

LUCIS & RCMC
FILM SCREENING
& PANEL DISCUSSION

Last Skies

Avian Imaginaries
in Video Art from
the Middle East

Programme

THURSDAY
19 SEPTEMBER 2019
19:00–21:30 HRS

**Museum Volkenkunde
Grote Zaal
Steenstraat 1
Leiden**

LUCIS | Leiden University Centre
for the Study of Islam & Society

RESEARCH
CENTRE FOR
MATERIAL
CULTURE



Universiteit
Leiden

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***Where should we go after the last frontiers?
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?
Where should the plants sleep
After the last breath of air?***

The Earth is Closing on Us, Mahmoud Darwish

This screening program presents video works by some of the most exciting artists from the Middle East for the first time in the Netherlands. Drawing on avian imaginaries, in which birds operate as protagonists and tropes, these works comment on regional geopolitics, belonging, heritage, and history in unruly times. Disaster – manmade or other – looms darkly on the horizon. In these videos, past, present and future are muddled, human and nonhuman narratives and agency intertwine, and bird’s-eye views offer alternative perspectives: from the ruins of Pergamon, petrified museological artefacts, and aerial views of Jerusalem and Teheran, to the weaponisation of spy birds and alien bird-human encounters. The videos in Last Skies offer speculative takes on contested pasts and uncertain futures in which human responsibility is continuously scrutinised. After the screening, two of the artists will join international experts on speculative fiction and people-bird relations for a panel discussion.

Featuring works by:

Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi Noori (The Owls, The Queen and the Maquettiste, 2018), Sophia Al-Maria (Mothership, 2017), Ali Cherri (Petrified, 2016), Heba Y. Amin (As Birds Flying, 2016) and Hera Büyükaşçıyan (Neither on the Ground, nor in the Sky, 2019).

The screening program is followed by a panel discussion with Ali Cherri (artist), Ben Greet (independent researcher), Benji Boyadgian (artist), Tasnim Qutait (SOAS), and Dan Hassler-Forest (Utrecht University).

Curated and moderated by Nat Muller (Birmingham City University).

ORGANISERS

Organised by the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS) and the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC). Curated by Nat Muller (Birmingham City University).

About LUCIS

LUCIS is an interfaculty knowledge centre offering a multidisciplinary and comparative view on Islam. A full and nuanced understanding of Islam and Muslim societies is essential to navigate today's complex globalised world. Drawing upon Leiden University's long tradition and unparalleled resources in Islamic studies, LUCIS is the Netherlands' premier platform for advancing that understanding. You will find much to stimulate and challenge you in our varied programme, from scholarly lectures, conferences, and expert meetings to cultural and public events.

Today's event was initiated by the LUCIS programme MENA Cultures and Global Aesthetics. This is a team of scholars from Leiden University who bring in inter-disciplinary, inter-area archives and methods to explore how the Middle East and North Africa acted as the crossroads of global aesthetics in the long twentieth century. Exploring modern and contemporary visual, material, literary and immaterial cultures, we seek to stimulate conversations about the politics of aesthetics from Morocco to Iraq and from Yemen to Tajikistan.

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About RCMC

The Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC) is a flagship research institute within the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), Museum Volkenkunde (Leiden), the Afrika Museum (Berg en Dal) and the Wereldmuseum (Rotterdam) that serves as a focal point for research on ethnographic collections in the Netherlands. Our research projects and programs address the historical and contemporary meanings of these collections, the national and global histories of which they are a part, and the contemporary societal questions around issues of heritage, cultural identity and belonging that these objects raise.

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PROGRAMME 19 SEPTEMBER 2019

- 19.00–19.15 Opening
- Judith Naeff (LUCIS),
Sarah Johnson (Curator Middle East and North Africa)
and Nat Muller
- 19.15–20.20 Screenings
- The Owls, The Queen and the Maquettiste**
Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi Noori
2018
- Mothership**
Sophia Al-Maria
2017
- Petrified**
Ali Cherri
2016
- As Birds Flying**
Heba Y. Amin
2016
- Neither on the Ground, nor in the Sky**
Hera Büyüktaşçıyan
2019
- 20.20–20.30 Break
- 20.30–21.30 Panel discussion with Ali Cherri, Ben Greet,
Benji Boyadgian, Dan Hassler-Forest,
Nat Muller, Tasnim Qutait

FILM SYNOPSES

The Owls, The Queen and the Maquettiste

Benji Boyadgian and Behzad Khosravi Noori

2018 | VIDEO 22 MINUTES

*There are Owls in the clock tower.
Each time that they appear immense
political change will arise. So far twice ...
Old Tehran, Jafar Shahri, 1978*

In the end of the XIX century, the Queen of England gave a large clock to the Shah of Iran. A clock tower, the “The Frankish Hat”, was added to the Golestan Palace, the “Edifice of the Sun” in Tehran. Later on, the Clock stopped. In the beginning of the XX century, the Sultan of the Ot- toman Empire built a clock tower at the Jaffa Gate, on the walls of the old city of Jerusalem. When The British arrived they demolished the clock tower. A few years later they moved the mechanics of the four clocks, to an other structure, sited few hundred meters away on Lord Allembly square, only to be demolished few years later to build a junction.

The project attempts by means of collage to narrate and fictionalize the story of three clock towers in Tehran and Jerusalem in relation to colonial history, architecture and middle eastern geopolitics. A multi channel video essay, narrates a tale, a fictional dialogue between two Owls and a ‘Maquettiste’, (model maker in French). The starting point of the project juxtaposes three clock towers in their territoriality’s, built between the late 19th and early 20th century in Tehran and Jerusalem as subjects of comparative analysis. A new territory is suggested where the clocks exist in the same time and space.

Fictional historiography in this project originates from the role of the nonhuman in urban mythology in the Iranian context. Factual historiography stems from the archival material collected; photographs, film, texts, all revolving around the subject and its memory. The Owl serves as a signifier of mythological value, and the Maquettiste: the human condition in its banality. The nonhuman and human protagonists shed a light on the question of factuality of fiction as well as fictionality of fact in colonial history and its materiality. Through a dialogical collaboration, we attempt to destabilize historical narratives, within the context of conflictual histories and hyper-politicized social environment that are under the permanent shadow of hegemonic discourses.



Mothership

Sophia Al-Maria

2017 | VIDEO 3 MINUTES

Mothership creates a haunting vignette that straddles the line between documentary and fantasy. A tiny drama of cosmic proportions performed in a sinkhole in the desert where a newborn earthling receives a shadow visitor: time – the terror of all creatures.

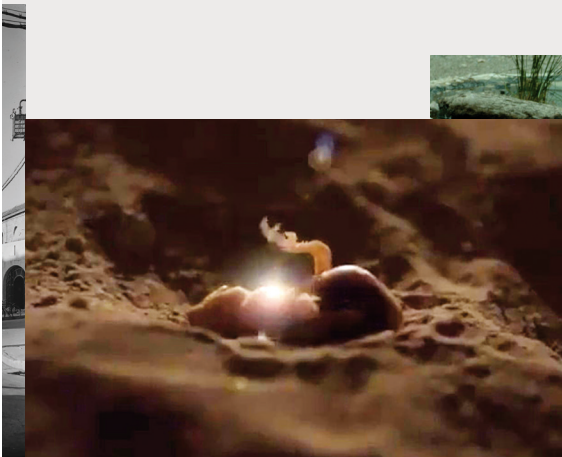
Petrified

Ali Cherri

2016 | VIDEO 13 MINUTES

Petrified questions the fetishization of historical artefacts, by looking at the value we place on provenance and authenticity. The current prevalence of looting and the trafficking of artefacts, especially in conflict zones in the Middle East, opens a timely debate on the reconstruction and restoration of demolished heritage. How does this alter the notion of authenticity? What historical traces are deemed valuable and why?

Filmed between Arabian Wildlife Park and an excavation site, *Petrified* takes a journey into the life of dead objects.



As Birds Flying

Heba Y. Amin

2016 | VIDEO 7 MINUTES

In late 2013, Egyptian authorities detained a migratory stork suspected of espionage due to an electronic device attached to its leg. *As Birds Flying* addresses conspiracies embedded in the political landscape that shape the present. It confronts the absurdity of the media narrative that has blurred fantasy with reality and turned a bird, that migrates from Israel to Egypt, into a symbol of state paranoia. The film juxtaposes drone footage of the “spy bird” with reconstructed audio from Adel Imam’s iconic film “Birds of Darkness” (1995) which critiques government corruption in Egypt through the opposing perspectives of secular and Islamist parliamentary candidates.

Neither on the Ground, nor in the Sky

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan

2019 | VIDEO 10 MINUTES

Neither on the Ground, nor in the Sky by Hera Büyüktaşçıyan, inspired by a floor mosaic in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum known as the Alexandrine Parakeet Mosaic (160–150 BC) that was taken from the ancient Palace of Pergamon (now Bergama in Turkey). While the provenance and ownership of antiquities and colonial artefacts is currently debated extensively in academia and museum circles – this forms the political backdrop to the project – Büyüktaşçıyan broadens these notions and takes us on a journey that traverses time and place by touching on universal sensibilities such as loss, identity, and history.

In *Neither on the Ground, nor in the Sky* Büyüktaşçıyan offers a temporality that is non-linear, a place that neither reaches to the sky nor touches the ground, and travels through history that primarily turn us to our unruly present.



ABOUT THE FILM MAKERS

Benji Boyadgian

Benji Boyadgian (1983, Jerusalem) studied architecture at ENSAPLV School of Architecture (L'Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris La Villette), specializing in urban sociology in post-conflict areas. Boyadgian works on research-based projects that explore themes revolving around perception, heritage, territory, architecture and landscape. He works with multiple mediums, spacial installations, video, and employs painting and drawing as his primary tools for conveying his subject matter.

Behzad Khosravi Noori

Behzad Khosravi Noori's (1976, Tehran) research-based practice includes films, installations, as well as archival studies. His work investigates histories from The Global South, labour and means of production. Histories of political relationships that have existed as a counter narration to the east-west dichotomy during the Cold War. He investigates contemporary history to revisit memories beyond borders, exploring the entanglements and non/aligned memories. Behzad Khosravi Noori uses personal experience as a springboard to, through artistic research, establish a hypothetical relationship between personal memories and significant world events, between micro and macro histories. His works emphasis on films and historical materials to bring the questions what happens for the narrations when it crosses the border? And what is the future of our collective past? He is currently a Ph.D candidate at Konstfack/KTH Stockholm, Sweden.

Sophia Al Maria

Sophia Al Maria is an artist, writer and filmmaker. For the past few years, she has been carrying out research around the concept of Gulf Futurism. Her primary interests are around the isolation of individuals via technology and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism and industry, and the erasure of history and the blinding approach of a future no one is ready for. Her work has been exhibited in various institutional shows around the world, at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK; Mercer Union, Images Festival, Toronto, Canada ; Biennale of Moving Images, Miami, USA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA.

Ali Cherri

Born in Beirut, Ali Cherri is a video and visual artist. His recent exhibitions include *Immortality* at the Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art Russia, *An Opera For Animals* at Parasite Hong Kong and Rockbund Art Museum Shanghai, *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise* at Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Milan and Guggenheim New York, *Somniculus* at Jeu de Paume, Paris and CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain Bordeaux, *Statues Also Die* at Museo Egizio, Milan and *General Rehearsal* at Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Russia. His films have been shown in International Film Festivals including CPH:DOX (winner of NewVision Award); New Directors/New Films MoMA NY; Cinéma du Réel, Centre Pompidou; Berlinale, Berlin; Dubai International Film Festival (winner Best Director); VideoBrasil, Sao Paulo (Southern Panorama Award); Toronto International Film Festival, San Francisco International Film Festival; Ann Arbor Film Festival and IndieLisboa amongst other. He's the recipient of Harvard University's Robert E. Fulton Fellowship and the Bellagio Rockefeller Foundation Award.

Heba Y. Amin

Heba Y. Amin is an Egyptian visual artist, researcher and lecturer. She is currently teaching at Bard College Berlin, is a BGSMSC doctorate fellow at Freie Universität, and a recent resident artist at the Bethanien artist residency program in Berlin. Amin has received many grants, including the DAAD grant and the Rhizome Commissions grant. She is the co-founder of the Black Athena Collective, the curator of visual art for the MIZNA journal (US), and curator for the biennial residency program DEFAULT with Random Association(IT). Furthermore, Amin is also one of the artists behind the subversive graffiti action on the set of the television series "Homeland" which received worldwide media attention.

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan

Hera Büyüktaşçıyan (b.1984 Istanbul) Graduated from Marmara University, Faculty of Fine Arts, (2006). The artist locates the figure of "the other" between the twinned specters of absence and invisibility in order to weave connections between identity, memory, space and time. She works as a storyteller, integrating metaphors from local myths, historic and iconographic elements of different geographies to open up new narrative scopes. Water is a recurring theme in her practice, referring to what the artist understands as the fluid, aquatic nature of memory. Her most recent works enquire into the meaning of 'absence' within collective memory without focusing on the destructive aspect of nostalgia but more of recreating and reconstructing new realities or representations out of the existence of the invisible. At this point the artist has an archeological and sociological narrative where she gathers different layers and aspects of time and history.

ABOUT THE PANELISTS

Ben Greet

Ben Greet completed his doctorate at The University of Leeds studying the symbolism of the eagle in the Roman world. Subsequently, he was a post-doctoral research assistant on the 'People and Birds in the Southern Levant' project in The Department of Archaeology at The University of Reading. This project studied the history of bird in the southern Levant, from the Neolithic up until the Early Islamic period. He is also interested in the study of science fiction and particularly the reception of the Roman world within SF media.

Dan Hassler-Forest

Dan Hassler-Forest has a background in film and television studies and English literature. He worked for several years as a lecturer in Media Studies and English Literature at the University of Amsterdam, where he defended his dissertation on the ideological and ideological aspects of superhero films after 9/11. From 2011 until 2015, he worked as assistant professor in the English literature department at the University of Amsterdam, before moving to Utrecht University in 2015.

Nat Muller

Nat Muller is an independent curator and writer. Her writing on contemporary art from the Middle East has been published widely. Recent exhibitions include Spectral Imprints for the Abraaj Group Art Prize in Dubai (2012); This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time at Stedelijk Museum/American University of Beirut Gallery (2014/15); the A.M. Qattan 2016 Young Artist of the Year Award at Qalandiya International in Ramallah and The Mosaic Rooms in London, and Neither on the ground, nor in the Sky at ia Gallery, Berlin. She has curated film programs for Rotterdam's International Film Festival, Norwegian Short Film Festival, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, and Video D.U.M.B.O New York. She curated the Danish Pavilion for the 58th Venice Biennale. Her AHRC-funded PhD project at Birmingham City University researches science fiction in contemporary visual practices from the Middle East.

Tasnim Outait

Tasnim Outait is a visiting postdoctoral researcher at SOAS, University of London. Her research interests include migration studies, postcolonial theory and world literature. She is currently working on a project on the nexus of security and mobility in fiction by Arab writers. Her research is funded by the Swedish Research Council.



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