

*PART A*

*Written document*

**OBJECTS REMOVED FOR STUDY**

RAFAEL GUENDELMAN HALES

PUBLISHED IN 2018

PRINTED IN THE UK

# OBJECTS REMOVED FOR STUDY

RAFAEL GUENDELMAN HALES

MA SITUATED PRACTICE  
THE BARTLETT SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
UCL - LONDON



## CONTENT

### I- COLLECTING AND CENTRALIZING

- a. The Ashurbanipal Library
- b. Empires: Defining Iraq's histories and territories

### II- LAYERS OF HISTORY

- a. Accessing past through materiality
- b. Fragmented stories from the community

### III- A COLLECTIVE LIBRARY

- a. Collectivity
- b. Re Writing
- c. Re placing the Library



FIG 1 – *Ceramics in process.*

## ABSTRACT

'Objects removed for study' consists of the recreation of a fraction of the Library of Ashurbanipal by a group of from the 'Iraqi Community Association' in London. The original Library, comprised of a series of ceramic books and ceramic artifacts, is the oldest Library preserved in the world and is originally from Nineveh, present-day Mosul in Iraq. Originally, the aim of the Library was to serve as a guide for the King Ashurbanipal in order to help him to take the best decisions for his empire. The majority of the content was information related to omens, divinatory texts and astrological interpretation. It was brought into England in the 19th Century by the archeologist Austin Henry Layard and still remains as part of The Middle East collection in the British Museum.

The project, inspired by the main role of the Library, asked the group of women to rewrite the books with messages and commentaries that respond to the contemporary situation in Iraq - one that represents a moment of new opportunities after years of dictatorship, occupation and internal turmoil. Through several sessions, each of the participants created their own ceramic pieces for a hypothetical Ashurbanipal Library today. These new artifacts were exhibited in the Iraqi Association of London in a temporary installation where each of the texts inscribed in the ceramic tablets was read to the audience.

Through the remaking of the Ashurbanipal Library, with new insights from the Iraqi community in London, there is an attempt to respond to the original Library held in the British Museum and the symbolic implication of that space. Whilst the project focuses on the Library, the aim of producing the pieces within the community centre is to some degree a mechanism to envisage the library outside the confines of the museum. This brings about an opportunity for the community to explore their own heritage and their displaced identity through the pieces. Ultimately, the project strives to rethink critically both the identity in the contemporary context of displacements and the role that these old artifacts, colonized years ago, can serve to articulate new sensibilities and possibilities today.

Author's note

*The following text does not have the intention to explain or create a specific reading of the work, but to expand its access points. Its purpose is to share the theoretical ideas that motivated my research, while presenting its historical context and my personal comments about it.*

*This publication goes hand in hand with part B of this dissertation, which offers a photographic documentation of the new library.*



# I- COLLECTING AND CENTRALIZING

## a. THE ASHURBANIPAL LIBRARY

The Ashurbanipal Library (Fig 2) was one of the first things I saw when I arrived in London. As a tourist, and especially as someone coming from Chile, the collection of the British Museum opened my eyes to various kinds of worlds, but mainly to a big amount of materialities and sensitivities that I didn't have access to until then apart from books and digital platforms. Coming from the margins to a cultural hub makes you feel both anxious and happy. But after this first moment of excitement, a series of questions and strange feelings begin to arise. Where are these objects from? What is happening there today? Where should these objects be?

Some relations and ideas between centre and periphery; travel and exile; identity and violence began to emerge.

The Ashurbanipal Library was the collection of books and artefacts from the Neo Assyrian King Ashurbanipal who, before becoming a king, was raised to be an intellectual and religious person. However, due to a series of family circumstances, he had to take over as King, succeeding his father Esarhaddon. Because of his background, he learned how to read and write in cuneiform, one of the earliest systems of writing, since he was a child. His period as King is well known for his interest in collecting books from all around the territory for his library, which is the oldest surviving royal library today.

In the words of Eleanor Robson<sup>1</sup> (Fig 3), Professor of Ancient Middle Eastern History at UCL, the extended idea of Ashurbanipal as a great warrior is a misconception, as he was much closer to books and mysticism than to military tactics. The library is a collection of clay tablets and fragments containing omens, astrological interpretations, and mystical ideas that Ashurbanipal used to make decisions and guide his empire<sup>2</sup>. All of this endowed his period



FIG 2 – The Ashurbanipal Library.

FIG 3 – Eleanor Robson in her office at the UCL History Department.



<sup>1</sup> Robson, Eleanor (July, 2018). Personal interview.

<sup>2</sup> Asurbanipal inscriptions.



FIG 4 – Tigris River 2018.

with a very special and mystical aura. Despite the above, his empire was like any other empire of the time and extreme violence was exercised in his campaigns and while he was collecting books around Mesopotamia.

“To the height of a foot or more from the floor they were entirely filled with them; some entire, but the greater part broken into many fragments, probably by the falling in of the upper part of the building (...) The cuneiform characters on most of them were singularly sharp and well defined, but so minute in some instances as to be almost illegible without magnifying glass.”<sup>3</sup>

Between the years 1849 and 1851, the excavator Austin Henry Layard found by chance the palace of Ashurbanipal in the old city of Nineveh, nowadays Mosul, Iraq. In a zone that was discarded by the French excavators who were searching for antiquities for the Louvre, Henry Layard found the ruins of what he later discovered was the Ashurbanipal Library. These were the ruins that had survived the big fire after the invasion of the Babylonians and the defeat of Ashurbanipal. Unlike writings on papyrus and fabric, which were totally destroyed by the fire, ceramics were the only pieces that remained. At the time, ceramic tablets were not fired, but thanks to the fire they hardened, which is why they were preserved until now<sup>4</sup>. It is important to

---

3 Jeanette C. Fincke. *The Babylonian Texts of Nineveh: Report on the British Museum's "Ashurbanipal Library Project"*. Ed. *Archiv für Orientforschung*. 2003. P113.

4 Robson, Eleanor. Personal interview. July, 2018.



FIG 5 – “The Library that contains all knowledge”.

highlight that the extraction of artefacts in that territory was possible thanks to the relationship established between the European colonial projects and the Ottoman Empire, which occupied that territory until the end of the First World War.

Today, next to the Ashurbanipal Library, the British Museum exhibits a sign that reads 'The Library that contains all knowledge' (Fig 5). This sentence invites us to think about the concept of knowledge and what defines something as such. It also invites us to think about the concept of "container" and the idea of this space as one devised to keep and organise knowledge. Both ideas are interesting to think of retrospectively in the context of Ashurbanipal's act of collecting and today's collecting endeavour of The British Museum, one of the icons of global accumulation. Both collections are imperial projects that gather the knowledge of others; other babylonions, other Iraqis, etc.

This allows the act of collecting to be understood as a laudable yet violent action. It is about knowledge for learning but also for possessing things that give you power and the possibility to impose a particular vision of the world. These are objects removed for study, but at the same time objects removed for power.

## b) DEFINING OTHERS' NARRATIVES AND TERRITORIES

Extraction generates a hole, a loss. The objects removed by Layard stand as the metaphor of a territory that was sacked and exploited in the name of knowledge, security, and democracy in the last century. Iraq, the country that was once the origin of civilization, is today a fragmented and damaged territory. The western influence in Iraq and the Middle East has created a deep loss in terms of both narrative and territory, due to the imposition of new human flows brought by the transformation of space.

In particular, in the context of The British Museum, the act of collecting is connected with the idea of territorial expansion (Fig) and the technological capacity brought by the Industrial Revolution to conquer foreign territories, together with the humanistic endeavour to see the world and learn from others. The collection of others' cultural artefacts served not only as a physical protection but also as a way to build a narrative related to ideas of universality from the French Revolution. The concept of 'universality' originated under the notion



FIG 6 – Map of Iraq created during the Sykes and Picot Agreement (Above).

FIG 7 – Blast walls in Iraq (Below).



FIG 8 – Iraqi urban areas recovering after conflicted periods.

of a universal republic<sup>5</sup> that, to some extent, meant the imposition of western ideas to uncivilized others, namely Africa, South America or the Middle East. In this way, the territory becomes irrelevant, since it is the same model that is used repeatedly in different historical circumstances, with different excuses. “The universality arrives with a gun in one hand, a bible in the other”<sup>6</sup>.

Griselda Pollock defines culture as a space of dispute, as “the social level in which those images of the world and definitions of reality are produced, which can be ideologically mobilized to legitimize existing domination and subordination relationships between classes, races, and sexes’ ”<sup>7</sup> reality is similar to the aforementioned relationship between knowledge and power, understanding that “history is always written by conquerors”<sup>8</sup>. Those with the power of knowledge are the ones that build the narratives that are maintained over time.

In the case of The Ashurbanipal Library, England not only extracted it but also organised it. The museum created a logic according to their own interests and encased the library behind a glass, under a cellar. The narrative developed by the museum has the purpose of preserving heritage and studying it, but it leaves aside two other narratives that I believe are quite important. The first one is related to the extraction of artefacts and the possible ethical and political questionings around this action. Secondly, there is a narrative related to what is happening now in those territories, including the physical and symbolic reconstruction process in Mosul, after years of American occupation and ISIS conflicts. For these reasons, these times seem like a good opportunity for these countries to go back to their artefacts as a way to rebuild their history.

The imposition of specific narratives onto other cultures and the inherent violence in this action is intimately related, as I said before, to territorial occupation and

---

<sup>5</sup> Njami, Simon. Essay “Dancing with shadows” in Giving Contours to Shadows. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Idem. P.107.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock, Griselda. Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art.

<sup>8</sup> Njami, Simon. Essay “Dancing with shadows” in Giving Contours to Shadows. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 106. 2015



transformation. It is an imposition related to cultural beliefs and spatial organisation.

In the Europe - Middle East relationship, it becomes important to go back to two moments in history. The first of them relates to the looting of artefacts by explorers during the Ottoman Empire, while the second one keeps relation with the British and French occupation of the Middle East after the Sykes and Picot Agreement, when the territory was divided into national states and completely redefined regardless of its history<sup>9</sup>.

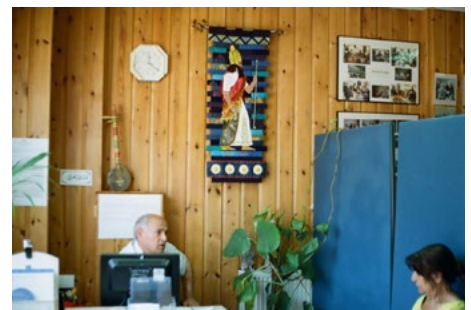
“No map is neutral, and the cartographic representation of Iraq became layered with the territorial interests of governments and corporations. The rise of British Petroleum and other oil companies during the Mandate period cannot be understood as separate from the production of geographical knowledge of the region”<sup>10</sup>

The consequences of imposing the “National State” political system, which was far removed from the political and territorial perspectives of the Arab world, onto a territory of multiple communities with their own traditions persist until today. It is possible to see this impact in the political instability suffered by the countries of the region during the last century and the large number of foreign interventions that still operate there today.

My project takes the Ashurbanipal library as an initial point to research the idea of displaced objects. For this, I got in touch with the ‘Iraqi Community Association’ in London (Fig 9 and 10), which was formed 50 years ago due to political situations. The Association helps the Iraqi community in the UK, providing them with advocacy in legal issues, creating a network to help them to establish further opportunities for themselves in the UK and also works as an important meeting centre for different activities related to culture, politics and expat iraqi society in general.

I became involved in two groups of the Association: the Old People Group on Tuesdays and the Women Group on Thursdays. Both groups get together weekly to do different activities and share a moment together. It was in the “Women group” with whom I developed a deeper

FIG 9 and 10 – Iraqi Community Association at London.



9 Kaplan, Caren. Aerial surveying as air control. In “The funambulist” 18 Edition: Cartography and Power. 2018.

10 Idem. P 15.

connection and further engaged in a project to reflect on the library beyond the museum. Considering the origin of the library and the current situation in Iraq, I thought it was quite important to think about the narrative of the Ashurbanipal Library today, especially from its displacement, which I came to understand thanks to the members of the Iraqi community through the analogy between displaced people and displaced objects.



FIG 12 – The “Women Group” observing The Ashurbanipal Library.

One of the first activities I conducted was a visit with the ‘Women group’ to the British Museum and the Library (Fig 11 and 12). We took the free tour around the Middle East collection, after which we stopped to eat something. Then, I took the opportunity and asked them about their thoughts on what we had seen. Their first answers were that they had quite enjoyed the day at the museum. There were no critical comments about the fact that a library originally from Iraq was being exhibited in a British museum. But then, I asked them again, and new opinions came up. Some of them said that the Library was safer here than in Mosul, specifically because of the recent events in the city and the destruction of artefacts by ISIS. Others, however, mentioned that because the library had been stolen from Iraq, it should be returned to that territory. It was also said that the returning of these artefacts could boost tourism in the region, and thus, help improve the overall situation there. In any case, there was no consensus about where the Library should remain. My question was uneasy for them, not only because of the paradox of the museum being the entity that once stole the library and now protects it, but also because their own identities are divided between Iraq and England; between a place that represents their history and another one that gave them shelter when their country could not provide that for them.



FIG 12 – The women at the entrance of The British Museum.

## II- LAYERS OF HISTORY

### a. ACCESSING PAST THROUGH MATERIALITY

“Archaeology moves backwards through the course of history, just as the imagination moves back through individual biography. Both represent a regressive force that, unlike traumatic neurosis, does not retreat toward an indestructible origin but rather toward the point where history becomes accessible for the first time”<sup>11</sup>.

Unlike history, archaeology allows touching and feeling the past<sup>12</sup>. While history reconstructs the past from words, archaeology does so from a material level; it does not translate the past, but shows it. As research methodology, archaeology studies the past and allows us to think about it as something that can still have impact today “an unpast past that still influences us and that is still active... not to yet become history”<sup>13</sup>. Thinking about the Ashurbanipal Library today is conceiving it not only as objects inside the cabinets of a museum, but as pieces that can generate a critical way of understanding both stories, that of the Neo Assyrian Empire and that of the Library’s extraction from Nineveh, modern-day Mosul. But overall, archaeology allows us to establish a relationship between the Library and Iraq and England today. In this way, the Library can be an active element to access contemporaneity.

I would like to show the Library as an element connected with the trauma of its extraction, that, as I said before, I think is intimately related with the conflicts in Mosul, Iraq, today. In “Philosophical Archaeology” by Agamben, there is an explicit invitation to use archaeology as a means to access a traumatic past. But more than accessing the past, my interest is also the search of possibilities that reconfigure it, and that could eventually heal it. In a way, it is also about confronting a haunting past<sup>14</sup>. In the case of the Ashurbanipal Library, its extraction appears as more traumatic because the Library is not only an object but also information, text inscribed in a ceramic tablet, literally.

---

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. The signature of All Things: On Method. Zone Book. 2009. P 106.

<sup>12</sup> Ebeling, Knut. There is No Now: An Archeology of Contemporaneity. Sternberg Press. 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Idem. P 66.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, Mark. Ghosts of my life. Zero Books. 2014.



FIG 13 – Moai originally from Easter Island (Chile) that the people from the Island are reclaiming back. They state that the Moai at the museum represents a lost soul.



FIG 14 – Michael Rakowitz, “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist” (2018), on Trafalgar Square’s Fourth Plinth. Sculpture that represents a replica of a Lamassu figure with Dates Envelopes.

For the Iraqi society, connecting with their origins today stands as a fundamental duty. Studying the past in order to rebuild the present is an essential thing to do after any catastrophe. This is something I will delve more deeply into later.

In addition to the aforementioned, researching the extraction and appropriation of the Library is not only relevant for the Iraqi society and culture (or any culture that has been looted<sup>15</sup>), but also for colonial countries. In this case, the artefacts in the British Museum can be seen as evidence of an unethical extraction during the middle of the XIX century, and the photographs of the artefacts, as the catalogue of lost items. Along the same lines, the collection of the Museum can be seen as evidence of a violent British colonial past.



FIG 15 and 16— Antifascist counter protest of an anti-migrant far right demonstration and Pro Remain protesters against Brexit.

In *Cartographies of Absolute*<sup>16</sup>, Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano states that the European expansion during the imperialist project not only affected occupied countries but also the European identity. This can be understood analogously yet inversely in the relationship between colonial expansion and national disorientation, where space is “so far-flung and complex - but most importantly, so spatially segregated from his own - that is not possible to synthesise”<sup>17</sup>. As an interesting hypothesis, it is suggested that colonial expansions could have been one of the reasons for the emergence of European Nihilism; the feeling of being lost and without a deeper understanding of identity. From this perspective, it is possible to think that the colonial past and the guilt arising from it affects not only the relationship with the other but also the relationship with the self. It is, then, an expansion that absorbs the world, and the world overwhelms the self.

In this context, several questions related to the collection of the museum, which are also relevant in other spheres of society today, begin to arise. More specifically, I refer to the attempt of fixing one idea over another, using identity as the main argument. These are

<sup>15</sup> I am not sure whether “looted” is the right word. The concepts referring to the extraction of these artefacts are problematic, as they involve political positions. Instead of “extractions”, words like “lootings”, “stealings”, and “appropriations” could be used. This question is part of the complexity of this issue and its relevance today.

<sup>16</sup> Toscano, Alberto and Kinkle, Jeff. *Cartographies of the Absolute*. Zero Books. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Idem. P. 8



questions about the identity of looted objects and the limit between one identity and the other.

From these questions, museums could be devised as contact zones, places of exchanges between cultures<sup>18</sup>, where collections are a way to connect critical thinking and generate new insights and perspectives. Following this idea of the museum as a hybrid space, I find it quite pertinent to note the “Hello World: Revising a collection”<sup>19</sup> project. In this exhibition, a group of curators took 5 German collections – Alte Nationalgalerie, Neue Nationalgalerie, Museum Berggruen, Sammlung Scharf-Gerstenberg and Hamburger Bahnhof – to challenge the historical concept of “world museum” from the beginning of the XX century. Their intention was to develop a new vision that “scrutinises the blind spots in traditional historiography and underscores the relationships which are capable of accelerating the deconstruction of the western canon”<sup>20</sup>. The works from the different collections played, therefore, new roles in the new contexts. The political statement was both to criticise the past and transform past perceptions through these objects, while assigning them new locations by using materialities of the past.

The opportunity to rethink the old artefacts appropriated by the British in the middle of the XIX century is not only an opportunity to go back and symbolically repair the Iraqi society, but also a way to repair the British conscience. These artefacts are the evidence of both history and trauma.

## b) FRAGMENTED STORIES FROM THE COMMUNITY

Similarly to the archaeological methodology of using materiality to access the past, I like to think about the Iraqi community and its members as a door to access their past and history of displacement. In this way, the Library and the people from the Iraqi community have in common a feeling of discontinuity (temporary dimension) and fragmentation (spatial dimension).

Additionally, migrant flows can be thought of as the

---

18 James Clifford. “Museum as contact zones”. In “Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century”. Harvard University Press. 1997.

19 Exhibition presented in Hamburger Bahnhof - Museum für Gegenwart - Berlin, between the 28 of May to 26 of August of 2018.

20 Schallenberg, Nina and Scharrer, Eva. Hello, World (Booklet). 2018.P 9.



FIG 17 – Fragments of The Ashurbanipal Library.



FIG 19 – The Women Group.

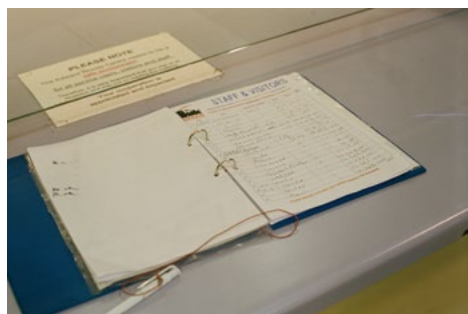


FIG 20 – Assistance list at “Women Group”.

paths of history; the spatialization of time and the past . “Roots and routes are, in other words, two sides of the same coin: roots, signifying identity based on stable cores and continuities; routes, suggesting identity based on travel, change, and disruption”<sup>21</sup>. The Iraqi community in London stands from that narrative: it does not exist without the past that links it to Iraq or without the idea of discontinuity, which is, paradoxically, what gives continuity to the stories of its members. Travel, exile and return represent the picture of a common history developed throughout the last century among the Iraqi people. Their discontinuous stories relate to the methodology of the archaeologist, who does not try to narrate the past in one sealed manner (or in a linear manner like the historian) but, on the contrary, tries to excavate pieces:

“When you excavate something, it’s the other way around, you find the youngest findings at first, and things may be as mixed up as the dirt in the ground. Also the debris tells another story in itself, not the ideal version of wishful thinking, but the Real that is covered by it”<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, the notion of fragment is connected with the separation of a part from the whole. Separation generates a fragment, namely Iraq or the homes and families of the members of the Iraqi diaspora. The ‘Iraqi

---

21 Stanford, Susan. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton University Edition. 1998. P 153.

22 Ebelin, Knut. *There is No Now: An Archeology of Contemporaneity*. Sternberg Press. 2017. P 50.



FIG 21 – The women who participated in the production of the new library.

Community Association' is a centre with the capacity of pulling together a coherent narrative, in the same way that the Museum does with the Library. The community is formed by pieces in transit; a caring shelter for migrants who, in their majority, were persecuted due to political reasons. The centre creates a specific narrative that transcends a national perspective (as it happens in other migrant communities in the world). The concept of fragment can be used as a way to think about other pasts. In addition, it can be linked to the concept of ruin, as in the case of the Ashurbanipal Library, where pieces are mostly incomplete<sup>23</sup>, which demands the creation of new connections and interpretations. This is, in a way, how memory works for individuals, probably similarly to how history is constructed as "an ensemble of ruins"<sup>24</sup>.

This project is an attempt to rethink the Library, especially its content, from stories of exile and movements of peoples. Through several sessions with the 'Women Group' from the 'Iraqi Community Association', I was able to learn details about their biographies, including that they have been emigrating since the 70s, when Saddam took power, and that most of them do not want to go back to Iraq. Most of the women in the community centre talk about Iraq with nostalgia, from a distant, idealising perspective. This view is a critical repercussion of the fragmentation occurred in the Iraqi society, which has considerably affected Iraq's cultural and intellectual scene today and generated a feeling of time discontinuity. Most of the members of the community talk about an Iraq that used to be more culturally developed, free and respectful towards diversity. The 'Iraqi Community Association', to some extent, is an anachronistic secular space of freedom, without strong political or religious ideas.

Studying the Library today, after the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship (1979-2003), American occupation (2003-2011), and conflicts with ISIS (2014-2017), is a unique opportunity to rethink local identity. "The emerging political environment in Iraq represents an opportunity to restructure politics and reinforce the country's war to peace transition"<sup>25</sup>. This new scenario in



FIG 22 and 23 – The Old people group.

<sup>23</sup> The library contains more than 33,000 parts, which are ruins of pieces. Some of them are complete but some of them are not, so the library will never be a te complete whole.

<sup>24</sup> Njami, Simon. Essay "Dancing with shadows" in Giving Contours to Shadows. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 2015. P. 109.

<sup>25</sup> Mehiyar, Kathem. In: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/iraq-s-new-statesman-pub-76244>



FIG 24 – Iraqi demonstration at Trafalgar Square in support of the protest movement in Iraq.

Iraq has also affected the Iraqi community in London. During the time I became involved with the ‘Women Group’, I had the opportunity to participate in different acts and demonstrations related to the need of the new government to not only improve the country’s economy after years of conflict, but also to provide a space where different peoples and ethnic groups can coexist peacefully. One of the main concerns of the women was the sectarianism and division in Iraq. These are problems closely related to the Sykes and Picot agreement after the First World War, which has led to the interventions and war in the territory until now.

As I mentioned earlier, studying the past and origins of Mesopotamia seems a reasonable common ground to rebuild identities, cultures and territories. In her last trip to Baghdad, Eleanor Robson saw Assyrian and Babylonian figures, graffitis and paintings in the streets and blast walls. With shame, she thought about the fact that many of these images were now in Europe and not in Iraq. This is the case, for example, of the Assyrian Wings in the British Museum, in London. Robson added that the majority of these images were appropriated by Saddam Hussein, which makes it possible to infer that their re appropriation by the Iraqi people could bring a special reconnection with the past, after Saddam Hussein’s period of dictatorship.

### III- A COLLECTIVE LIBRARY

#### a. COLLECTIVITY

This project originated from the idea of connecting the Library with Iraq, where it was extracted from. At the beginning, I wanted to travel to Iraq and meet Iraqi archaeologists and people from Nineveh to find the place from where the library was removed. My first idea was to develop an individual project that would be developed throughout my travel. But because of the difficulty of visiting Iraq<sup>26</sup> I decided to stay in London and find a link between England and Iraq. In that process, I learned about the 'Iraqi Community Association' in London and met Rayya (Office manager) and Jabbar (Director), who allowed me to participate in the Association and become involved in the two groups I mentioned previously.

Being in contact with the community and their people led my project through collective paths that I did not consider to be important at the beginning of this process. In the past, I had only worked collectively in relation to teaching and pedagogy, but not actually producing artworks, so this was a new approach for me. From the ideas of the book written by Pablo Helguera "Education for Socially Engaged Art", it is possible to state that the project took a dynamic course catalogued by him as "Creative Participation", where each participant "provides content for a component of the work within a structure established by the artist"<sup>27</sup>.

The social aspect of the methodological process forced me to think about the role of the artist as one that uses dialogue as an essential element in the process of making a piece. Helguera notes the importance of conversation in socially engaged projects as a way to "activate the space between groups and individuals as a zone of potentiality, in which the relationship between contemporary art and life may be renegotiated"<sup>28</sup>. These type of projects encourage not only a professional relationship between the artist and the people, but a close human relationship, where bonds are horizontal



FIG 25 and 26 – Ceramic production at "Grove Community Center"

---

<sup>26</sup> There were various reasons that hindered my idea of travelling to Iraq. The main one, though, was the impossibility of obtaining a visa due to current visa restrictions for foreigners, in relation to ISIS's recruitment project .

<sup>27</sup> Helguera, Pablo. Education for Socially Engaged Art. Jorge Pinto Books. 2011. P. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Idem. P 20.



and fruitful for both parties. Also, it is important to highlight that, by being a project that explores the idea of text fragments and their possible rewriting, the role of dialogue in my research is intrinsic. In this way, the dialogue with the Iraqi community was a key element to define the content of the work as a collective. In a way, this project originated from that flow, just as in the Reunion project<sup>29</sup> by artist Dani Zelko, were unity “is not one, is two. One in relation to another”<sup>30</sup>.

Coming from outside the Iraqi community and speaking very little Arabic, it took me some time to connect with its members and create a bond that could lead to a collective project. And even though my mother is a Palestinian descendent and I feel very attached to that culture, I felt like an outsider. The process of building trust and reciprocity involved learning through experience and trying different strategies, but one of the things that helped the most was the fact that, just like them but from a totally different context, I was also a foreigner with a need for social relations.

One of the exercises I proposed was a dialogue related to their identities through objects that connected them to Iraq (fig). Many of the women in the group brought pictures from when they lived in Iraq, others brought things they used daily like keychains and jewellery, and others brought decorative pieces related to their ancient heritage. I also participated in this exercise and brought a vinyl record from Victor Jara, a Chilean singer-songwriter killed during the Chilean dictatorship. This is a vinyl record that connects me to my own family history: my mom was kidnapped, some members of my family were tortured and others went missing during this period. When I showed and explained to them the context of my object, they became immediately interested. In a way and to different extents, death and violence had been a common element in our stories beyond cultural, political and geographical differences.

The incorporation of dialogue and empathy in my project has plenty to do with the concept of Situated Knowledge by Donna Haraway, “epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality

FIG 27 to 29 – Object from one of the participants emulating an old Ark (above) / Victor Jara record bought in Barcelona this year (middle) / Ceramic plate made by Iraqi Artist Thamir Abbas. Sincretic image of Iraqi and British Culture (below).



29 “REUNIÓN is composed of various acts that involve conversation, reading and writing: daily actions –though at the same time out of the ordinary- that always involve being face to face. Dani Zelko writes down poems that others dictate to him”. De la Garza, Amanda. Retrieved from: <https://www.danizelko.com/>

30 Zelko, Dani. Reunión. Ed. Gato Negro. 2017. P. 117.

and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims”<sup>31</sup>. It was partiality that allowed me to get to know these people and also that gave structure to my project. My purpose was to connect the Library specifically with that space, that specific Iraqi community in London. Specificity is, then, what gives value to this project.

## b) RE WRITING

Elaborating a speech from locality implies the observation of history, understood as the narration of the past, from a different perspective. Locality, in this case, brings out a marginal gaze that opposes the ideas of centralisation and hegemony that I have been developing throughout this text under the idea of collecting and retaining. By symbolically moving the Library from the British Museum to the Iraqi Association, I expected to rethink each of the ceramic tablets in connection with the members of the Iraqi community. History can be a controversial concept, as it involves a generic spectrum of events that are always related to one centralised narrative that belongs to the conqueror. As Njami says, “History is nothing but a tool used to impose a point of view through the suspicious guise of objectivity”<sup>32</sup>. As an alternative concept to history, different authors have started to use the term “story” instead, understanding that this subtle change can be a way to decolonise language, so the “transition from capital H to small h, from a singular History to plural histories would be at the crux of any sequestering endeavour”<sup>33</sup>. Using the word “stories” is a way of looking to the past that defies hegemonic and totalising points of view. In the case of my project, every person that became involved in it was in a way an historical, horizontal, and simultaneous voice, that collectively formed a choral structure. The new Library is a vehicle for that new voice to be read and heard. The concept of locality by Donna Haraway is similar to that stated by Njami, when he thinks about locality as a position to narrate the past:



FIG 30 an 31 – Ceramic production at “The Bartlett School of Architecture”

---

<sup>31</sup> Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No3. 1988). P. 589.

<sup>32</sup> Njami, Simon. Essay “Dancing with shadows” in *Giving Contours to Shadows*. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 2015. P. 108.

<sup>33</sup> Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Bonaventure; Agudio, Elena and Janse van Rensburg, Storm. *Giving Contours to Shadows*. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 2015. P. 101.

“I hate the global because the global wants to tell me that there is only one language and only one way to tell stories and only one way to read the world. I love the local because the local creates misunderstandings, and those misunderstandings are the spaces in between where a dialogue can occur”<sup>34</sup>.

The main purpose of my project is to recreate the Ashurbanipal Library based on the original meaning and mystical aura it had for King Ashurbanipal, who, before becoming a King, had been raised to be a priest. He became known for using the contents of his library for making decisions and guiding his empire (Fig). In order to make decisions, he would also read the signs of nature, the stars and interpret the interiors of sacrificed animals based on the texts of his Library. In this way, the Library was another means to decide the future of his empire. For the project, I took the idea of the library as a tool for governors to make decisions, and asked the women of the Iraqi Association to write short texts that could be part of a hypothetical Ashurbanipal library today in the context of the current situation in Iraq.

Each one of their testimonies acquired a specific perspective, as the exercise did not seek any type of consensus. In this sense, their writing developed in the Antagonism logic proposed by Claire Bishop regarding the characteristics of Participatory Art. The concept of antagonism tries to create “an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality”<sup>35</sup>. From this perspective, projects should not focus on the search of a microtopia where everyone believes the same thing but where “new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate - in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased”<sup>36</sup>. Following that logic, my project did not try to generate a single perspective about Iraq or rescue some kind of political discourse, but to allow a space for reflection and discussion. Even though from a western point of view the majority of the writings I gathered could be considered as positive and politically correct, there were some texts with rather violent approaches that included topics like the imposition of death penalty and dictatorial regimes.

FIG 32 to 34 – Ceramic writing.



34 Njami, Simon. Essay “Dancing with shadows” in Giving Contours to Shadows. Savvy Contemporary Editions. 2015. P. 108.

35 Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells. Verso. 2012. P 18.

36 Bishop, Claire. Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. In: October Magazine Issue 110. MIT. 2004. P. 65.





FIG 32 to 34 – Ceramic writing.

The artistic practice creates spaces that tend to go beyond the control of the author, which I believe to be highly important. Said space of indeterminacy is relevant for understanding that the artist should not necessarily be an expert. In this context, Pablo Helguera expresses that “the expertise of the artist lies, like Freire’s, in being a non-expert, a provider of frameworks on which experiences can form”<sup>37</sup>.

One of the most complex things to achieve in art projects, according to Bishop, is the balance between “social conscience” or “the right of the individual to question social conscience”<sup>38</sup> and the project’s effectiveness in terms of its social and aesthetic spheres. This is a key challenge especially for artists who involve social practice in their works.

Even though my project could ignite positive changes in the community and create a space for dialogue and critical thinking, I am aware that it does not actually change any structures in depth. Not because it lacks the potential to do so, but because it is not in its nature to do so. I believe that my project is closer to one of the purposes of participatory art according to Bishop, that is, a project that generates “new ideas, experiences and possibilities that result from these interactions”<sup>39</sup>.

37 Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. Jorge Pinto Books. 2011. P 54.

38 Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells*. Verso. 2012. P 18.P 276.

39 Idem. P 9.

### c) RE PLACING THE LIBRARY



FIG 35 to 38 – Installation at the “Iraqi Association”

Once the ceramics were finished, they were installed inside their boxes, which had the function of both displaying the objects and also protecting them. These boxes were made in order to allow the ceramics to travel, be displaced, and removed, either back to the houses of each of the women who participated in the project or “back” to Iraq. The new Library works beyond the Museum because, as Santiago Villanueva said, “the museum is already closed, symbolically speaking, it does not have room for manoeuvre”<sup>40</sup>. The museum absorbs the artworks that criticise it, washes their image and then shows itself as a democratic and inclusive space. I believe that in order to criticise the museum and challenge its hierarchy, one must take distance from it (physically and symbolically). An example of the contradictions of the British Museum is the current special exhibition, paradoxically, about Ashurbanipal. The institution organised this exhibition in order to highlight the importance and relevance of the ancient Iraqi civilization, but at the same time the main sponsor of the show is BP British Petroleum. Situations like these are proof of the museum’s lack of critical behaviour. The institution is and will continue to be part of the dominant system.

‘Objects Removed for Study’ creates a replica based on an historical dialectic, as expressed by Jane Rendell from the “what-has-been” in the “now”, “replacing existing histories of sites with alternative understandings, transforming present realities and so providing glimpses of new future possibilities”<sup>41</sup>. This new library modifies not only the content inscribed in each of the ceramic tablets, but also the way in which they are presented. On the one hand, it modifies the axis, from a vertical one to a horizontal one (wall to table), and on the other, it changes the geolocalisation from centre to periphery (British Museum to the Iraqi Association).

In the opinion of David Roberts<sup>42</sup>, one of the teachers of Situated Practice, the project conveys three fundamental operations compared to the original library. First of all, the project “decentres” the library, moving from the

---

<sup>40</sup> Villanueva, Santiago. Personal interview. May, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Rendell, Jane. *Art and Architecture: a place between*. I.B. Tauris. 2006. P.83.

<sup>42</sup> Roberts, David. Personal comments during the last crit of the MA Situated Practice. November, 2018.

museum to the community; secondly, it “democratizes” the library, given the collective nature of the production of the ceramics; and thirdly, the project decolonises the gaze, by offering a closer access to the ceramics compared to the distant curatorial display of the pieces in the British Museum.

From a personal perspective, the act of showing this project in a non artistic space, like the Iraqi Association, challenges the assumptions of artistic practice in a positive way. The centre of the community offers a richer experience, in which other elements, textures, and colours interact with the artwork, as opposed to the white cubes of traditional galleries. In this sense, this way of showing the pieces felt more real and less pretentious. The work was adapted to the space of the ‘Iraqi Community Association’ because, in a way, it has always belonged there. All of this was reinforced by the fact that the people who attended the exhibition felt confident to touch the pieces, but at the same time showed themselves very respectful towards the reading of the ceramic tablets that I conducted with Fawzia, the coordinator of the Association<sup>43</sup>, I interpreted that solemnity not as fear of not knowing how to behave in a specific situation, but as a respectful attitude connected with the closeness they felt with the work. Beyond the display of the pieces, the library became a space for human encounter, a type of encounter of which Caroline Philips says “may flourish relationships, objects, and effects that reconfigure systems of authority and power relations, and move towards a non-hierarchical sharing of the world”<sup>44</sup>.

Overall, I can see that the project addresses three complementary and interdependent aspects. Firstly, the project researches the complex identity of people in displacement; secondly, it explores the collectivity of these identities; and thirdly, it takes these two ideas, identity and the collective discussion, in order to challenge historical narratives. All of these aspects emerged from the community, however closely linked with my personal experience and identity at the end of the space we developed together. The “Iraqi community” became just a “community” with no nationality that I genuinely felt part of.

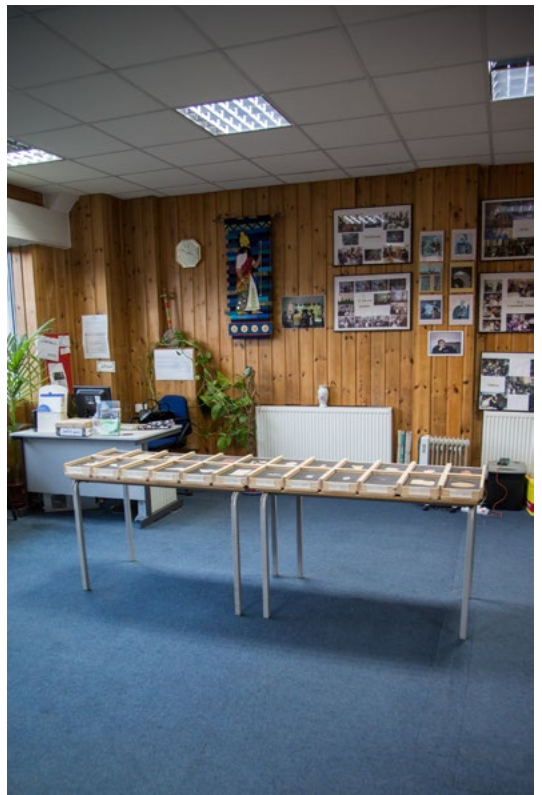
---

<sup>43</sup> We opened each box reading each ceramic, in english and arabic, while we were moving around the table.

<sup>44</sup> Philips, Caroline. Essay “Materialising the interval” present in the publication “Feminist perspectives on art”. Edited by Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore. Ed. Routledge. 2018. P 153.



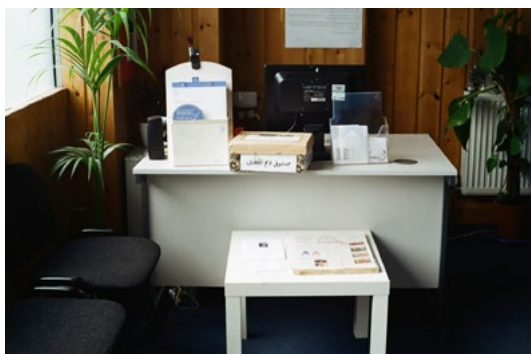
**DOCUMENTATION:  
EXHIBITION AT THE IRAQI  
COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION**













All pictures were taken by Rafael Guendelman except for the ones from Iraq, taken by Noaman Muna. Dating from 2018, they are all in 35mm analog film, appart from the last ones from the “documentation section” which are in digital.



This work is dedicated to my family and their support throughout this time.

Thanks to: Fawzia Alwaji Al-Assam, Mrs. A Hilimi, Faieja Al Mashar, Fatimi Al-Kadhimi, Sheila Ali, Jinan A. Maki, Sajdah Ridha, Nadia Al Minar, Layla Haraq, Dr Nesrin Salih, Maha Yousif, Shwrook Alani, Rehena A, Sawad Mohamad, Awatif Alibadi, the groups of Tuesday and Thursday from the Iraqi Association, Camila Cabello, Belén Bascuñán, Andrea Lathrop, Ignacio Rivas, Ignacio Saavedra, Alex Kurunis, Myles Cutliffe, Eloise Maland, Lawrence dodd, Martina Amato, Eleanor Robson, Noaman Muna and to all the academic team of Situated Practice, Henrietta, David, James and Jane for opening new perspectives in my practice.

With the support of Conicyt Becas Chile, Iraqi Community Association and Bartlett School of Architecture.

