

## PREFACE

JILL JASMIN BUMILLER

In 2016, the University Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin launched the *Contemporary Interventions in The Bumiller Collection* exhibition series in collaboration with Taswir Projects, showcasing the Syrian artist Ali Kaaf. The underlying concept of the series is simple, yet requires a good deal of sensitivity and intuition in its realization: each respective artist stirs up the antique collection by exhibiting their works together with ours at Bumiller Studio X-Berg in Berlin-Kreuzberg, thereby creating a fresh exchange and interrelation between both. Explored anew with each exhibition is the specific selection of ancient pieces from the more than 6,000 objects of the Bumiller Collection located in Bamberg, the way in which the artworks and objects are exhibited together, as well as the relationship between these two “worlds.” Ali Kaaf, for example, chose an associative approach to our pieces, while Nicky Brukheuisen, who was featured in the second edition of *Contemporary Interventions*, chose to build a series of thematic links.

The aim of *Contemporary Interventions* is to liberate the exhibiting artists from commercial pressures too often prevalent in the gallery environment, so as to provide them with the greatest possible opportunity for development and expression. This creates a very intimate relationship between our institution and the artists: they are involved in the process from the very beginning, fully integrated in the decision-making, and we work together to build an exhibition with no predefined outcome. A special form of creativity is encouraged through this approach, namely one constituted out of the engagement with, and interplay between, the collection and the artist. Our objective is to break open the stereotypes, to blur the otherwise common boundaries and clear-cut distinctions of conventional exhibition layouts for antique versus contemporary art, commonplace structures for museums versus galleries, and academic versus non-academic approaches to art, thereby creating fluid transitions between these spheres. All of this happens with the intention of benefiting a new understanding of space and time, and with the hope that the works and objects displayed will illuminate each other, consistently revealing new aspects of the pieces themselves and their counterparts.

The third edition of *Contemporary Interventions* is a truly special one. This time, there are two artists, Rebecca Raue and Steve Sabella, presenting their works in conversation with two distinct groups of objects from The

Bumiller Collection: mirrors and game pieces dating from the 11th to the 17th century. With this intervention, our collection’s objects, quiet historical bystanders that they are, seem to take on the role of a philosophical-methodological interface. These pieces can be ascribed a meditative nature, engaging with ideas of reflection and perception and built with playful yet strategic components—precisely the point at which Raue’s and Sabella’s artworks position themselves. A fascinating, multilayered network is developed out of the connections and cross-references between all of the artworks and objects on display. Raue’s over-paintings of medieval Arabic miniatures are ludic and secretive, while simultaneously displaying a certain honesty that speaks directly to our subconscious. They manage to communicate a feeling in the viewer that his or her soul itself is being mirrored back. Sabella’s archaeological-seeming fragments, peeled from the Old City walls of his native Jerusalem with a surgeon’s care and precision, reach deeper into layers of time and memory. He then awakens them, bringing them back to life through his photography. In the first moments of viewing them, one catches oneself wondering if they aren’t actually antique depictions. The onlooker falls silent at their vivid appeal, to then give way and sink into the fragments. Only the silence itself, one that allows a contemplative air to resonate and breathe, seems to do them justice.

It is because of this multifaceted entirety, with its various layers and connections, that the exhibited objects and pieces should not solely be read through the lens of the here and now, but also as mementos with which one is also able to create new memories.

## NOTE TO THE READER

A.S. BRUCKSTEIN ÇORUH

*Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* is part of House of Taswir’s longstanding agenda of artistic research exploring what is “contemporary ancient.” Accompanying the exhibition is this book, which traces the dual intervention by two contemporary artists into a private collection of ancient Persian and Islamic art. We thank Jill Jasmin Bumiller for her enthusiastic welcome of Rebecca Raue’s brand new *Kalila wa Dimna* series and Steve Sabella’s fragments from *38 Days of Re-Collection*, shown alongside pieces of the Bumiller Collection. The chess figures, mirrors and dice were graciously chosen by Jill Bumiller herself, whose selection is felicitous, showing a certain ingenuity with respect to the exhibition’s fascination with digits of time, cut-ups, and a mirrored, non-consecutive order of things. We thank the artists, Steve Sabella and Rebecca Raue, who offer their work so lavishly to a spatial setting whose nature is experimental, weaving their own practice into layers of matter and time, future to past, dreamlike. These are two artists who exhibit the radical nature of the poetic imagination.

This book also showcases the power of theory and convenes an imaginary roundtable of scholars. We are touched by the spontaneous generosity of the authors, thinkers, writers and curators who followed our invitation to read the artworks and the exhibition from various perspectives.

In a chapter called [6],<sup>1</sup> I speak as the curator about fractal methods of “writing exhibitions,” a poetic technique I call “contemporary ancient,” drawing on Freud, Dada, Fluxus, and Kalam. Nat Muller, curator and writer, focuses on the politics of collecting and collaging, offering a close reading of the artists’ works. The political theorist and poet Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh contributes a motto to nomadic thinking and the nomad’s lines of flight. In a chapter on Rebecca Raue [19], philosopher Marleen Stoessel presents a poetic essay on the *Kalila wa*

*Dimna* series, its visual poetry and display of Raue’s dreamlike ethic; Elliot R. Wolfson, scholar of Jewish mysticism, offers six of his own poems on dreams, eros, love, and death, which I arranged alongside Rebecca

Raue’s work in the form of a visual *midrash*.<sup>2</sup> In chapter [20], Hubertus von Amelunxen, director of the European Graduate School, gives a succinct account of Steve Sabella’s *38 Days of Re-Collection*, the series’ photographic collage disclosing an aesthetics of displacement. Ella Shohat, cultural theorist and scholar of the history of the Arab-Jew, exposes various layers of the return of the repressed in Sabella’s fragments, examining alienation as a method of unsettling a political landscape. T.J. Demos, founder and director of the Center for Creative Ecologies at University of California Santa Cruz, writes on the artist’s strategy of memory retrieval, reading it as a resourceful resistance against the threat of erasure. In chapter [1], art historian and scholar of Islamic art Lorenz Korn offers a rich and thorough analysis of the objects sourced from the Bumiller Collection.

During the opening on May 18, 2017, *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* becomes the public scene for a Fluxus intervention with pieces from John Cage’s *Songbook* presented by singer and performer Anna Clementi. The prospect of hearing Cage’s compositions inside our constellation of *Fragments* anticipates a desire: *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future* dreams to become a “text” for further commentary, an exhibition examined by another exhibition, a dream interpreted within a dream, somewhere, determined by a future yet to come.

I thank Jill Bumiller for welcoming this exhibition into Studio X-Berg, the artists for their outstanding generosity and inspiration, Nathaniel Marcus for his meticulous copy-editing, and Julia Gyemant for co-editing and her resourceful support.

Thanks to Pierre Becker and Johanna Goldmann of Ta-Trung for creating a magnificent book.

<sup>1</sup> The chapter numbers [6], [19], [20], and [1] are named after the first letter of their themes in the Latin alphabet: 6 for *Fragments From Our Beautiful Future*, 19 for Rebecca Raue, 20 for Steve Sabella, and 1 for Ancient Figures.

<sup>2</sup> *Midrash* is an ancient rabbinic associative technique of interpretation usually applied to biblical narratives. Here, it is related to the juxtaposition of Wolfson’s poems with Raue’s paintings.