some earth from around us to get some sense of its consistency between my fingers, curious about the grain size. The men laughed after a bit and told me it would be difficult to get a sense of this *miti* (soil/earth/sand) because it was mixed from the construction sites, and in many cases the beaches were being developed with earth coming in from other places. The coastline itself is constructed, as all landscapes inevitably are, but with sand from many different contexts. In its very essence, in the materiality of its grains, this was a cosmopolitan coastline. My last question to them had to do with the local fishing families, only to be met with the answer that most of the fishing families no longer lived in the area. I was left with a question hanging in the air of who they were, but could not find the space to ask as it suddenly felt incredibly personal, contingent and unknowable. There was a silence that filled the spaces between us and I turned to the earth once again looking for answers.

A few weeks later I was in the office of a geoarchaeologist in Hoboken, New Jersey and we talked about the shifting coastline of the UAE. In order to know the third millennium BCE landscape, we would have to conduct some geocores from the coast working our way inland. How else could we capture some understanding of a coastline that was constantly shifting. I recognized the colonial impulse in myself which wanted to know something that was proving to be shifty. I am still too young and curious, willing to be epistemically lazy about the violence I might be reinstating by conducting such a survey: it is just a few holes every few kilometers.

In speaking to fishermen, they often gesture towards the sea and say they are from everywhere, making one feel as if their ties vaguely touch land. There is an admirable comfort they have in the fluidity of belonging to a scape that constantly shifts in ebbs and flows. Perhaps one of my deep assumptions is that for those of us on land, our belonging is more certain and can be excavated. We are of the soil and as such there is some ontological certainty of our belonging to a soil. It is almost as if our

bloodlines are made of our soil lineages. What if the earth of this coastline is cosmopolitan in its makeup, what if each grain of sand hails from a different place, a different history, a different language?

Early in my obsession in geomorphology, I spent much time thinking about Aeolian processes and specifically, loess – how slowly over time, particularly in desert environments, dunes moved with the help of the wind. I watched wind patterns as they carefully picked up silt grain after grain and redeposited it to a new location. The loving nature of the wind moves me, and I know of its capricious tendencies, and yet it is still not as unreliable as human nature. I cannot help but think of Aeolus, the Keeper of the Winds, after whom these processes are named. His present to Odysseus was a tightly sealed bag of captured winds to find his way back home to Ithaca. The sealed inaccessibility of them made them visually valuable, which they were because they could have aided in the way home by sea. Human nature assumed that the riches in the bag must have been material. Opening the bag to experience wind, the subsequent hurricane that emerged and the inability to make it home, entangle nature within itself whether it is located in the landscapes of humans, winds or seas. Somewhere in my own history of learning how to get to know a landscape that very entanglement of the forms of nature exists.

I find myself allowed and able to taste sand, but not eat it. I find that we are of the soil but as it shifts our own sense of belonging is contingent. And I find that in decolonizing my scientific approach, it is not only the bodies on a landscape and their political essentialisms that I must take into account, but also how this landscape resists my documentation. Every moment that I feel I am closer to knowing this landscape and it knowing me, it shifts and moves. To be fair, it may feel the same about me because I change with every new taste of earth.

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**Uzma Z. Rizvi** is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Urban Studies at the Pratt Institute of Art and Design, Brooklyn and a Visiting Scholar in the Department of International Studies at the American University of Sharjah. Recent publications include *Crafting Resonance: Empathy and Belonging in Ancient Rajasthan* (2015), *Decolonizing Archaeology: On the Global Heritage of Epistemic Laziness* (2015), and the *World Archaeological Congress Research Handbook on Postcolonial Archaeology* (2010). Rizvi serves on the scientific committee of the World Archaeological Congress -8 (Kyoto), chairing (with Hirofumi Kato) the theme Postcolonial Experiences, Archaeological Practice, and Indigenous Archaeologies. She recently directed the Global Art Forum-10 (The Future Was \_\_\_), and has written for *E-Flux*, *The New Inquiry*, and *LEAP*, among other art/culture/politics magazines. Rizvi's current research work is focused on Ancient Pakistan and UAE, both during the 3rd millennium BCE. She utilizes poetics as a mode through which to push the limits of archaeological theory. Additionally, her research focuses on ancient subjectivity and related to that, the idea of an intimate architecture; war and trauma in relationship to the urban fabric; and finally, epistemological critiques of archaeology in the service of decolonizing archaeology.

## Ali Cherri

b. 1976 Beirut, Lebanon

Lives and works between Paris, France and Beirut, Lebanon

Ali Cherri is a visual artist working across film, installation, and print making. He received a B.A. in Graphic Design from the American University in Beirut and an M.A. in Performing Arts from DasArts, Amsterdam. In 2016, he is teaching at the Académie Libanaise Des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) and at the IESAV-Saint Joseph University.

Recent exhibitions include *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise*, Guggenheim New York, US (2016), *The Time is Out of Joint*, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE (2016), *Desires and Necessities*, MACBA, Spain (2015), *Lest the Two Seas Meet*, Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, Poland (2015), *Mare Medi Terra*, Es Baluard Museu d'Art Modern i Contemporani de Palma, Spain (2015), and *Songs of Loss and Songs of Love*, Gwangju Museum of Art, South Korea (2014).

## Works on display

### Twin Gallery 1

**Petrified**, 2016

Single-channel video installation, 12 minutes (looped)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

### Twin Gallery 2

**Fragments**, 2016

Archaeological artifacts, taxidermy buzzard, light table, variable dimensions

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

1. Anthropomorphic standing figure. Ceramic with beige and black slip. Chancay Culture, circa 1100-1450 AD. Peru. Shards and lacks the right arm.
2. Wooden mannequin head, from Celebes islands, Indonesia, called Tau-Tau, 1950.
3. Indian deity headless bust in sandstone, Champa Xth century.
4. Polychrome carved wooden mask. South East Asia. Undated.
5. Ushabti anepigraphic. Egypt, Late Period.
6. Stone head probably from a mace weapon, Costa Rica, 300-900 AD.
7. Element of antique figurine. Molded terracotta and painted stucco. Roman period Ist-IVth century AD.

In addition to the works presented here, *The Digger* will be screened regularly in the auditorium. Shot in the Sharjah desert in the UAE, *The Digger* follows the everyday life of Sultan Zeib Khan, the Pakistani caretaker who has been guarding the ruins of a Neolithic necropolis for twenty years.

**Screening times:**

23 May – 3 June: Mon-Fri at 12:00 and 16:00

25 July – 29 July: Mon-Fri at 12:00 and 16:00



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*A Taxonomy of Fallacies: The Life of Dead Objects* is part of an ongoing series of exhibitions in the Twin Galleries, showcasing recent work by early-career artists.

**Sursock Museum**  
Greek Orthodox Archbishopric Street  
Ashrafieh, Beirut, Lebanon  
[www.sursock.museum](http://www.sursock.museum)