Dubai:
The Bodiless Image

By Stephanie Sykes

In his essay "Chasing Shadows in Dubai", Mauricio Guillen claims that Dubai is designed to "look like something that only exists in photographs, rather heavily photo-shopped ones" (Guillen 2007, 14). It is this self-conscious hyper-recognisability that has constructed the emirate's branding since its contemporary inception and has created its public persona, signified by superlatives, wealth and globalised aesthetics. Perhaps more interesting than this branding is what Guillen's Photoshopped perception has been designed to edit. What lies beneath the marketing?

While no place is simple to understand, Dubai is particularly complex because it operates as a unique point of convergence for numerous social systems, religious beliefs, classes, etc. While it is a place rich with history, the temporal frame that pertains to this essay dates back to the 1960s, during which time Dubai's ruler Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed al Maktoum dredged the emirate's small creek, marking the beginning of a successful shipping industry that would eventually lead Dubai to its unprecedented rate of economic development. Within the last 20 years, and under the new leadership of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Dubai has transformed from a remote desert village into one of the most globally branded and enigmatic cities in contemporary culture.

Traditional modes of investigation into Dubai's cultural framework focus heavily on its rapid development and attempt to diagnose specific conditions in specific moments of time. Because Dubai moves at such an extraordinary speed, it is virtually impossible to do a thorough analysis without published material becoming immediately obsolete. Given the challenging nature of the emirate, I have turned to contemporary art to propose a different sort of analysis. Instead of answering to the conditions put forth by Dubai, the enquiring nature of contemporary art will instead propose questions. The very act of questioning discourages us from hastily keeping up with the developments and instead forces us to pause and consider what is before us, hopefully revealing new forms of scrutiny in the process.

This essay openly runs the risk of becoming prematurely outdated, as does all published material about Dubai. Its subject matter uses the concept of a specific art project to experiment with new ways of reading the emirate, and it is my hope that the project itself will continue to raise new questions long after this supporting text reaches its expiration.

Each year, Art Dubai – the first major contemporary art fair in the Middle East – hosts the Global Art Forum, a three-day series of conversations, lectures and debates, comprised of international art thinkers that poise Dubai as the nucleus for discursive investigation. The intent of this forum is to offset the commercial nature of the art fair and encourage the sustainability of Dubai's young art community through discussion. Following the fair, the Global Art Forum releases its published transcripts, the text of which is partnered with an annual artistic commission. The concept behind this commission programme is to visually brand the discussions, as the images within the publication become visual emblems for the text, and the complexity of dialogue within the transcripts is collapsed into a visual campaign.

The most recent commission involves a partnership that directly responds to the notion of discussion advocated by the Global Art Forum. Thierry Bal and Idris Khan have engaged in an image-led collaboration for *Global Art Forum: 2 Transcripts* that introduces the notion of debranding to Dubai through a series of conceptual composites. Bal, often regarded

II, Dubai © Thierry Bal and Idris Khan

as a commercial photographer for the art world, has used his commercial aesthetic to capture moments he felt represented a "real" Dubai. Khan, an artist known for appropriating existing material through digital layering, then used Bal's images to create composites, implementing the commercial language of branding as seen in Bal's photographs to create a new visual vocabulary of what can be perceived as a version of debranded Dubai. Their project offers the question: is it possible to use this exercise in branding *Global Art Forum: 2 Transcripts* to self-reflexively destabilise Dubai's own brand? Using both the conditions of Dubai's existing brand and the visual reference provided by Bal and Khan, this essay will attempt to examine the ways in which artistic production, this project in particular, can be used as a tool in the debranding process.

While Bal and Khan's work differs formally, their methodological similarity initially drew my attention to the potential of collaboration.

Departing from his background in medicine, Thierry Bal moved from Belgium to London and established himself as a photographer who produces work for and in collaboration with contemporary artists. Working with practitioners such as Francis Alÿs, Zineb Sedira, Daria Martin, and of course, Idris Khan, Bal is often commissioned to document artists' work, as for *Global Art Forum: 2 Transcripts*, for the sake of branding and archiving. Bal's photographs offer glimpses into the work of these artists in many instances, but he is not interested in depicting exact moments or scenes from the original artwork itself. Instead, he takes liberties in restaging the artists' compositions (be they visual or performative), thus creating his own visual production of someone else's work.

Meanwhile, artist Idris Khan photographs and scans existing material (pictorial images, musical scores, pages of text, etc.) and layers the reproductions in such a way that the final work mimics the aesthetics of drawing. Like Bal, he restages an original piece of work in order to distort it and make it his own. He considers this process of meticulous appropriation to be a gesture of intervention in which the original piece of appropriated material is recontextualised and given new form.

Bal and Khan spent a week in Dubai and produced five composites and 15 photographs that are scattered throughout *Global Art Forum: 2 Transcripts*. Their body of work is positioned in response to the text of the transcripts and in dialogue with one another. The images are a reflection of their experiences in Dubai, experiences that have destabilised, or sometimes affirmed, their perception of the emirate's myth. It is significant to note Bal and Khan's response to Dubai's

brand, but we must first articulate the conditions that compose this brand and the reason why debranding is a critical ingredient in understanding the emirate. It is commonly accepted that Dubai's aggressive branding seeks to reject the stereotype of war-torn Islamic states in the Middle East, a reputation that has been exacerbated by Western media, particularly since the Gulf War in 1992 and 9/11 in 2001. Similar to the way in which a stereotype is formed and disseminated, a brand projects a recognisable myth within the public domain. While they may communicate polar messages, both the stereotype of the Middle East and the brand of Dubai are mutated truths in that they communicate an over-simplified, misinformed generalisation to the public at large. In doing so, each one conceals any form of site-authenticity that could potentially reveal a glimpse of the complex truth behind Dubai's ethos.

Dubai has created a brand that directly opposes the Middle Eastern misconception by illustrating itself as a destination of affluence, a physical playground for the architecturally unbelievable and a melting pot for global business practice. Unlike its traditional Islamic neighbours, Dubai prides itself on its religious and social tolerance, and is known as one of the most multinational places in the world:

"In Dubai, outsiders constitute 80% of the population. In the history of the world, there is perhaps no precedent where 20% of locals were able to coexist with 80% 'foreigners"'. (Koolhaus 2007, rear panel)

With these statistics, Dubai has made the idea of harmonious multinationalism one of the cornerstones of its brand, but within these figures lies one of Dubai's greatest complexities. According to the Dubai Tourist Guide (http://www.dubaitouristguide.com/dubai-Population_of_Dubai.html), the ethnic breakdown of registered immigrants is approximately 50% South Asian, 23% non -UAE-Arab and Iranian, 19% Emirati and 8% Other. A vast percentage of the South Asian population composes Dubai's labour force, while the remaining 50% of the population is composed largely of Emiratis and international professionals, many of whom see Dubai as a transient, tax-free, opportunistic mecca for business and architecture. This polarity in population highlights not only a rift in social status, but it also implies a collision of customs, traditions and religions that contradicts the veneer of a seamless coexistence. Using this fragmented population as an example demonstrates the critical role debranding plays in deconstructing the myths surrounding Dubai to reveal a notion of truth. It is clear that Dubai functions as a different place to different people, and identifying a singular "truth" is impossible. Instead of trying

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to pinpoint precisely these multiple truths, we will instead rely on Bal and Khan's artistic production to guide us through the possibilities of debranding.

How do we begin the process of debranding? Elementary psychoanalysis provides a strong platform from which to consider the many questions debranding raises, both in terms of Bal and Khan's artistic production and the human motivations puppeteering Dubai's brand. In hopes of breaking down the basic ideas feeding the Global Art Forum: 2 Transcripts commission, I turn to Jacques Lacan, whose revival and scrutiny of Freudian theories led to new articulations of narcissism and Lacan's own formulation of the mirror phase.

Lacan argues that in the mirror phase, infants are able to recognise their image in reflective surfaces. However, they are unable to rationalise the existence of their projected self and do not understand the lack of feelings and internal reasoning within the reflection. They perceive the steady movements of their fragmented body to function without awkward mechanics as experienced within their own movement, and consequently they misinterpret this image as an imago. Witnessing none of "the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him" (Lacan 1966, 2), the child begins to mimic this imagined "other", thus igniting the lifelong tension humans endure in trying to embody the ideal self, or the ideal ego. The subject, doing its best to assume the symbolic identity of the ideal ego, paradoxically looks down upon the subject itself, or rather, the ego ideal.

Lacan suggests that infants experience this life-altering encounter because humans are born prematurely when compared to other species and lack necessary motor and reasoning faculties; as such, they desperately seek models from which they can fashion themselves.

Likewise, Dubai has suffered from a premature "birth" by ostensibly appearing to the world in a fully realised state. The topography of the city developed before the place and people therein were able to prepare psychologically, and now, after just two decades of expedited physical development modeled on the success of various global cities, Dubai perpetually pursues its ideal ego – a globalised veneer that makes up its branding – and evades its ego ideal – its sense of authenticity.

How should we understand Dubai's authentic self? Despite its complexities, what remains of Dubai's authentic self is deceptively simple. Perhaps the emirate's notion of citizenship, its direct physical, psychological and geographical relationship to Dubai-as-site, is key to understanding its pre-branded and

debranded conditions. Although Dubai's population of 1.8 million is made up of 80% expatriates, laws are enforced that deter expatriates from obtaining permanent Emirati residency. As cultural theorist Mieke Bal writes, "Exteriority is necessary for the interiority of the sensational body to become filled with meaning" (Bal 1999, 232), suggesting that the abundance of expatriates, representing those who are nationally exterior to the United Arab Emirates, are necessary for Dubai to contextualise its national identity as authentic. At the same time, Dubai as the sensational body identifies not with its "self-same" ego ideal, but as its "self-same as other" (Bal 2006, 56) – the ideal ego. With this in mind, there appears to be a mutual Lacanian misidentification: Dubai's debranded, authentically national ego ideal becomes the expatriates' ideal ego in that it signifies an unreachable version of the ideal self; meanwhile, the globalised nature of the expatriate population represents the ideal ego of Dubai's brand while its publicly concealed sense of authenticity constitutes the ego ideal.

Lacan's formulation of the mirror stage became the platform for many of his theories, including his interpretation of narcissism, which stems from the moment a child identifies its disembodied mirror image as its ideal ego. However, if we look at a more recognised rendition of narcissism as presented by the ancient Roman poet Ovid, we see Narcissus as a mythical figure who attracted the love of many but was too proud to reciprocate anyone's affections. Upon seeing his reflection in a stream for the first time, he falls in love with his own likeness and is stricken with despair when he realises he will never be able to embrace the reflection. Overcome with heartbreak, Narcissus wills himself to die. Through Ovid, we discover that the catalyst of Narcissus's demise occurs when, "[H]e falls in love with an image without a body" (Bal 1999, 237).

This ultimately fatal flaw of Narcissus speaks to the emptiness of Dubai's consuming brand, as it too can be perceived as an image without a body. If we understand the brand to be based on myth, there is inherently no truth or evidence of authenticity to substantiate Dubai's actual body. Is it possible to decipher a body from Dubai's pluralistic identity, and if so, can this be achieved through debranding?

Bal and Khan address this question in *Untitled 1* (2008), a composite that positions the Burj Dubai, the world's tallest building, as a ubiquitous apparition strewn across the image, layered over and within numerous other images of construction sites, high-end SUVs, playing children, humble buildings, etc. These understated images are heavily layered and create a dark, muddled patch that is only discernible upon close visual dissection.

In an interview, Bal and Khan remark on the experience that influenced this composite:

"We were fascinated by the tower's sheer dominance of the skyline and decided to walk towards it, following as straight a path as possible. However, it seemed we were never really getting closer, and at one point we had to abandon the journey because we couldn't continue along the same path. We never reached our end point, but that seemed very apt. Wherever we went in the city, the tower would always be visible but forever far removed". (Bal and Khan, 2008)

In addition to the obvious Lacanian metaphor of chasing Dubai's ideal ego, Bal and Khan's infatuation with this city icon relates to the narcissistic quest to find a sensational body. By repeatedly using a ghostly symbol of Dubai's city branding, the Burj refers to the simultaneous omnipresence and emptiness of the brand, while the saturation of the more discreet images (sights encountered in pursuit of the Burj) defies the singular perception of debranded Dubai, suggesting that the sensational body is unrecognisable as it exists in too many different forms.

The medium used by Bal and Khan plays a large role in connecting the psycho-social conditions of both branded and debranded Dubai to the concerns surrounding their formal aesthetic. That the foundation of Bal and Khan's collaboration is premised upon photography is key as, according to philosopher Walter Benjamin, "It is through photography that we first discover the optical unconscious just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis". (Benjamin 1931, 243)

In his 1931 essay, "A Small History of Photography," Benjamin muses upon the social impact of photography when it is used as a cultural vessel and calls attention to the potentially problematic nature of the medium when used within an artistic context. For Benjamin, the aura is an essential component of pre-industrial artworks, and works that have been created through the use of reproducible technology, such as photography and film, are stripped of their aura. He describes the aura as, "A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (250). Here, Benjamin's use of "distance" can be read as the sense of representation present within an artwork. For example, the subject of a painting does not make claims of being the object itself; rather, the painting is the object and the subject lies therein. The clear distinction of representation between object and subject is what creates the idea of distance. However, because of photography's "magical value" (243), that is, its tendency to bestow upon the viewer an "irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now" (243), a new form of connection is fabricated between the viewer and image, and as such, attention is drawn away from the photograph as an object and is instead channeled into the subject, which falsely assumes the role of object. This misidentification hails back to Lacan's mirror phase, as well as the dialectics of narcissism, wherein the subject is recognised as a bodiless image.

Benjamin asserts that an artwork maintains its auratic quality when it brings with it an aesthetic experience, a "fundamental category of experience, memory and perception permeating human possibilities of encountering the world" (Costello 2005, 165). This claim insinuates that there is an "underlying form to which all experience must conform in order to be experience at all – as opposed to the content of any particular experience...it suggests a kind of reverie in which time expands, in which one is contemplatively immersed in – or absorbed by – the object of one's perception" (Costello 2005,173). Because of photography's mass reproducibility and corresponding accessibility, Benjamin does not feel the medium invites a sense of consuming experience. The proliferation of a photograph's reproduction is capable of bringing images to the viewer instead of viewers to an image. Therefore, the aesthetic experience is lost and with it dies the aura.

While Benjamin's notion of the unauratic photograph may have had relevance at the time "A Small History of Photography" was written, his theory does not hold true in contemporary culture. Benjamin witnessed a transition in the visual arts in which traditional mediums like painting and sculpture expanded to include new forms such as photography, film and installation. This development of the visual arts marks a shift in photography's role from a mode of documentation to that of an artistic device. As the nature of photography has developed so tremendously since Benjamin's time, it is now widely accepted as an art form that, for various reasons, is capable of producing an aesthetic experience as well as the ontological awareness Benjamin claims a work needs in order to have an aura.

In fact, the nature of photography has progressed so much since Benjamin's influential essay, there now seem to be more contemporary concerns surrounding photography-as-document rather than photography-as-art. As an example, Bal's commercial practice represents the challenging nature of both photography and documentation. Typically, he is meant

to record artwork neutrally as presented by the artist, but his reading of the work automatically shifts the meaning within his documentation of the piece, and his final images often communicate his own artistic license rather than that of the original artist. This unintentional act of translation speaks to the ongoing concerns surrounding notions of documentation. Commenting on the controversial filmmaker Jean Rouche, who is known for blurring the boundaries between documentary, fiction and his subject matter, scholar Steven Ungar writes, "Documentary can arguably be seen as a mode of fiction built on the basis of heterogeneous images and effects . . . to produce representational systems on a par with the (so-called) fiction film". (Ungar 2007, 111) If, as Ungar suggests, the nature of documentation corresponds to modes of fiction, Bal's photographs can be perceived as a fictive account of an artwork, and as such, his work adopts a narrative perspective that is distinct from that of the artists he works with. Taking into account these concerns of photography-as-document in addition to the drastic shift in the social acceptance of photography that has occurred since "A Small History of Photography", it can be argued that branding represents the contemporary equivalent of Benjamin's unauratic image. If we liken the death of the aura to the demise of Narcissus, we can assume that images produced by branding are images without a body and the missing auratic element must be contained within this absent body.

In another of Benjamin's influential texts, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), he says that the loss of aura due to "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (Benjamin 1936, 215), with "tradition" referring to a singular artwork's distinctive value in place and time. The idea of a "tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind" (Ibid) leads us to Palestinian artist, filmmaker and theorist Jalal Toufic, who in keeping with Lacan's metaphor of mirrors as a site for inaccurate reflections, offers the notion of the surpassing disaster, a theory through which we can position the role Bal and Khan's collaboration plays within the context of Dubai.

In "Forthcoming", Toufic observes, "With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there" (Toufic 2000, www.unitednationsplaza.org/readingroom/Jalal%20 Toufic,%20Forthcoming.pdf). Toufic's concept of the surpassing disaster was initially inspired by the Lebanese civil war and other catastrophic events he experienced while living in the Middle East, and as such, he suggests that the surpassing disaster refers to specific events that lead to the withdrawal of

tradition (specifically Arabic tradition) in a community. He claims that this community is inherently shaped by the effect of the surpassing disaster, and its tradition is recognised only through its withdrawal caused by the surpassing disaster (Toufic, personal communication, 09/05/2008).

If Toufic illustrates the surpassing disaster as a specific event that leads to the withdrawal of tradition, we can assume that the specific event is a catalyst for a larger consequential social condition. What is or will be the surpassing disaster in Dubai, and what has been or will be withdrawn? It seems that the surpassing disaster in Dubai has both happened and still threatens to occur. Relating back to the notion of stereotypes, the Gulf War and 9/11 are specific events that had a large impact on the international community's perception of the Middle East, and with these events, confidence in economics, cultural practice and tolerance in the Middle East plummeted. As mentioned earlier, to restore this lost confidence, Dubai conceived its brand in order to portray itself as a globalised hub to an international audience. In light of this, its community has been directly shaped by the effects of the surpassing disaster, and its sense of cultural tradition – the Arabic tradition Toufic often speaks of – is recognised precisely because it has been socially withdrawn to make way for globalised business and social practice. However, this example of the surpassing disaster and its consequences seems incomplete as unbranded Dubai - Dubai's relationship to site through citizenship - has not yet been demolished by the evolution of the surpassing disaster - its brand. Though Dubai's government is doing what it can to maintain the purity of its nationality, the ever-growing influx of expatriates increasingly subverts the population ratio and constantly threatens to dilute Dubai's remaining Arabic tradition.

This threat reveals itself in Bal and Khan's body of work, particularly in the images that focus on construction. During my first conversation with Khan and Bal, we discussed Dubai's physical tendency to make large strides towards the future (or towards its ideal ego) without creating a clearly documented history for itself. Present moments and current developments seemingly become obsolete instead of historical, and the moment we are able to identify these states of "nowness" (Rifkin 2007, Lecture), Dubai has moved on, or, in Toufic's words, these states of "nowness" have withdrawn. It is precisely this withdrawal that provides a catalyst for Khan and Bal's artistic production. The duo expressed an acute interest in the ubiquitous presence of construction in Dubai. Many of their images focus on the physical rise of Dubai, fixating on the myriad building sites scattered throughout the city and the way the flat desert landscape surrounding these sites responds

to the disturbance. While Bal and Khan's depiction of Dubai's physical growth metaphorically alludes to the demand for a larger globalised metropolis, these images simultaneously address the deconstruction of Arabic tradition.

Bal and Khan's medium is of further importance within the framework of the surpassing disaster as Toufic goes on to say, *"We have to take photographs even though because of their referents' withdrawal, and until their referents are resurrected, they are not going to be available as referential, documentary pieces -- with the concomitant risk that facets relating to the subject matter might be mistaken for purely formal ones."* (www.unitednationsplaza.org/readingroom/Jalal%20Toufic,%20Forthcoming. pdf)

In the way that the surpassing disaster refers to a concrete event, here Toufic speaks of the "referent" as a specific object that has been destroyed. While withdrawal of the "referent" is caused by the surpassing disaster, the process is not confirmed until that which has been withdrawn is resurrected. Again, we must expand on Toufic's intended scope, and instead of perceiving the referent to be an object that has been withdrawn, we accept it as a condition – the Arabic tradition – that has receded as a result of Dubai's surpassing disaster.

Toufic's reasoning highlights the difficulties of photography pertaining to the surpassing disaster in a way that reprises the dialectic between the purpose of photography-as-document vs. photography-as-art. He argues that photographic documentation of the withdrawn cannot be considered as such until the withdrawn is resurrected. Until then, "memories of what has been withdrawn is a betrayal of it; a false memory" (Ibid). If we juxtapose his claim to Ungar's statement about the convoluted nature of documentary, we find that photography-as-document is incapable of resurrection because its inherently fictive nature disguises itself as a purely objective document, thus resulting in a "betrayal" of the referent. Alternatively, if Toufic asserts that art makes visible the surpassing disaster by revealing the withdrawal of tradition, and if withdrawal is only confirmed once it has been resurrected, we should interpret art to be a form of resurrection. This confirms art photography's validity in the resurrection process.

Toufic shows us the relevance of Bal and Khan's collaboration in relation to Dubai. In their unmodified, photographic form, Bal's images do not make literal reference to Arabic tradition; the presence of Arabic tradition is implied through its absence. However, capturing this withdrawal cannot succeed in a purely photographic format. Bal's independent images run the risk of being mistaken for documentation of Dubai's

physical and social conditions, and if received on their own, they can easily be interpreted as an attempt to keep speed with Dubai's "nowness". Khan's post-production engagement with Bal's images is critical as he creates visual, often illegible narratives that impose an undeniable subjectivity upon the images, which prevents both the composites and the photographs from being read as a "false memory". Through Khan's compositing of Bal's images, "each layer used is a fallible human decision" (Khan, personal communication, 2008). It is this visibility of "fallible human decision" that supports Bal's original images within a specifically artistic context and ultimately positions the collaborative body of work as a potential form of resurrection.

If Bal and Khan have succeeded in the act of resurrection, and if they have successfully rendered a potential body for unbranded Dubai, we still do not have a clear notion of what this body might look like. Perhaps they show us that this body is unknowable or is something so overtly present we are unable to locate it with precision. Perhaps it is nothing more than a collection of murmurs beneath Guillen's Photoshopped Dubai. What we do know is that we are left with intangible data that encourages us to continue experimenting and questioning.

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Untitled 1 © Idris Khan and Thierry Bal