

Narratives of resistance: contemporary collecting in Qatar

Paper presented at the American Alliance of Museums conference, Seattle, May 2014

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Introduction

The collecting process in Qatar at state level is intimately linked with the construction of a new Qatari identity for global consumption and national cohesion. At a community level, the Msheireb Arts Center holds the Echo Memory collection of found objects from the cleared site of the downtown Heart-of-Doha urban redevelopment project. At an individual level collecting can be linked with the desire to preserve the disappearing present in the face of the rapid development, as well as representing local traditions of authority and erudition. Using the examples of the Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum and the Echo Memory Project, this paper situates the processes of collection, curation and display within, or in opposition to, the ongoing process of Qatari national identity construction, preservation and dissemination, and presents them as a facet of Qatar's engagement with modernity and the reimagining of itself on the contemporary global stage.

The tiny Gulf state of Qatar gained independence in 1971, and now reaps enormous wealth from its oil and gas reserves. It has emerged onto the global stage over the last decade investing its hydrocarbon wealth in numerous commercial and cultural projects at home and abroad, with extensive international media coverage of its museum development and, in particular, its investment in contemporary western art. The father Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani (1995-2013), instigated a programme of cultural development including the building of museums such as the Museum of Islamic Art (opened 2008), Mathaf: Arab Museum of Contemporary Art (opened 2010), and the new National Museum of Qatar (due 2016), designed by western 'starchitects' such as I.M. Pei and Jean Nouvel.

This kind of disciplinary collecting of Islamic and Western art reflects an exposure to the museums and art markets of Europe and the US, and articulates an engagement with global,

or 'universal', value systems, aesthetics and discourses of knowledge. Sheikha Al-Mayassa, Chairperson of Qatar Museums Authority and sister of the current Emir, demonstrates a commitment to modern and contemporary western art, such as the investment in the works of Damien Hirst and Takeshi Murakami (Ego, 9 February – 24 June 2012; Relics, 10 October 2013-22 January 2014; Al Riwaq exhibition space, Doha), but this can leave many Qatari nationals and foreign observers (as witnessed by discussions in the Twittersphere) equally bewildered – both parties, for different reasons, desire the prioritising of local heritage in cultural investments, rather than recognizing the state globalization agenda that, according to Sheikha Al-Mayassa, links Qatari culture to transnational networks of visual culture and attempts to create international and intercultural dialogue. A comparison might also be made to seventeenth century royal collecting in England where foreign art collections were bought wholesale as the embodiment of knowledge and therefore cultural value; taste was purchased as a fast-track method of developing cultural capital; in Qatar cultural capital is a key element of the 'soft power' central to its current political significance.

Collecting as resistance

This recent high-profile formation and display of the contemporary and Islamic art collections suggests that collecting is something new in Qatar. In fact, the practice of collecting and display, if at different scales, has been in existence in Qatar, and other Gulf states, for some time. One example is the private collection and museum of Sheikh Faisal bin Qassim Al-Thani, an eclectic collection of over 15,000 objects, from cars to radios, religious paraphernalia to numismatics which offers a glimpse into the tastes, values and socio-historical conditions of the collector during his lifetime. The museum opened to the public in 1998 in a purpose-built building 22 km from Doha, Qatar. This collection, created during Qatar's transition from traditional lifeways to contemporary urban wealth and modernity, also reflects an anxiety about rapid change, nostalgia for an idealized pre-oil past, and local cultural systems of knowledge and authority. The development of Sheikh Faisal's collection can be located within at least two local conditions or traditions: the reaction to Qatar's rapid social and economic development over the last 40 years, and the role of the *majlis* in hierarchies of authority and knowledge dissemination in the Gulf. In conversation, Sheikh Faisal discusses how he began life living in a tent, and how as a child

and young man he recorded the forts that were being demolished along Doha's old corniche to make way for the early phases of urban redevelopment in the 1970s and 1980s. He returns repeatedly in conversation to the 'pre-oil' period in Qatar, and how he feels the need to preserve what is left of that time in order to educate people today about life beyond the current state of urban modernity and wealth. For Sheikh Faisal, the reasoning behind the early personal collecting, and the later adult collecting of objects with a wider cultural currency is similar: a desire to hold on to a material witness to the past.

The presence of numerous private collections in Qatar that date from the 1970s bears witness to a general desire amongst the country's residents to hold on to the disappearing present – in 2012 the Qatar Museums Authority curated *Mal Lawal* ('From the Old Times'), an exhibition held at the Al-Riwaq exhibition centre near the Museum of Islamic Art, which exhibited a large royal collection and over 60 smaller private collections, the majority consisting of categories of items similar to those found in Sheikh Faisal's: traditional coffee pots, weapons, old radios and similar technical equipment, copies of the Qur'an, and artefacts associated with pearling, Qatar's earlier economy, and the Bedouin lifeway. These collections embody a desire to construct a safe place of belonging, of familiarity, as a reaction to the anxieties implicit in rapid change; they act as a form of solace. They can be regarded as a manifestation of a form of nostalgia, although the past that this nostalgia is seeking may be more utopian than historically accurate. However, the feeling itself is legitimate, and one way of attempting to assuage the anxiety that the present is becoming the past ever more rapidly is to gather up the fragments of the disappearing present as a way of holding on to its values and cultural forms. This is particularly the case when the future seems uncertain, on both an individual and a cultural level, as is the case in Qatar and a number of other Gulf and Middle Eastern countries engaged in shaping their modernity.

Another history: The Echo Memory Project (2009-2011)

Collections also exist that appear to offer alternative narratives of life in Qatar. The Msheireb Arts Center in downtown Doha, twenty minutes walk from the Museum of Islamic Art, holds the Echo Memory collection of found objects from the cleared site of the Msheireb Properties Heart-of-Doha urban redevelopment project. The collection of found objects – photographs, shop fittings, accounts files, architectural fragments, street signage and so on – relates

primarily to the lives of the South Asian communities that lived in the area until 2011 when they were moved out to make room for the urban regeneration project.

The combined processes of globalisation and Qatar's rapid development have brought huge numbers of migrant workers to the tiny state. Transnational migration is a central theme of globalisation debates which can conceal the fact that in reality only three per cent of the world's population are immigrants; in Qatar, the migrant population far exceeds this figure, at 85 per cent. The state museums shape and present Qatar's contemporary national identity at a local and global level in a very particular socio-cultural context, that of being a minority in their own country: Qatari nationals represent only around 15 per cent of the population, the majority consists of skilled and unskilled expatriate workers with residence status only, who bring diverse cultural practices and lifestyles to the state that may not be compatible with the state's Islamic ideology and value systems. National identity is therefore regarded as in need of robust protection, and it is this identity that is predominantly represented in the current and planned museum displays or state-sponsored cultural activities.

South Asian communities in particular disappear from heritage narratives the closer these narratives approach the present, as witnessed in the heritage house museums in development as part of the Msheireb properties Heart-of-Doha urban regeneration project. Msheireb Properties is a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development established in 1995 by HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the father emir, and his wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, and is responsible for a number of large-scale cultural developments in Qatar, including the Education City/Hamad Bin Khalifa University complex which hosts the foreign universities in Qatar. The Msheireb redevelopment is transforming an area of the city centre from a dense commercial and domestic zone predominantly inhabited by migrant South Asian communities into a contemporary urban area aimed at attracting Qatari nationals to re-inhabit the centre of their city. The majority of Qatari nationals moved out of the area in the 1970s and 1980s to suburban villas where there is more space and privacy, better suited to their preferred lifestyle. The redevelopment is part of Qatar's nation-building programme, with the specific aim of 'Qatarising' the downtown area. The area has an urban history that can be traced back to the 1930s, when rapid urbanisation followed the discovery of oil in 1939 during the period

of the British Protectorate (1916-1971). The area includes traces of this British history, in the form of farmhouse called Zarah al Mustasha used by the British Consulate in the 1950s, as well as the early Qatari occupation in the architectural style of some of the buildings. From the 1960s, migrant workers predominantly from India, Nepal and Bangladesh moved in and set up businesses, renting the properties from Qatari landlords until they were re-homed in 2011 in a purpose-built village some distance from downtown Doha.

The Msheireb Arts Center (MAC), located in a 1950s school near the redevelopment, houses the Echo Memory collection of found objects that largely represents the lives of the South Asian communities and is now used, amongst other things, as inspiration for artwork by Qatari artists to be included in the new development, a complete reimagining of the objects. The Echo Memory Project (Sada Thakerat al Makan) was initiated in 2009, the concept of Issa Al Mohannadi, the then CEO of Msheireb Properties (now at Qatar Tourist Authority). The stated aim of the Echo Memory Project, according to Ben Barbour, the curator of the Msheireb Arts Center who joined the Project in 2011, was 'to record and collect the artefacts, stories and memories of the area as Msheireb undergoes extensive regeneration'; 'the role of the MAC is to act as a place to interpret and transform the Echo Memory collection through art practice', with the objects acting as raw materials. Artworks produced from the objects at the Center will be installed on the redeveloped Msheireb site, in buildings and open spaces, as 'visual guides to the site's earlier history'.

Issa Al-Mohannadi worked on the Project with the Qatari artist Khalifa Al-Obaidly, then Assistant Director of Cultural Affairs at Msheireb Properties and now Director of the MAC, two London-based artists, Bobby Lloyd and Sally Labern, and the British architect, Tim Makower, at the time Architectural Language Advisor to Msheireb Properties. The object collecting was carried out by Qatari artists, employees at Msheireb Properties and construction workers working on the site's redevelopment, many of whom were from the same countries as the communities represented by the majority of the material collected from the area's upper strata, the recent habitation by the South Asian community. The collection was gathered in four phases from 2009-2011, following a methodology and typology developed by Lloyd and Labern. The methodology involved numbering each building and attaching the same number to the objects found in that building. The focus in the

collecting process was on the site of collection, rather than the people who owned and used the objects; for example, an object might be identified by the provenance 'Building 6673'. In the Echo Memory Project, Lloyd and Labern created a typology to structure the collecting, as follows:

- Doors, shutters, screens, gates
- Architectural elements
- Building materials- metal, timber
- Tree trunks
- Signage- shops signs & street signs, house numbers
- Light fittings
- Chairs, tables, cupboards
- Cookers, fridges etc.
- Electrical items
- Tools
- Nails, screws, cogs etc
- Coloured glass
- Containers, boxes, packages, suitcases
- Art materials
- Hats, shoes, gloves
- Clothes
- Books
- Stationary
- Posters & advertising
- Photos
- Toys
- Memory documents- personal collections
- Cars etc
- Water tanks
- Large objects

Between 3000-4000 objects were gathered (the inventory is still in progress), and these are now stored either at the MAC building that also functions as the largest artefact in the collection or, if large, at a warehouse. Any typology imposes a logic drawn from the value-perspective of those creating it rather than any intrinsic order – or disorder – of the objects themselves. This typology, with contradictory (why is a fridge not an electrical item?) and ambiguous ('Large objects'; 'Memory documents – personal collections') categories, already excluded many of the objects on the site, privileging objects that would be selected. The collectors (artists) and the agenda, that the objects would form the inspiration for artworks rather than represent their own biographies or the lives of those that used them, perhaps goes some way to explaining the nature of the categories chosen, the objects selected and the recording of the site of collection over the inhabitants. In addition, as the collection formed part of the broader agenda of focussing on Qatari history as part of the official state narrative, an emphasis in the planning was placed on objects that represented the Qatari past. However, the forty-year gap in Qatari habitation naturally resulted in a collection that was more heavily weighted towards the recent occupancy by the South Asian communities. As Barbour notes, the only genuinely 'Qatari' elements were the architectural fragments which reflected an early Qatari architectural aesthetic.

The collection of found objects is used in a number of ways at the Msheireb Arts Center and elsewhere. Some of the objects are carefully displayed as works of art in the small gallery at the Center. These and other objects are used in community workshops involving the South Asian construction workers employed by Msheireb Properties, offering, for example, English language/art workshops in an attempt, as Barbour state, to 'redress the balance' between the disenfranchised source community and the reuse of its possessions for a Qatari-only future. Al Mohannadi's stated idea was that the collection would create continuity between the old and new Msheireb area (Barbour pers. comm. 2013) which translates as creating a link between the original Qatari habitation up until the 1960/70s, and the future Qatar occupation in the 2020s. Al Mohannadi, with his interest in art and culture, was concerned with transforming the objects into art for consumption by contemporary Qatari society, regardless of which society they were originally drawn from (Barbour pers. comm., 2013); for Al Mohannadi the objects themselves had no intrinsic value but were catalysts, vehicles for contemporary artistic expression and the expression of Qatari identity. The objects might be

'neglected items brimming with unwritten local history' (Fox 2012: 80), but this local history is not of primary interest in the project.

However, as Barbour observes, '[e]ven a cursory inspection of the storage rooms at the MAC reveals that there are multiple histories, narratives and identities that can be found within the collection' (2012: unpaginated). An example of the resistance of these narratives to suppression can be found in the proposed displays for the 'Memories of Msheireb' gallery in the Mohammed Bin Jassim House Museum (MBJ House),ⁱ one of four heritage house museums created as part of the Msheireb redevelopment. The role of MBJ House is to narrate the history of the Msheireb area in a sequence of displays that locates the evolution of the area within the wider history of Qatar and its economic development, with an emphasis on Qatari habitation and use. MBJ house, along with the other heritage house museums, is being designed by Ralph Applebaum Associates (New York), with the content development led by Barker Langham. The team contributing to the 'Memories of Msheireb' gallery also includes Ben Barbour with his Qatari colleagues from the MAC, Khalifa Al Obaidly and Abdulla Al Naama, and the Msheireb Museums Director, Scott Cooper and two Qatari colleagues from his office, Nisreen Al Malek and Fahad Al Turkey, focussing on object selection. The architect Tim Makower will work on the interpretation. With such a range of nationalities, disciplines, interests and agendas, the gallery has gone through a number of editions before arriving at a set of designs Barbour considers appropriate. The 'Memories of Msheireb' gallery will contain five themed cases linked to a sequence of oral histories gathered from the recent South Asian inhabitants of the area, as follows:

1. Early settlement: 1930s-1950s
2. Events and celebrations
3. Electricity
4. Trade and commerce
5. Healthcare and education

The associated oral histories are carefully curated to cast the transformation of the Msheireb site as one of opportunity for the South Asian inhabitants and to allow a positive reflection on the vibrancy of the area. The cases will present dense displays of the found objects, chosen for their link to the theme, but also with an emphasis on their aesthetic appeal, rather than a tight fit to, for example, chronology. Barbour reports that amongst the Qataris there was

scepticism of the relevance of displaying everyday items, contrasting with his own fascination with such objects. Barbour's own writing on the subject (2012) references the work of Victor Buchli on archaeologies of the recent past (for example, Buchli and Lucas 2001; Buchli 2010) and William Rathje and Cullen Murphy (2001), who founded the Garbage project in Tucson Arizona, which articulates the revelatory nature of discarded objects in relation to people's lives. In the final display designs, however, Barbour's interest in the social and historical value of the objects is subsumed within his aesthetic impulse as an artist-curator, and the objects are organized and presented with an emphasis on shape, form, texture and colour, so that at first one simply looks at the displays as art. Where Al Mohannadi aimed to produce new work inspired by these objects, Barbour simply presents the objects themselves, and asks that the viewer consider their ordinary beauty. This presentation of the everyday possessions of an excluded community legitimized as art objects allows the community to be represented without overtly subverting the narrative of MBI House and the wider authorized Qatari heritage discourse; the objects are superficially depoliticized and the politics of heritage transcended, allowing another narrative of Qatari history to remain in evidence.

Conclusion

As authors who have spent time in Qatar and the region observe (for example, Fromherz 2012: 6-7; Kamrava 2013: 154), the glittering modernity on display – the high-rise buildings, the museums, the vast American-style campus of Education City/Hamad Bin Khalifa University – do not represent the entirety of Qatari culture and society, whose traditional practices and structures continue, if seldom on public display or accessible to outsiders. The sudden urban and cultural modernity does not represent a rupture with the past (see Appadurai 1996: 3), but Qatar's selective embrace of modernity and its dialectical interaction with global processes. Qatar's collecting processes and modes of display, from the traditional *majlis* to Damien Hirst, illustrate a facet of Qatar's contemporary social conditions and national identity, and demonstrate an active and selective engagement with processes of globalisation and modernity. The pink suitcase from Bombay and other objects in the Echo Memory collection represent another side of this global engagement.

ⁱ Sheikh Mohammed Bin Jassim (1881-1971) lived in Qatar through the demise of the pearling industry and the discovery of oil and acted as mayor of Doha for a period.