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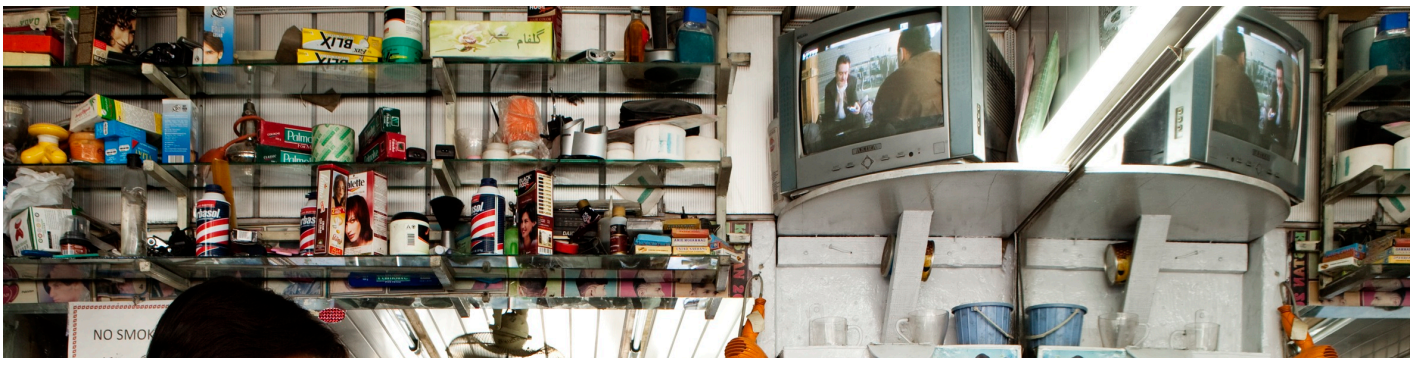
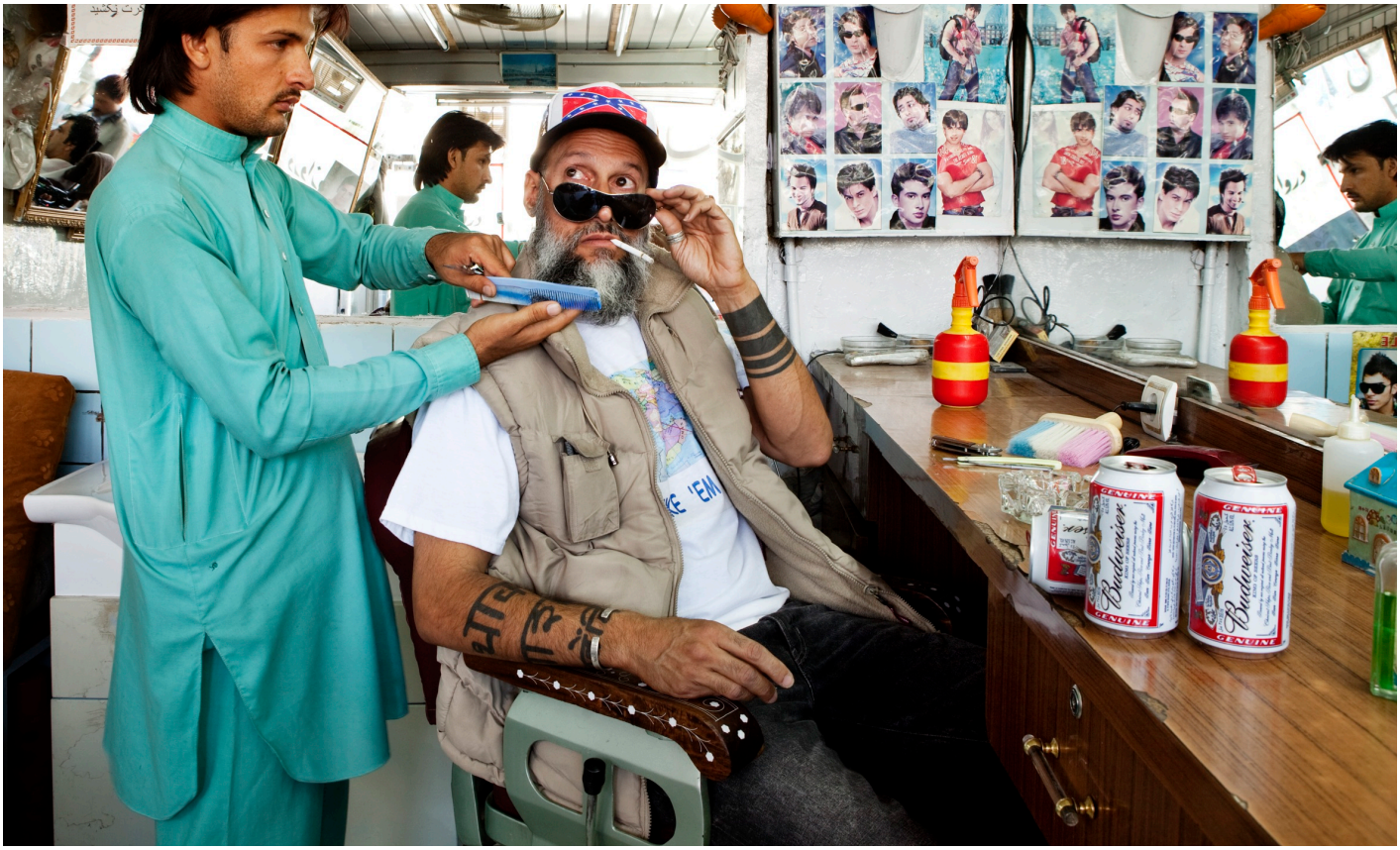
AMANULLAH MOJADIDI'S SPECTRAL DOCUMENTS OF MIGRATION
By Adam Klein

I first met Amanullah Mojadidi while he was doing an artist residency at Traffic in Dubai, U.A.E. I had seen his TED talk and wanted to inquire about his artistic practice in Kabul and perhaps invite him to speak to a class at the American University of Afghanistan. He arrived, looking as he does in the video—tall, loose-limbed, tattooed, long-bearded—and how he describes himself and titles a body of work: "Afghan by blood, redneck by the grace of God." But this tagline, which he uses in his brief, very funny TED presentation, establishes him as more situated in these identities than he in fact is.

Raised in Florida, Mojadidi is a walking snapshot of Afghan–American relations in 2014—a quirky mix of aggression and alliance, of mutual engagement and incomprehension, of a fidgety, impermanent commitment to constructing a future in which both sides can claim their own successful retention of "exceptional" values: American democracy and Afghan independence. Of course, both national narratives are characterized by a particular stubbornness. This makes the Afghan redneck a quite plausible, even logical, transnational identity. Mojadidi is far more complex than the sum of his DNA and cultural affiliations (though these are quite complex to be sure). He works between the overlap of two nations' narratives, creating something that, on the surface, seems merely satiric, an irreconcilable opposition, but with more time is surprisingly naturalized and consumed.

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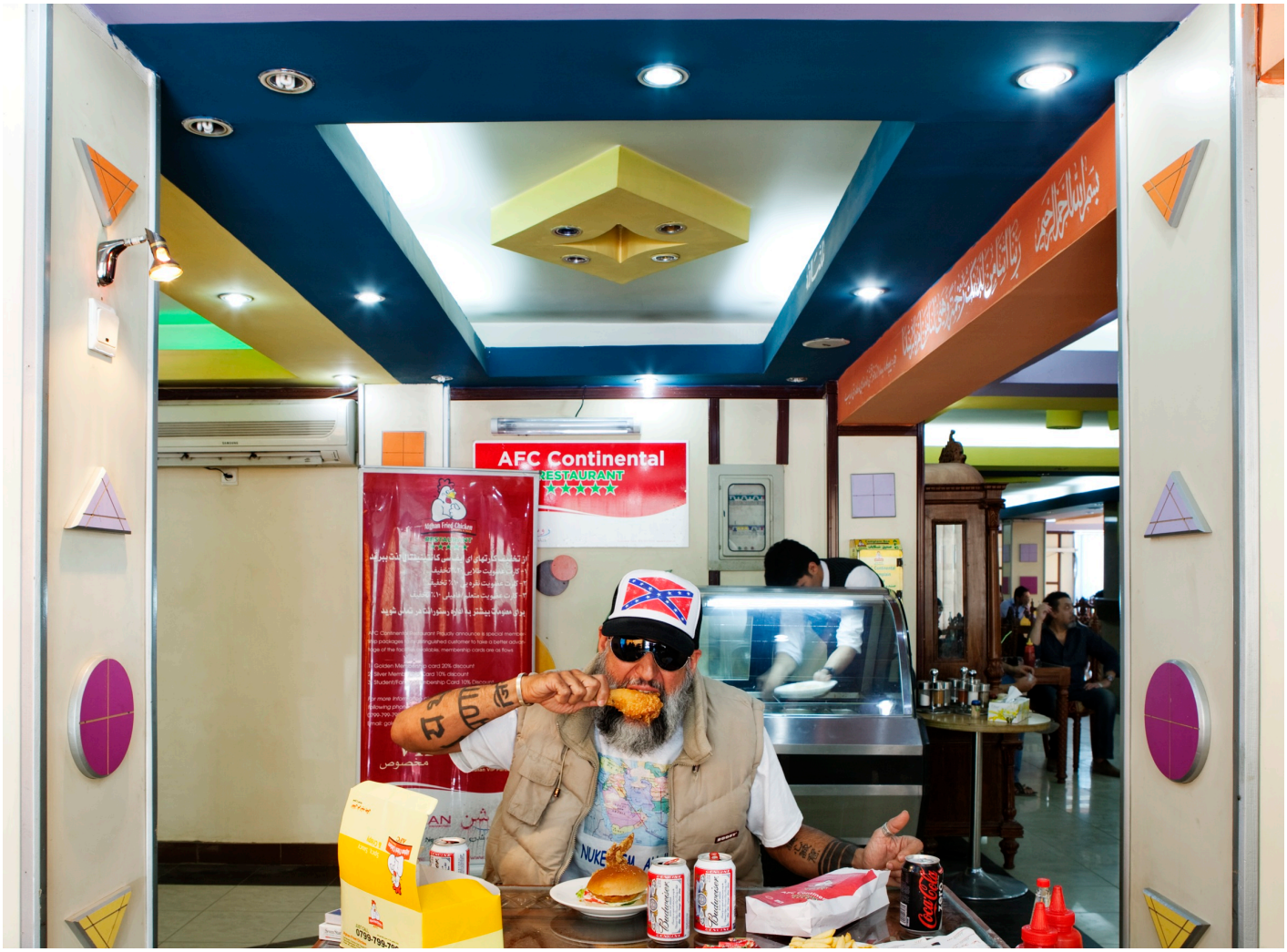
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Afghan by Blood, Redneck by the Grace of God. Images by Amanullah Mojadidi with photographer Lorenzo Tugnoli.

Mojadidi is in frequent movement, literally and figuratively. He has lived in Kabul since 2003, but his site-based works frequently emerge from residencies abroad—in Dubai and India. Over time, the depictions of his origins and identity have grown more annexed, regionalized. Moreover, his work runs the gamut from posed tableaux to land- and time-based works in which his photo documentation is more abstracted, almost purely conceptual.

The early tableaux depicting Mojadidi as an armed jihadi gangster at the center of adoring women in *chadri,* or a Confederate Afghan at a fried chicken shop (in Kabul, KFC conveniently refers to Kabul Fried Chicken) are seemingly simpler to engage, intended to read as an encounter between cultures at war. However, the recent photos that now document a series of publicly engaged performance/installation works are particularly appealing. They attempt to document a series of actions that precede them, but those actions can't possibly be reconfigured from them. While Mojadidi isn't practicing "photography" any longer as a primary component of his work, these documents—some not even shot by him—show a more interesting philosophical undertaking in his overall approach.

In keeping with his mise-en-scène pieces, Mojadidi has photographed a clothing line of refabricated traditional Afghan clothing—"conflict chic," as he calls it (not far from the Army Navy surplus stores and various forms of survivalist gear one finds in America)—that included fur-lined suicide vests. Again, the militarizing of folk clothing may initially read simply as a mocking juxtaposition. And yet, conflict chic is already a standard in the world of fashion and brings up the deeper questions of global trade in everything from armaments to contractor guard towers and family security systems. One can't help but wonder about the white Toyota trucks employed by the Taliban (were they simply offered a good deal on them, tested for durability, or was their whiteness intended to give the appearance of purity?) and the signboards for Red Bull, and even the energy drink Hell, that line the roads from the Kabul airport to the city's clogged interior.

Though Mojadidi attended only one painting class in the U.S. (he tells me he learned the color palette, little else), he is by no means an outsider artist (nor an insider—he earned his master's degree in cultural anthropology). He is well versed in conceptual art and mentions as a particularly powerful influence Joseph Beuys. Beuys, whose notion of *gesamtkunstwerk,* or social practice artwork that crosses and integrates all media—from opera to architecture—seems to cover perfectly the broad scope of his recent undertakings.

When we first met, I asked him where I might pitch a profile piece about him. I admit I was taken aback when he mentioned *Frieze* magazine.[1] If a New York artist had suggested the same—regardless of where he or she hailed from—I would not have batted an eye. But my own assumptions about an artist working in Afghanistan were more myopic than I had assumed.

I had imagined an Alighiero Boetti figure, someone who had traveled to Kabul so as to conduct his business without the capitalist imperatives of those artists captive to art markets and gallery representation. I thought of Boetti's hotel, his mail art and collaboration with local carpet weavers, and believed this could be the only reason an Afghan artist would live in Kabul: as a performative act in which one follows or re-creates the best-known Afghan-based artist—known, that is, almost entirely outside Afghanistan. Either that or he had a family home there where he could make work, attend to family obligations, and not worry about the stress of rent. Without a family home, rent in Kabul is exorbitantly high, even now at the close of America's longest war—so what else would be the point of situating himself there? Neither answer is correct. Amanullah married and now resides and works in Kabul but is on his way to Paris to live with his French wife. Maintaining his studio space has been problematic, and one is left to assume that he enjoys himself and his access to countries in the region.

Without a critical infrastructure, Mojadidi ultimately works alone or must rely on the work of an industrialized, commercial, critical establishment that, like me, presupposes too much about the influence of culture on someone who is interrogating plurality and unfixed positions as opposed to the simpler theoretical questions of genealogy and geographic location. But Afghanistan's artists have, in the past few years, drawn more international attention than one might imagine. The burgeoning rock music scene has caught the attention of Turkish producers, and *Documenta* has brought the photographer Masood Kamandy and conceptual artist Michael Rakowitz to Afghanistan on new projects.

When I later met Amanullah in Kabul, he was working with Luciano Benetton's 10 X 12 project, which has in its sights a cataloging of artists from every country. Amanullah had, using his networks, amassed pieces from 140 artists from every major district in Afghanistan, the bulk of work coming from Herat. Benetton's giant memory project is an enormous act of archiving, of outsourced curatorial efforts, and in short is a kind of outsized, encyclopedic rebuilding of the world for volumes of images that rival Google Books' scanning of public domain texts. But images don't require translation, and if communications theorist Vilém Flusser is correct, such global image gathering exemplifies the point when our ahistoricism requires a return to the ideogram:

> The invention of the alphabet was to supersede magical-mythical (prehistoric) thought and to make room for a new (historical) consciousness. The alphabet was the code of historical consciousness. If we should give up the alphabet, it will surely be because we are trying to supersede historical consciousness. We are tired of progress, and not only tired: historical thinking has shown itself to be murderous and mad. That (and not the technical disadvantages of the alphabet) is the real reason we are prepared to abandon this code.[2]

Indeed, artists such as Mojadidi are caught between the concepts of hybridity and transnational identifications as well as a digital age that attempts to supersede history altogether, while at the same time returning us to iconic, pictorial, magical thinking. As for many American artists of Islamic descent, to be colonized/hybridized by America's military-industrial complex is to find oneself split between the U.S.'s euphemizing erasure, or, in the classified language of drone strikes, being targeted and collateralized. The other option is to take on the passionate rhetoric of Islamic resistance—in which geopolitics are never secularized, never about temporary allies and strategies but always a humiliation, and no target is singular but always plural, tribal. Mojadidi's

work straddles these networks of faceless power and affiliation, resulting in his identification with land and people while eschewing narrower narratives of displacement, victimization, and occupation.

Mojadidi delivers quite an account of his arrival in Afghanistan at the age of nineteen, entering from Peshawar, Pakistan, on the back of a truck full of Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF) Mujahedeen fighters. At last, no longer the target of redneck racial and religious slurs, he rolled into his "native place" and soon found himself in combat with other out-of-view communist fighters in the Battle for Jalalabad. He describes a firefight almost as a cordial volley—an unusual first contact with his "homeland." After trying the rocket launcher himself and being congratulated on his military indoctrination, he quickly realized that he might not be a Florida redneck, but neither was he one of these "liberators." Rather, he initially worked with an NGO to develop educational programs, elementary school puppet theaters, and school gardens.

Later he worked briefly as the director of culture and heritage at Turquoise Mountain, a renowned institution for Afghan craftspeople. Amanullah is too concerned, or skeptical, to have prevailed long in this position, as Turquoise Mountain—a cultural organization itself—also had a Department of Culture, as though some creative works would be excluded from the culture, while others would help codify it. His own work made this rather rigid idea of culture as a referent to an unspecified past impossible to dictate or even absorb. One could almost say that his work is not the product of the conflict between identities but the exile from stable identities. It is no wonder that Amanullah's pieces have progressively moved to faux-archaeological digs and rudimentary construction projects—neither produced in Afghanistan, nor maintained, except through inconclusive "documentary" photographs.

When we met in Dubai, he described the city as "creating its traditional and contemporary identity simultaneously." This seems a good way to engage his diverse body of work, which uses the conflict embedded in regional histories to combat the ideological lens attached to disciplines of biography, biology, architecture, and archaeology—to history, period.

He had proposed building a wall for his residency at Traffic—an ironic play on the title *Museum Without Walls.* It wasn't surprising then to find Amanullah dispirited when we met in Dubai. His proposed project for Traffic required permission from global property developer Emaar to construct his piece adjacent to the Burj Khalifa, the icon of "downtown" Dubai. Anyone interviewing artists in the Middle East or South Asia will inevitably come upon Emaar, the "premier lifestyle" provider responsible for the entire rebuilding of downtown Beirut, the Armani Hotel brand, and planned communities in India's chaotic cities, with their advertisements depicting white suburbs entirely disconnected from their potential inhabitants. Without the corporation's permission, Amanullah had to work on an alternative plan. He appeared preoccupied by it. I only read about it after he had completed it. And so it was in Kabul—many months later, over a relaxed dinner at a Cambodian restaurant—that I could talk to him about how his idea evolved and could see the photographs that documented the piece.

Amanullah explained that he had finally been told of a less developed lot where he could engage people in the making of mud bricks as part of his project. This most primitive form of construction was actually quite difficult to manage: soil had to be purchased in Dubai. Sand and coral stone

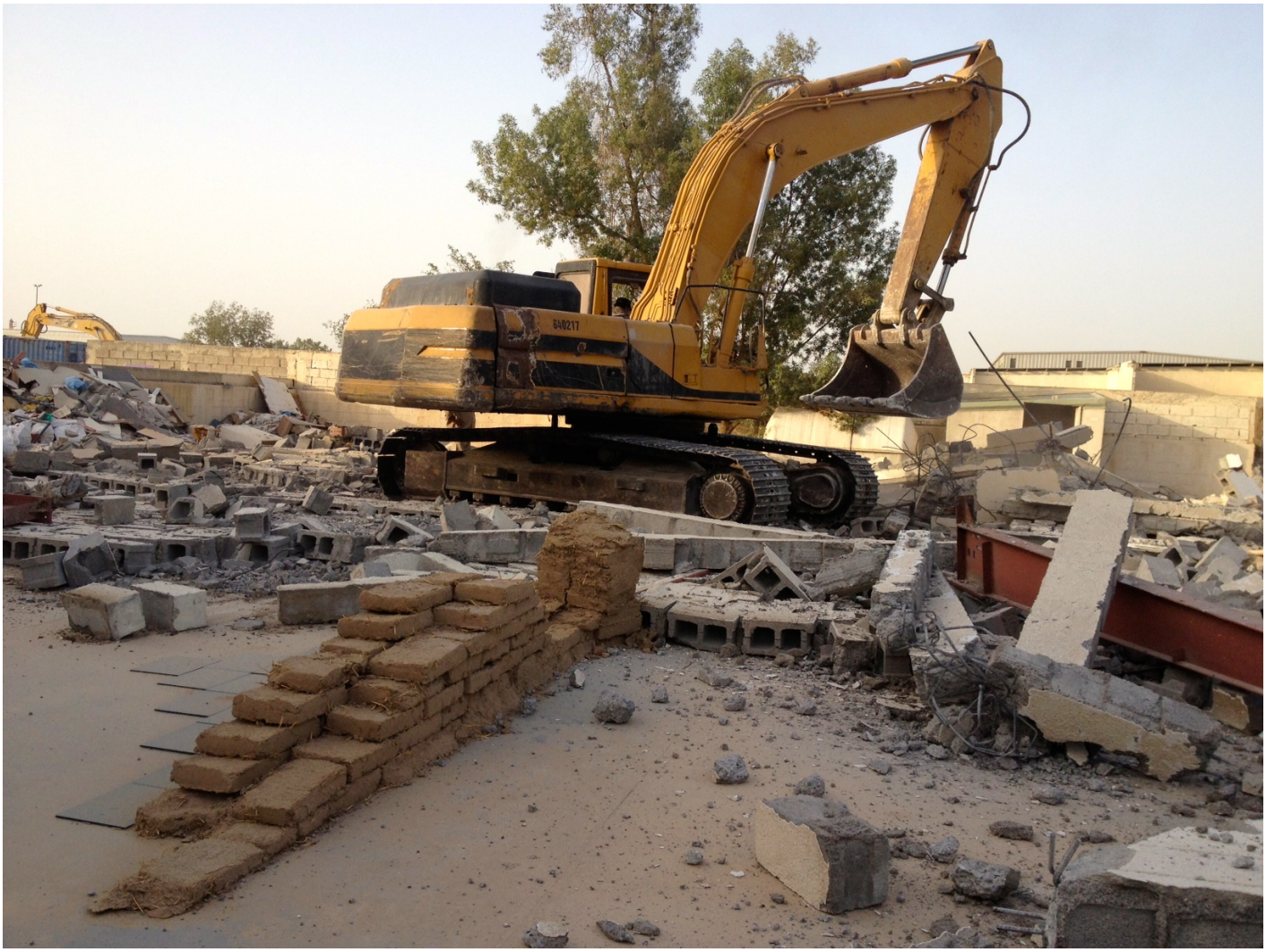
may be ubiquitous in the Emirates, but soil and hay had to be purchased from a construction company. In Dubai, mud had only been used in the past for perimeter walls. This idea of creating something so antiquated abutting feverishly built skyscrapers was one way to introduce the conflict of a simultaneously traditional and contemporary city. He invited participants in the making of the large soil slabs and constructed a partial wall, only about waist high.

More important was what he didn't construct: the small sliver of shade the wall cast on the sidewalk. On returning to the site, he found that migrant construction workers, most brought in from Bangladesh and India, had left water bottles beside the structure. Wanting to engage these workers, he dispersed mats. On returning to the site the following day, the workers had resettled the mats beside the walls and more water bottles were left. The piece transformed into a way of communicating with the invisible workforce, driven in from the camps on the city's outskirts.

After his residency was over, Amanullah's friend discovered that demolition crews were knocking down the concrete walls and buildings on the lot. Oddly, they hadn't touched the mud wall. Amanullah speculates that the wall was left because the earthly material—the mud bricks—suggested something these laborers had a connection to, something impossible to obtain from concrete. "The precision of the destruction was too provocative, not arbitrary," he explained. He had his friend in Dubai photograph the demolition, and the photos represent a distinct move from the earlier staged, satiric tableaux in which Amanullah was his own subject. Now, the photos depict an absent, or implied, subject and are purposefully "documentation" of a time-based and site-specific event—or nonevent, since it was a speculative interaction after all. This is where Aman's projects open themselves up to chance and a far more fecund approach to critique. His photographic documentation must invoke ghosts, presences that do not speak or reveal themselves, and yet possess a power—almost entirely undisclosed to the casual observer—to convey presence, attachment, and mobility. As Levi R. Bryant writes,

> Objects or generative mechanisms are defined not by their qualities or events, but rather by their *powers* or capacities. [...] In other words, objects are not *constituted* by their relations to the rest of the world. While relations to other objects often play a key role in the precipitation of events or qualities in objects, we must here recall that objects are not identical to their qualities but are rather the ground of qualities.[3]

Mojadidi sets an operation in process, and the interactions, which he has not anticipated or even witnessed, become the subject of speculative photographs marking the project's seeming termination. In other words, the photographs document the work he no longer attends nor ever orchestrated totally. It becomes a way of investigating his own work: how it behaves as a public project.

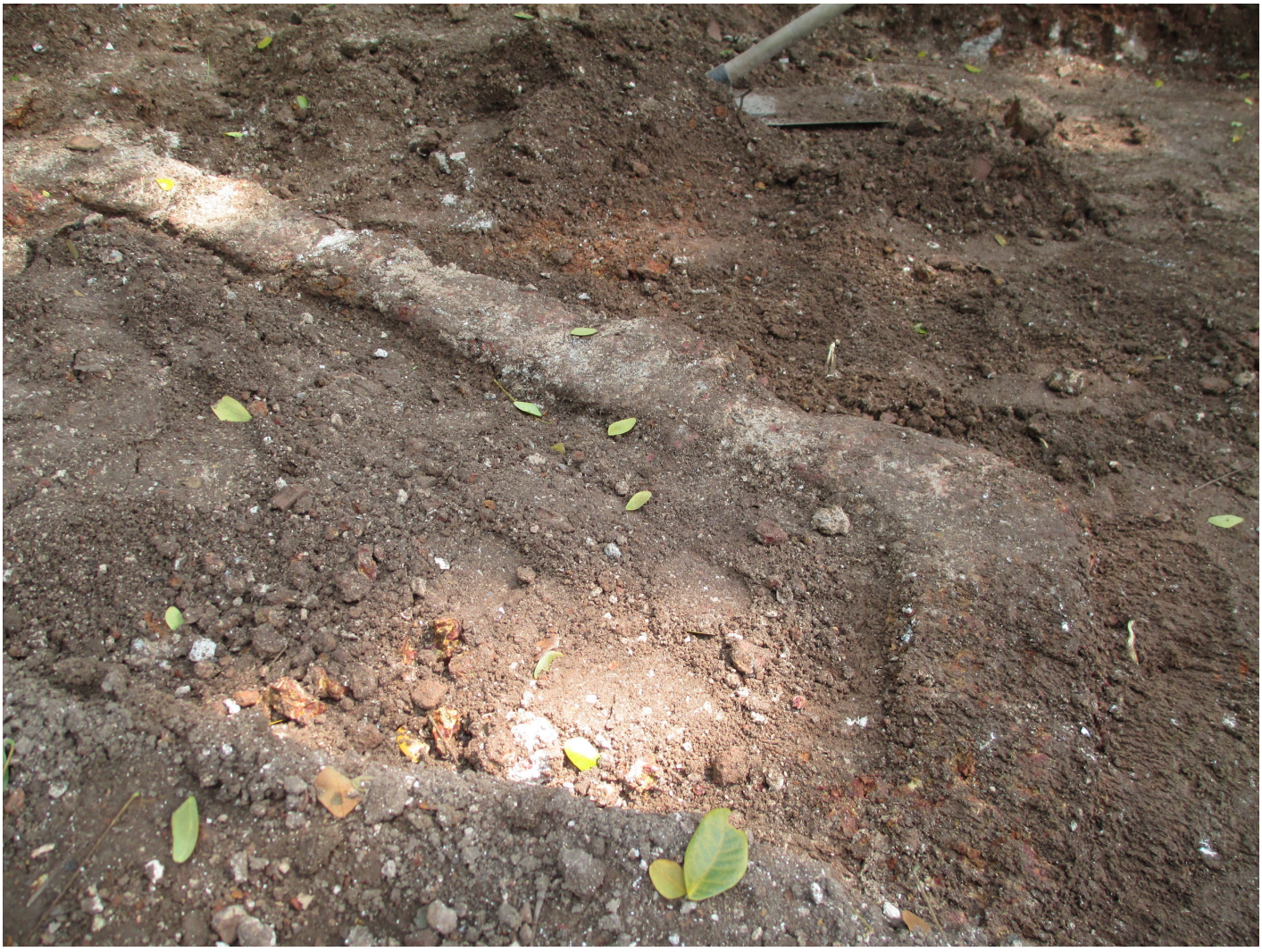


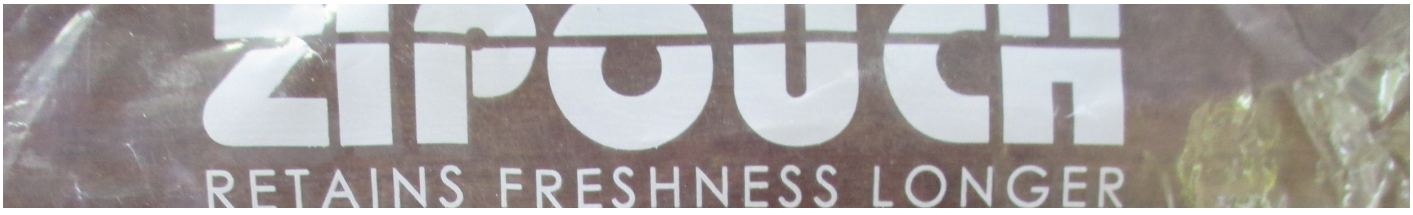
Images of the wall and the wall with tushaks by Amanullah Mojadidi. Images of the demolition by Nilo O. Pantig, Jr.

Invited to create a piece for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India, Mojadidi looked more deeply at his family history. The resulting archaeological "dig" he titled *What Histories Lay Beneath Our Feet?* Wedding some "truth" about his family's migration to Sirhind, India, he tells the etymological story of his family name, which derived from the Naqshbandi Sufi leader Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, who in the late 1500s/early 1600s became Al Mujaddid-i-al Thani. (Here Amanullah explains that every century a renewer/scholar of the religion comes around to restore the "purity" of the religion.) Amanullah's descendant Haji Safiullah then migrated back to Afghanistan, where he settled in Shor Bazaar in the Old City and took on the last name Mujaddidi, from al-Mujaddid, which has since been spelled in different ways, including Mojadidi. But the etymology of Amanullah's last name isn't nearly as interesting as the confabulated ancestor whose story was provided at the "archaeological" site in an open-air "dig" of Aspin Wall House (the vast colonial warehouse where spices, timber, hides, and rubber were prepared for shipment to England—and which held the Biennale).

Not deep in the ground outside Aspin Wall, Amanullah uncovered clay pottery. He had also brought his own "antiquities" from Afghanistan, including a compass and the blue lapis prayer

beads of a Tasbih. (In an interesting slip, these beads supposedly belong to the fictional figure Zaman Mujaddidi, a man who rejected religious orthodoxy and was consequently disowned by his father. Why, one wonders, would a man who had rejected religious orthodoxy keep the prayer beads?) According to the Hadith, pebbles and stones already proclaim "Glory be to Allah." Once in the hand of the Holy Prophet, the pebbles became audible, comprehensible.[4] Also, *Tasbih,* as a verb, translates to "travel swiftly." These two concepts—(1) that stones (or, in the case of Amanullah's wall, soil bricks) speak to people, penetrate them in ways that are unpredictable and profound, and (2) migration, or swift movement—are both essential to this late work. Amanullah wrote out the entire fictionalized life of Zaman, and one can't help but imagine that some part of himself closely identifies with this fictional persona, whose iconoclasm and anticolonial thinking offer so much more coloration than the mere etymology of one's last name. At Aspin Wall, Amanullah presented these artificial "finds" in Ziploc bags, cataloging them and displaying them. His counterfactual family story is presented as historical record.



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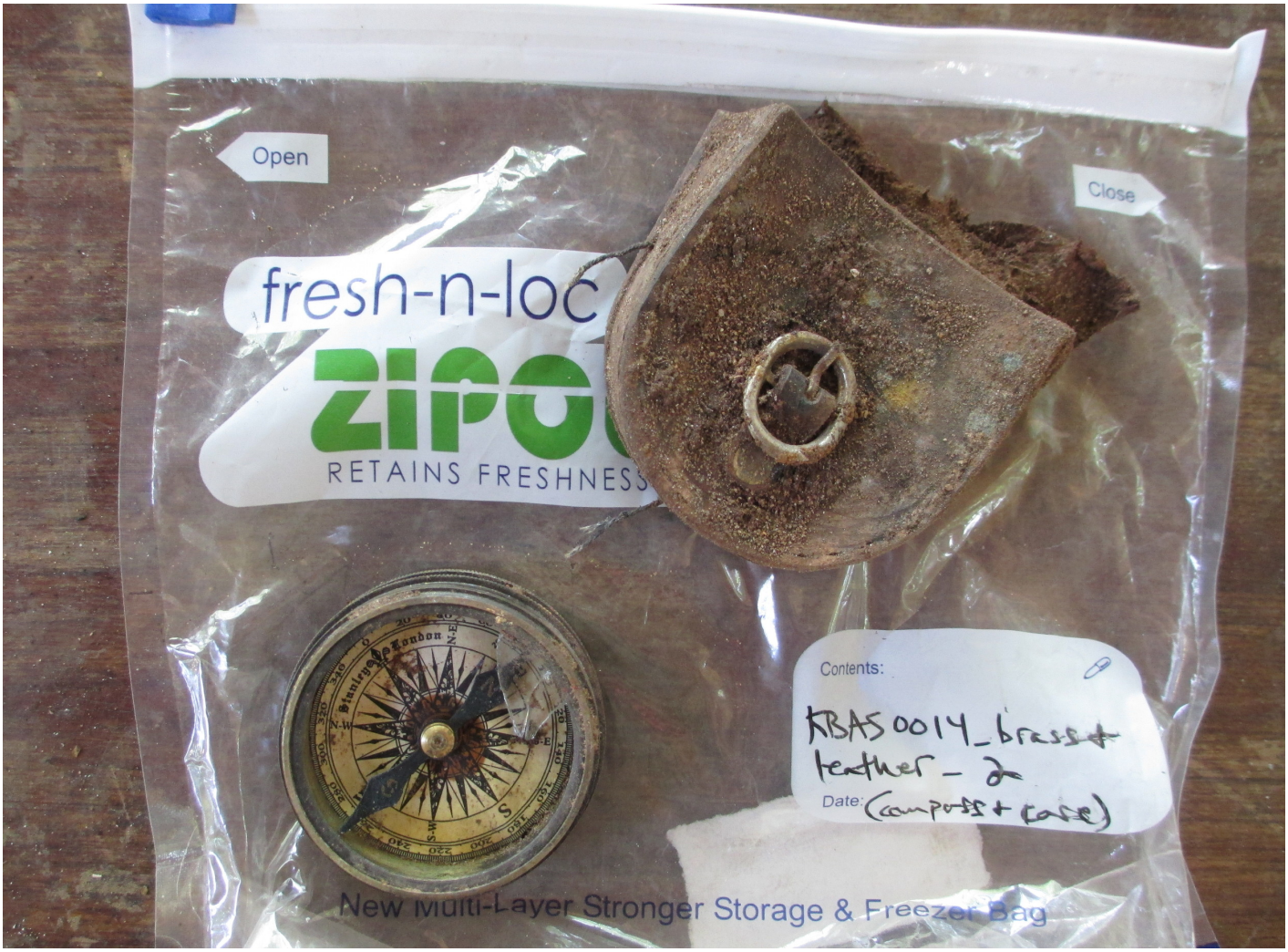
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Images at Aspin Wall by Amanullah Mojadidi.

It is important to keep in mind the intensely politicized idea of migration in India. India's partition in 1947 and the Afghan civil war in 1978 created a deep sense of religious and ethnic divisions throughout the region. India's partition was the largest migration in history, with an estimated 10 to 15 million people crossing its redrawn borders in violent eruption. Afghanistan, too, suffered the largest refugee crises between 1978 and 2001, resulting in upwards of 6 million people driven to neighboring Pakistan and Iran by the mid-eighties. Considering these upheavals, Mojadidi's work registers on deep, often unexamined levels of regional identities now severed and reduced. Mojadidi's genealogy and his counterfactual history traverse those lines and introduce—in the fictional telling of Zaman's story—the possibility of movement not imposed by force and war but by choice, conscience, and chosen affiliations. Amanullah explained, "Archaeology is in and of itself a political discipline. A large number of people showed up and believed [the family histories and the site itself] but felt manipulated by the piece. But this was the desired effect, because this is what our own history books do."

Similarly, the formalities of cataloging and photographing the "evidence" at Aspin Wall suggests

the greater value in Amanullah's photographic recording of speculative events. For, while photography has moved from a central medium in his work, his casual documentation carries a potency of inarticulate conveyance, as though it possessed—like the stones of the Tasbih—the power to glorify or extol. Describing Auguste Salzmann's photographs of Jerusalem in 1855, Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote,

> Proposing a history of photography, in which photography is understood as a history of distinct genres and styles, supposes that one can make a distillation of the cultural solution from which discrete images will precipitate out. But because the history of photography is, in reality, integrally bound up with numerous discourses—those of science, of geographic expansion and imperialism, of reproduction, of architecture, of archaeology, and so forth—the extraction of art ends finally with the suppression of all the others.[5]

Amanullah appears to push the medium of photography to the least communicative of his strategies, for each work requires lengthy discussions of the evolution of a piece, none of which can be drawn from the blunt evidence of the image. Armed with a strong sense of the ideological function of the discourses addressed in Solomon-Godeau's quote, he appears to treat the photographs as a personal mnemonic link system, from which he can later detail the preceding actions of the performance or installation.

There are many artists who have struggled with the problem of representing culture—as a broad concept—who have found the mediums of representation too compromising. Maya Deren, filmmaker, anthropologist, and author of *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti,* had initially imagined herself filming ritual dance in Haiti but ultimately found the anthropological categorizations of her mentor Gregory Bateson too mechanistic. Catrina Neiman, in her article "Art and Anthropology: The Crossroads," recounts Margaret Mead's most vivid memory of Deren describing ritual and children's games: "[She] trace[d] hopscotch lines in the air. Deren repeatedly invoked this image to illustrate the way in which we define an artificial, ritual space, a frame of reference, boundaries that may not be crossed or stepped upon." [6]

Similarly, artist Allan McCollum, in *Lost Objects,* cast dinosaur bones in concrete, each different, drawn from fossils discovered in Utah. McCollum seeks a method to address history without the specificity of culture. In an interview with Thomas Lawson, he states:

> In a sense, culture is too much to have to think about. It's too much to have to know. This is probably not only an American impulse; it's probably more generally a modern impulse to want to reduce things into some simpler form. [...] I didn't think you could get at that feeling of "timeness" without leapfrogging over cultural artifacts. What was I going to choose—something Sumerian? Or Mayan? It would always be something from somewhere. Then it would be, why choose that and not the other? So I narrowed it down to a very rare, almost curiosity type of object more than a historical type of object.[7]

Amanullah's work moves between the approaches of Deren and McCollum. Where Deren sees cultural practice as embedded in the sacral—therefore inappropriate for the probing of "orthodox" scientific discipline—McCollum avoids (in *Lost Objects*) anything human centered, made by hand. By removing the human-centeredness, McCollum brings in fossils and seashells as examples of works that should have "value" if originality is *actually* a measure of an art economy. Mojadidi is

equally annoyed by those who see art as essentially subordinate to national narratives and "anoint" cultural production, codify it, through a variety of historical discourses.

Mojadidi mentions the Samangan monastery stupa near Mazar-I-Sharif and a renowned Tajik scholar who has claimed that the stupa was Zoroastrian before it became Islamic, in this way erasing Afghanistan's Buddhist history. This brings me to my students' reaction to his TED talk. While they found his critique of Afghan corruption humorous and engaging, they immediately wanted to know how a self-proclaimed atheist could embark on a jihad. He appeared momentarily taken aback: "I've never heard anyone ask that before." But the students, so quick to identify what they imagined an inconsistency in his story were only acknowledging their desire for consistency—something Amanullah has long lived without. Similarly, the people who encountered his archaeological site imagined that they were encountering the rediscovered items that could stitch them to their broad regional histories, fill in the gaps of time and traumatic separation. But Amanullah seemed to know already that that could only happen through the imagined and loosely reconstructed past, a past built contemporaneously each time we assert it.

Adam Klein is editor of *The Gifts of the State: New Afghan Writing* and author of the short-story collection *The Medicine Burns,* the novel *Tiny Ladies,* and the artist monograph *Jerome: After the Pageant* (Jerome Caja). His interdisciplinary works and stories have been published in MIT's *Performance Art Journal, Essays and Fictions, Fourteen Hills, Fiction International, The New York Times* "At War" blog, and elsewhere. He is also singer/songwriter for the band The Size Queens, whose videos have premiered on *Electric Literature, Ninth Letter,* and the *Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review.*

NOTES

1. Since then he has been written about in Jennifer Kabat's *Frieze* blog.
2. Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
3. Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects.* Open Humanities Press, 2011.
4. Mufti Shafi Usmani, *Ma'ariful Qur'an* (English), vol. 5, www.classicalislamgroup.com, 2007.
5. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
6. Catrina Neiman, "Art and Anthropology: The Crossroads," *October* 14 (autumn 1980), MIT Press.
7. Thomas Lawson, *Allan McCollum*. Los Angeles: A.R.T. Press, 1996.

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