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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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Petro(leum)Melancholia, Ecologies & Gulf Futurism in the Work of Design Earth



Figure 13: Rania Ghosn, *El Hadi Jazairy. After Oil: Das Island, Das Crude*. 2016, inkjet print on canvas, 70 × 70 × 2 cm. © Design Earth.

This essay addresses *Das Island, Das Crude*, a drawing from the series *After Oil* by Design Earth. By considering the cartography of time that the drawing offers and taking into account the notion of nostalgia, this essay seeks to explore how possible future scenarios in the Persian Gulf might be narrated.

Design Earth is a collaborative practice led by the Algerian architect El Hadi Jazairy and the Lebanese architect and geographer Rania Ghosn. Their work has embraced the anthropocenic turn (Anker and Edwards Anker). The Anthropocene is a term used to designate the era of earth's history that follows the Holocene in which humanity is seen as a force with a dominant influence on the climate and the environment (Latour 9). Usually, such grand environmental scales easily escape the human eye. Design Earth's goal is to develop a language that translates global changes into humanly relatable designs, stimulating the viewer to approach the environment responsibly.

After Oil renders the embeddedness of petroleum visible in different oil-producing economies and foregrounds the past and present geographies of oil in the Persian Gulf and the surrounding islands (Jazairy and Rania 28). The single works of the series focus on three nodes in the system: firstly, the transit chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz; secondly, the site of one of the largest oil spills in history, Bubiyan Island; and thirdly, the offshore oil extraction and processing facility on the Emirati island Das Island. This essay discusses the drawing *Das Island, Das Crude*, which is part of *After Oil*.

The drawing presents a cross-section of the infrastructure of Das Island, consisting of an oil production station and a fictional subterrestrial scenario made of rock layers, deserted gas, water, and carbon dioxide fields surrounding a vertical drill hole. The drill hole forms the central element of the drawing and connects the subterranean area with the sea as well as parts of Das Island above ground. Within the hole, and thus within the void of exploited oil reservoirs that are marked as white geological formations, are iconic architectural forms stacked on top of each other in a significantly oversized way when compared to the oil infrastructure. Two timelines along vertical axes on the left and right also frame the drill hole. The timeline on the left shows the geological history of the region. This is juxtaposed with the timeline on the right, which presents the architectural history of the United Arab Emirates since 1965. The timeline on the left side starts in the lower corner, at its lowest point in the Jurassic Period, where geological layers of shale are situated five thousand meters below the earth's surface. It rises vertically up to the tertiary period, which lasted from approximately 66 million to 2.6 million years ago, and is present in up to fifty meters of sandstone below the surface. The timeline on the right side starts in the upper right corner and goes downwards, starting with Deird Clocktower (1965) and continuing chronologically with the Central Bank of Dubai (1976), ADMA OPCO Headquarters (1980), Al Attar Tower (1998), Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (2000), ADNOC Headquarters (2006), Index Tower (2004), Burj Al Arab (2007), and finally Burj Khalifa (2010). This list of architectural landmarks that shape the skyline of Abu Dhabi and Dubai corresponds with the iconic buildings shown in the middle of the drawing.

Shifting now to the notion of nostalgia as an analytical category, I draw on Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia as "a sentiment of loss" and as "romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). Concerning temporal directions in which nostalgic feelings can strive, Boym writes that nostalgia "is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways" (xiv).

To explore possible future scenarios in the Persian Gulf that the drawing integrates as potential "sideways" forms of nostalgia, I first address a vision that could be considered as a rather conventional reading of the Persian Gulf before shifting to an alternative vision of the future. Both

visions are strongly related to the rise of oil production at the beginning of the twentieth century, which is considered a crucial moment in the history of Persian Gulf societies.

In the first scenario, fossil fuels, the archetypal modern energy source, contributed significantly to modern prosperity and accelerated the general progress of life as it is known today. For example, Das Island, an island lying off the coast of Abu Dhabi, has developed into a major oil and gas facility since the first expeditions there in 1953. Here Abu Dhabi processes, stores, and exports crude oil pumped from offshore fields. Such exports are a mainstay of the economy and, consequently, a significant driver of urbanization (Bukhamseen and Karimi 204). On the one hand, the desire to continue this success story may seem obvious. Accordingly, contemporary future-oriented development plans projected by Gulf state governments usually integrate megaprojects, high-tech infrastructures, and militarized spaces of consumption and surveillance, fostering utopian scenarios of hyper-driven and technology-focused times-to-come (Parrika 46). On the other hand, predictions of oil depletion, the negative consequences of oil production for the environment, and the threat of climate change may produce somewhat dystopian future visions in a social, economic, and environmental sense.

To what extent does the drawing *Das Island, Das Crude* arrange time, and in which ways might nostalgic feelings be explored here? At first glance, when one looks at the timelines that co-exist on the map, one might think the drawing tells stories about the past in particular. But when we take a closer look, an unusual way of creating temporal complications becomes visible. The represented timelines move in opposite directions. With that, time markers located on the same horizontal level on the geological and the architectural history timelines become connected at a certain point in time. For example, Burj Khalifa is brought in connection with the Jurassic Period. As the tallest building on earth, is rising up, and at the same time, drilling goes deeper and deeper into the ground. The ambiguity in the drawing between the linear notion of progress and an entanglement with the past remains unresolved. Within the idea of the Anthropocene, humanity has become a geological force that is willing and able to extract oil from a depth of five thousand meters. In this context, the deserted oil fields and the architectural landmarks in the center of the drawing represent the exploitative treatment of the earth by humans since the turn of the twentieth century (Anker and Edwards Anker). One way of reading *Das Island, Das Crude* from today's perspective is that the drawing may evoke nostalgic feelings as sentiments of loss, of the unbroken belief in narratives of modernity, of the world as a commodity, and of industrial progress as an escape from nature's determinations and limits (Jazairy and Rania 13).

In yet another reading of the drawing, connecting these two different temporalities suggest a more troubling message. On one side of the drawing is the very long and slow timescale of the earth's geological history; on the other side, there is the timeline of Dubai's architectural history, which is very short in comparison. By juxtaposing these timescales, a kind of opposing acceleration can be noticed. The hyper-driven progress caused by oil wealth has caused a quantum leap and a temporal gap in the history of the societies in the Persian Gulf. Two different temporalities that present the times before and after the discovery of oil have been stitched together, and a piece of history is missing (Orton). In this sense, the architectural elements in *Das Island, Das Crude* could be read through the idea of nostalgia as a sentiment of loss that is longing for a temporal epoch that has never actually existed in the societies of the Persian Gulf states. In this case, nostalgic feelings are directed sideways toward a dislocated temporality.

The iconic buildings can simultaneously be seen as representing the oil-driven past-to-future visions of the United Arab Emirates and as an expression of the cultural expectations that were fabricated in the period of modern civilization towards the future (Parrika 43). These expectations might have been accompanied by nostalgic feelings as a kind of romance with a fantasy of one's

own making. In a way, this fantasy has materialized in the buildings depicted in the drawing, which seem to refer to different temporalities. For example, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, as a sacred building, may refer to tradition and religion. In contrast, Burj Khalifa may refer to excessive growth and a technology-fixated future in which all issues can be solved by technology and capital.

In conclusion, the way time is arranged in *Das Island, Das Crude* has a liberating potential that works against already existing conventional future visions. *Das Island, Das Crude* tells stories in a way that creates a different sensitivity to time and in which the future may be read as a scenario that is not already prescribed in set temporal coordinates or continuums. The drawing invites the viewer to imagine possible future scenarios that oscillate between the utopic and the dystopic. In this way, it has the potential to stimulate the disentanglement of the complicated relationship between humanity and earth.

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