



INTERVIEWS

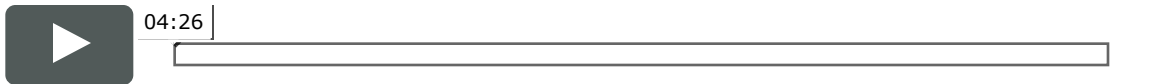
Image Appropriation

Urok Shirhan in Conversation with Stephanie Bailey

Stephanie Bailey

009_05 / 30 November 2015

This conversation with Urok Shirhan is framed around a performance staged by the artist in 2013 as part of Home Works 6 and Matthias Lilienthal's X-Apartments project, in which Shirhan offered visitors the chance to obtain 'Membership to the Occupation of Iraq'. Shirhan, Iraqi-born and raised in the Netherlands, talks about this project in relation to a later 2014 work, *Children of the Left*, and explains how the Beirut performance came out of a reaction to a 2003 video by Paul Chan, *Baghdad in No Particular Order*. Composed of images taken during Chan's trip to Iraq, Shirhan was struck by the similarity between Chan's images and those belonging to her father. This resulted not only in *Membership to the Occupation of Iraq*, but a series of studies titled *Occupy Baghdad*, including *Occupy Baghdad: Study I* (2012), in which Shirhan re-created Chan's video using her father's footage instead.



Urok Shirhan

Children of the Left, 2014

4 mins 26 secs

Stephanie Bailey: I wanted to start by discussing your 2014 video work, *Children of the Left*, because it speaks to the legacy of Communism in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond, which led many, your family included, to flee, since communist parties presented the greatest opposition to Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The work begins with the images of a stately colonial building, followed by a slow sweep over what seems to be a college yearbook. The images are accompanied by the following captions, as you zoom in on faces and names:

WE CAME HERE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. FIRST, FROM GERMANY. HITLER'S GERMANY. THEN MUSSOLINI'S ITALY. FRANCO'S SPAIN. IN CHILE, OUR PARENTS FIGHT THE MILITARY REGIME. IN GHANA, FIGHTING BRITISH COLONIALISM. IN KURDISTAN, FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE. PALESTINE. ANGOLA. IRAN. ETHIOPIA. CHINA. YUGOSLAVIA. IRAQ. WE ALL CAME HERE, BECAUSE WE HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON. WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF THE LEFT.

Children of the Left is a kind of historical and political cartography infused with your own personal biography. It accepts the inheritance of a historical and political struggle that is contradictory, ongoing, and displaced.

Urok Shirhan: When I started asking myself how I arrived at communism, I realized it was exactly through migration. The fact that I was born in exile and ended up in the Netherlands is a migratory tale influenced entirely by one political idea: communism. When I considered that, I started to think how strange it is that one has to find a trajectory when considering such an inheritance. It's as if my entire existence is built on a single idea that I'm not even sure I properly understand. What is this idea of communism? Is it the same communism that we refer to now in exhibitions? Is it the communism that people regret? Is it Stalin? Is it the failed communism, or is it a different communism that my parents still identify with today?

SB: It's interesting how for you, communism and exile are one and the same. This touches on the relationship between communism and post-colonialism, and the two world wars in the twentieth century that resulted in your existence as an Iraqi who was born and raised in the Netherlands. Picking up on what you said about your life, or identity, being rooted in a legacy of migratory politics, I wanted to expand the frame and think about the historical point in which a certain kind of unravelling occurred within the region: the collapse of the Ottoman empire. So much of what is happening in the region today has to do with the catastrophic break down of an empire that essentially turned the Middle East into a new frontier for the Great Powers. It's really where everything started – the Palestinian mandate, for instance.

US: Yes, that's when Iraq was created as a concept and a border. A visual essay I wrote, titled '[i]legal Bodies: A Personal Genealogy of Citizenship' (2014), is based on a document I found in my parents' archive that was issued in Baghdad in 1973. It states my grandmother's former identity as an Ottoman and her new identity as an Iraqi. Departing from this document, I began tracing the idea of genealogy through my parents' political trajectory and the changes in Iraqi Nationality Law at coinciding moments. There was a moment in Iraqi history when political dissidents, mainly communists, had their Iraqi nationality stripped, in accordance with 'Resolution No. 666 of 1980' that stated: 'The Iraqi nationality shall be dropped from any Iraqi if it is appeared that he is not loyal to the homeland, people, higher national and social objectives of the [Ba'athist] Revolution.'^[1]

More recently, in 2006, Resolution No. 666 was repealed and a new resolution was put in place allowing Iraqis to have two nationalities 'Article 10: I – An Iraqi who acquires a foreign nationality shall retain his Iraqi nationality.'^[2]

[Il]legal Bodies

*A Personal Genealogy
of Citizenship*

Urok Shirhan



Urok Shirhan, *[il]legal Bodies: A Personal Genealogy of Citizenship*, 2014. Visual essay.
Copyright and courtesy the artist.

For me, personally, *Children of the Left* (2014) marked a shift in thought for me. Prior to that work, I had been constantly preoccupied with my parents' history – interviewing them and digging up old photographs and documents. But as soon as I asked them questions, I realized I wasn't interested in finding answers at all: I didn't need to be conclusive. The fact of posing the questions was more telling. This resulted in *Communist Parents* (2013), with the answers deliberately omitted. It was the moment at which I understood that the focal point of my enquiry was actually not my parents, but this second generation that I am a part of – the 'children of the Left' – and it considers what we inherited and what we carry as children of this legacy.

SB: What is this legacy?

US: It's not about being communist children. It's about being children of the left and what it is we do with that inheritance. The ways in which we position ourselves regarding this legacy is a different question: it differs from

person to person and from region to region. It all depends on how things were enacted, employed, how these stories were told and what images we decide to keep or revisit. This is how the question of continuity, discontinuity and inheritance comes into play. More recently, I began to wonder: did I inherit a cause or did I inherit a loss? Was I given a cause to enact, or was I given a loss that I am trying to come to terms with?



Urok Shirhan, *Children of the Left*, 2014. Video.

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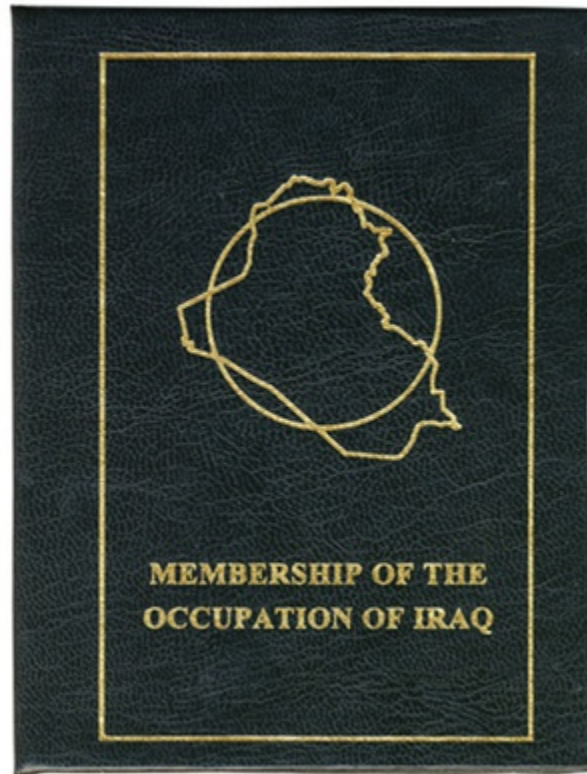
SB: What comes to mind when I watch *Children of the Left* is the common struggle of the Global South or the post colonies. It's interesting to think about how communism really fed into these struggles as well and became, for a moment, a viable option, yet was then subsumed into the politics of the Cold War. This takes us back to the legacy of the Ottoman collapse, the First World War, and the unravelling and attempted restructuring of an entire region that somehow failed.

This really reminds me of Maryam Jafri's *Independence Day 1934–1975* (2009–ongoing), which is a series of

images that she collected from archives showing the first independence days of colonial states. It was a comparative study into what was really happening when these post-colonies gained their independence and it showed that they were simply 'changing the tablecloth', in so many ways – in other words, though 'independence' was gained, new nation states simply organized themselves in the manner of the colonizers: the systems essentially stayed the same.

US: It's interesting, particularly in these moments, to think of continuities within these changes. The grid shifts or the tablecloth has changed but there are still people with ideas, building and working together and thinking about how to live as a society. It's not necessarily a different position, though: the same people are still at the table or trying to get to it. This is the loss, or loss of leverage: politics is somehow taken away from us.

SB: This is a great moment to bring in *Membership of the Occupation of Iraq* (2013), which was part of Home Works Forum 6 and the X-Apartments project by Matthias Lilienthal, then resident professor of the Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut (2012–2013). You staged the performance in a book binding shop, right?



Urok Shirhan, *Membership of the Occupation of Iraq*, 2013. Visual essay.
Copyright and courtesy the artist.

US: Yes, even though the whole point of X-Apartments is to take up residence in someone's home, which is how Matthias has staged it in other cities in the world. But I did not want to stage my performance in a private home for different reasons. The main reason being the history of Beirut and the civil war, during which people went through the trauma of being displaced from their homes and not being able to return. As someone who is also familiar with different forms of forced displacement it was impossible for me to justify kicking people out of their homes in order to produce an artwork, so I discussed with Matthias that I would not work that way.

Then, one day, as we were walking through the neighbourhood I saw a working bookbinder's shop with the door open. This seemed ideal for me, firstly because as an artist bookmaking and printed matter is one of the few 'material' and tactile crafts I am really in to: something I feel have a relationship with. Secondly, and most importantly, this was a workshop – a place for production. For the performance, I insisted that the bookbinder's staff did not cease activities or interrupt their work. I would just have a desk and produce something in the shop

alongside them, and they were compensated with rent. It felt like a fair exchange.

Of course, when thinking about what to make, I wanted to work with the context. In the shop, they usually print and bind academic theses and materials, but also Qur'ans and other books that often have this kind of aesthetic – burgundy, fake leather with gold embossing. It's a certain aesthetic, not necessarily one that I would implement elsewhere, but one that seemed to work with my intentions, which was basically to invite unsuspecting visitors to become Members of the Occupation of Iraq. In order to entice the visitors to become members, I would offer them a membership book, hand-bound in the shop itself. After all, if you are going to stage a performance in which you tell random people they are eligible to become official Members of the Occupation of Iraq, the book I was going to make had to be a beautiful and desirable object.

SB: How was this allegiance formalized in the performance?

US: After an introductory pitch to the two or three visitors who would enter the bookbinder's shop at scheduled times, I ask them to answer the questions on the application form in order to assess their eligibility for becoming members. I briefly introduce the Membership – outlined in the Membership Conditions and Terms of Agreement – as being specifically based on the *virtual occupation* of Iraq, that is: through the production and consumption of images, artworks and other cultural products. If, after the questionnaire and conversation they still agreed to become members, we both signed the form and the Membership booklet. The new member left with the book, and I was left with the form.

I wanted the performance to be more or less a fair exchange. I didn't want to hijack my audience or make them work for me. I have a problem with projects in which artists rely entirely on audience members creating the work, entrapping the audience in a situation where they are involuntarily producing content for the artist. I don't find that a fair position. Therefore, if I wanted something from the audience then I had to give them something in return.



SB: Have you done anything with the forms that you collected from the performance?

US: So far I have not articulated a continuation of the Membership nor have I used the forms and documents in any way, and I'm not sure if it's necessary to use them. There is something beautiful about the idea that the 250 members of this fictional occupation have dispersed all over the world since the performance and that I have these documents to commemorate that. In a way, I also want to be careful not to ruin the reality of the fiction. Through the forms I have collected all of these email addresses but I don't want to send people anything that isn't related to their membership, if it all. There were particular aesthetics to that moment of encounter, the site of production and the way the exchange took place that I think should remain intact.

SB: Of course, the whole project really came out of your encounter with Paul Chan's *Baghdad in No Particular Order* (2003), a video composed of images Chan took on a visit to Baghdad. As you told me once before, when

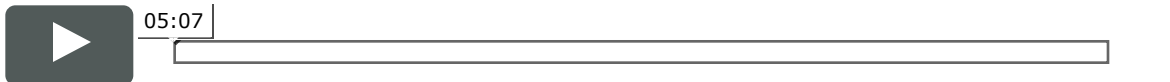
you saw the work what immediately struck you was the familiarity you had with those images: identical to those in your father's footage. This resulted in *Occupy Baghdad Study II* (2012), in which you re-created Chan's video but using your own images instead; a kind of statement of ownership articulated through direct appropriation.

US: *Occupy Baghdad Study I (What's Mine is Ours)* was composed of personal photographs that feature my family in Baghdad and media images of Iraq combined into one photo album. The basic gesture of mixing up real, personal, and private family photos with 'public' images was one of the first exercises. I began looking at these media images of Iraq and Iraqi people and wondered: am I one of them? Do I look like them? Are these the images that people have in mind when they first meet me? At the same time, I was encountering them on a different scale with Paul Chan's work, which also had to do with the ways in which artists and academics have been using the images of Iraq since the Iraq war as a point of contestation, a symbol of struggle or solidarity, and so on.

Consequently, I started building a database of all the artworks that were created in relation to Iraq since 2002 and 2003 to examine those questions and to look at how artists have worked with the image of Iraq. But then something else happened. I was going through fourteen VHS tapes of footage that my father filmed during his and my mother's first trip back to Baghdad in 2003, about one month after the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship following the American invasion. Their trip marked a return after 25 years of forced exile. An artist himself, my father took it on himself to conduct interviews with other artists and intellectuals in an attempt to recount the way in which cultural production in Iraq had been affected during Saddam's Ba'athist regime. The footage was wide-ranging. It included anything from home videos, like my cousins dancing in the living room for instance, images of the first Communist red flag-filled demonstration in over three decades, Al-Mutanabbi Street's famous book market, scenes from moving cars and Al Shabandar – one of Baghdad's oldest remaining café's – and a donkey in front of an anti Ba'athist graffiti-filled wall.

At first, I was afraid to touch the images because they were family images; personal and precious. But then for a couple of months during the winter of 2011, together with a group of artists, academics and activists, I became part of the encampment at Occupy Amsterdam. We maintained a collective tent and organized daily readings, screenings and seminars around the topics of art and politics. It was at this time I decided to work through my father's footage.

During the careful process of cutting up and trying to edit this video material in many different ways, I came across Paul Chan's *Baghdad in No Particular Order* (2003). His 51-minute video was filmed in Baghdad in 2002 during his stay as part of activist group 'Voices in the Wilderness', right before the United States' military invasion in Iraq. But to my complete surprise and confusion, his footage was nearly identical to my father's footage and featured many of the same scenes and sometimes exact locations. Girls dancing in living rooms; the same book market of Al Mutanabbi; scenes filmed from a moving car as well as an identical close-up of a painting inside the same Al Shabandar café. There were some differences: where my father's footage features a donkey, Paul Chan's video instead features a monkey. And so, almost through sheer obsession and impulse, I decided to edit my father's material in order to mimic Chan's video as precisely as possible, which included having to violently stretch, crop, and cut footage featuring my relatives in Iraq.



Urok Shirhan

Baghdad in No Particular Order, 2013

5 mins 7 secs

I found myself wondering: Why does this footage look the same? How can it look the same? What does it mean that it looks the same? Is it the same? It's the same image, but is it the same image? Do I have to look at the framework outside of it, such as who made it? Does that make a difference in terms of authenticity and authority? Having the right to speak for, with, or on behalf of? And there again I have that idea of what's mine is ours but actually, what's ours is ours – it's all ours.

SB: With *Occupy Baghdad Study I* you said dealing with your personal images and the images that were sourced from the media outlets was a way for you to think of Baghdad not only as your own but everyone else's. But then with *Occupy Baghdad Study II* you identify three positions: your father's, Paul Chan's, and your own. And I wonder if you can articulate what those three positions are?

US: I think there are different things: firstly, there are three artists. Then there are roughly three generations. And there's the geographic relation to Iraq: my father is Iraqi and was forced to leave and has been living in exile since; Paul Chan is an American who has been to Iraq and been in Baghdad; and I'm an Iraqi child of the diaspora who has never been to Iraq. In terms of the question of authority, who has the most? Looking at my position with the other two, I wonder: do I have more of a right to speak of and for Iraq? Does it mean something else when I speak about Iraq as opposed to an American speaking about Iraq, when I've actually never been there? Is authority about being there and seeing it with your own eyes, having the ability to go, having the audacity to speak? Or is it that I have some sort of bloodline that gives me more power or

authenticity to speak about a place?

No – just because I'm Iraqi, whatever that strange concept might mean, doesn't necessarily mean that I have more of a right compared to someone else to talk about Iraq. And from that thinking came the thought that authority has to be equal – we all have this right but this also comes with responsibility.

SB: This makes me think about the inheritance of loss and how you articulated that in your performance in Beirut. What's interesting about the project in Beirut is that it stakes the claim that Baghdad essentially belongs to everyone. Just as you once remarked that seeing Chan's work made you realize that your claim to Iraq was equally as problematic as Chan's.

US: Working through the remake of Paul Chan's video made me take the decision to state that we all have a right to speak about anything, anywhere. At that point, I was thinking about how with rights come responsibilities. So I began thinking about what that entailed – what is this question of responsibility? And how can I think that through in an interesting and productive way? The terms 'responsibility' and 'complicity' can become dead weights, endpoints at which we arrive at the conclusion that we are all guilty and that's it. This is something I wanted to subvert because it's not workable and can't go anywhere.

This was really where I located the idea of *Occupy Baghdad*. We have the occupation of land through a foreign invasion: not only an occupation of a place, but of images, ideas, and thoughts. I came up with the title during Occupy Amsterdam, when the word 'occupy' somehow had this positive connotation of reclaiming, taking back what is already ours and reshaping it collectively. That we didn't know exactly why we came together and tried to figure out how we were going to work together was predicated on recognizing first that this public space, or the public imaginary, is ours, then deciding what to do with our rights and responsibilities. And this is where the *Membership of the Occupation of Iraq* came from.

I think of the membership as a placeholder for what would otherwise simply be complicity, which is petrifying since complicity is often involuntary. In this respect, membership is potentially an active and more collective form of engagement.



Remake Blue Sky / Left: Paul Chan, *Baghdad in No Particular Order* (2002), Right: Urok Shirhard, Remake of Paul Chan's *Baghdad in No Particular Order* (2012). Video still.

Copyright and courtesy the artist.

SB: And you said that you then decided to go to Goldsmiths, University of London, to untangle some of these ideas.

US: For me what tangibly happened at Goldsmiths and how I started developing some of these questions was that I tried more and more to root the idea that the occupation of images was related to a suspended geography. I'm not only talking about the way post-2002 Iraq has existed in images as part of a kind of global imaginary, but tracing the shape of this thing that has existed in the British imaginary before it existed as a place: Iraq. My final dissertation was titled 'The Slow Violence of Images' because I really needed something beyond the metaphor of how images function and circulate and how we relate to them and so on. I really needed to find ways of articulating the ways in which we look at the image of Iraq in its entirety because it's never settled in a single image or one news broadcast: it's an accumulation that turns into a slow violence.

Interestingly enough, the terminology that was most useful to me in thinking through the effects of the way images function and circulate came from environmentalist studies. The term 'slow violence' is from a book from Rob Nixon called *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), which looks at visibility and non-visibility, spectacular and non-spectacular violence, and atrocities that don't come into instantaneous view but that are nonetheless lethal over longer periods of time. Because they lack this spectacular component and spectacular visibility, bodies and sites affected by slow violence are simply discounted. This kind of violence is not particularly 'sexy' – it takes a long time to be discernible and it's dispersed. Nixon talks about the use of depleted uranium in the Gulf War, which was supposed to be a form of precision warfare, and the way that when the target is hit it starts to refract imperceptible radio-active glass particles, after which there is no way of retracing where it came from, where it's going and how far it has spread. This describes a similar quality to that of the image in the way that once it's out there it mutates, it spreads, it has different contexts and it keeps working but you cannot trace it back to a single culprit, there's no single cause and effect which makes the question of responsibility, accountability very difficult, if not impossible, to trace back. But still we are left with the debris.

SB: That brings us full circle back to *Children of the Left* and the questions that you laid out with this inheritance that is dispersed through bodies and histories all over the world, so much of it related to the breakdown of the Ottoman empire and the rebuilding of the post-colonial regions using structures taken from the western world as a result of that legacy. In so many ways, this is the world we have all inherited; and this inheritance also includes what you might call the children of the Right.

US: Yes. Actually, a friend in Cairo recently told me about someone they know who was Iraqi and whose father had been deep in the Ba'athist party, and I was like, 'You've found my twin!' – a woman more or less my age who has also been dealing with this inheritance but exactly on the other side. Her father would have wanted to kill my father and vice-versa. I immediately asked if I could speak to her, but also said that it would need someone to facilitate the discussion because it could be really intense. I can just imagine it derailing, so I think it would be useful to have someone be part of the conversation somehow who is not Iraqi and isn't part of the Ba'ath opposition but is nonetheless engaged and able to discern whatever might go on – an interested party, so to speak. For me, in that sense, Paul Chan was a blessing, because I didn't have that distance looking at the images of my relatives in my own work. Without a proxy, it would just become a private conversation, and I think it should be more than that.

SB: The proxy being the third person, party, or view?

US: Yes, the proxy being the *dispositif*, a lens, an external perspective, or voice.

SB: Which brings us to your project for Ibraaz Platform 009, *Watani Al Akbar*, in which you take the classic 1960 operetta originally composed by Mohammad Abdel Wahab and sung by leading Arab singers of the time, Abdel Halim Hafez, Sabah, Fayza Kamel, Shadia, Warda and Nagat. It is considered to be the anthem of Pan Arabism as advocated by Gamal Abdel Nasser, then president of Egypt. Could you talk about that?

US: In the case of *Watani Al Akbar*, it's the first instance that I am enacting the role of the proxy myself

somehow. With this project I feel I am venturing in a new direction where I am positioning myself inside the work, in this case quite literally: I am giving my own voice. There is a lot happening in this gesture that I am only starting to unpack, but I think of it as a kind of temporal ventriloquism, where the voice as proxy merges two different temporalities. There is something at once megalomaniac and silly about manipulating the biggest stars of the 20th century to embody my voice, but to me the gesture feels rather genuine. As an artist, I quite often find myself stuck inside my own head, analysing and debating ideas before they ever have a chance to exist. With this project, the ideas were embodied and enacted before my head even had chance to interfere!

Watch Watani Al Akbar, commissioned especially for Ibraaz projects.

Urok Shirhan (b. 1984) studied Fine Arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, and holds an MA in Visual Cultures from Goldsmiths' University of London. She was a participant in Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program in Beirut (2012-2013) and is currently a resident researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht (2015-2016).

[1] See: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b51d28.html>

[2] See: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b1e364c2.pdf>

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