

Jala Wahid
Mock Kings
1 Apr–14 May 2023

How can history be told and preserved if it intrinsically eludes the Western idea of nation-statehood? Working with conflicting Kurdish and Western narratives and perspectives, Jala Wahid explores the enduring effects of longstanding colonial occupation and British and US imperialism on Kurdish art practices and archaeology.

The site-specific jailed bull sculptural installation housed in the Kunstverein exhibition space refers to the Kurdish performance of Mirmîran. Involving the election of a mock king instating mandatory laws, Mirmîran was considered politically subversive by British occupation forces and subsequently banned in 1922. In the gallery above, the work *Metaphysical Reunification* (2023) is presented. It's a deck of aluminium-cast playing cards that respond directly to the equivalent deck created by the Department of Defense, encouraging the U.S. army's preservation of archaeology during the Iraq invasion. Artefacts from Mesopotamia, and modern-day Greater Kurdistan, now on display in London or Paris or still missing after the US military invasion of Iraq, are some of those that Wahid now re-collects and expands upon in direct opposition to the illegal excavations and looting of archaeological finds.

Both an early form of Kurdish art performance and artefacts from former Mesopotamia serve as starting points for Wahid to counter-draft Western historical narratives and, in doing so, reflect on theatrical and performative forms of political subversion. Which media might aid in criticising and ridiculing colonial power relations, or what's more, distorting, inverting and temporarily suspending them? What potentials are offered by carnivalesque aesthetics, play and dance, parody and humour? And what happens when political and theatrical action can no longer be clearly distinguished?

In the context of political, geographical and linguistic fragmentation and unresolved questions of belonging and permanence, Wahid takes on the contradictions, diffuseness and complexity of diasporic reality and develops alternate techniques of remembering and preserving that can be transformative and playful, that testify to resilience and self-positioning.

Mock Kings is Wahid's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany.

Curator: Theresa Roessler

Interview with Jala Wahid

Theresa Roessler: Jala, you visited Kunstverein Freiburg about a year ago. I remember very well how we sat downstairs in the exhibition hall and talked about the medium of the exhibition as a tool for remembering, preserving, and archiving in your practice. Picking up this previous conversation, what makes the question of preservation and archiving so fundamental in the context of Kurdish art practices and specifically the performance of Mirmîran?

Jala Wahid: Up until this point, making exhibitions has always begun with an overload of information. For example, the exhibition *AFTERMATH* at Niru Ratnam Gallery in London, as well as my current exhibition *Conflagration* at BALTIC in Gateshead, have involved research into various archives, such as the British Petroleum Archives, the (UK) National Archives, the Kew Gardens Library and Archives and the London Kurdish Cultural Centre. In contrast, the moment that sparked this body of work at the Kunstverein was a very slippery, almost invisible anecdote of an early form of performance art called Mirmîran.

When I consider Kurdish art forms, I immediately think of poetry and music. The idea of a collaborative and collective performance was very interesting to me, but Mirmîran was barely documented. Apart from a short paragraph and an image in the book *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage* by Mari R. Rostami¹ I haven't been able to find much other material. However, the above-mentioned archives document well, for instance, the relationship between Kurdistan and Britain, or the history and politics of oil and even the flora and fauna of Kurdistan and neighbouring regions, as the acquisition of this knowledge is embroiled in colonial history and politics.

Starting without almost any concrete material was very challenging. How do I make a body of work around something that is just beyond my reach? My research often reveals gaps and space for speculation, but with this show, it almost felt like there was more fiction and imagination than reality. This applies to both the work in the exhibition hall that took the performance art of Mîrmîran as a starting point, as well as the deck of playing cards on the upper floor that explores the speculativeness of archaeology. I liked the idea of using fiction, speculation and imagination as a material and device to navigate these moments and their consequences.

TR: I like this understanding of imagination as material, as it already implicates this idea of opposition to an “officially” approved historical narrative based on an archive rooted in colonialism that offers only one perspective, one ideology, one history.

JW: Yes, but with this show, an alternative in opposition to a pre-existing narrative isn’t being played out because the narrative just doesn’t exist. When Mîrmîran, ephemeral by nature, was censored in 1922 by British political officers, it ceased to exist. This annihilation is one of the most brutal forms of colonial violence.

When Britain politically occupied Mesopotamia there was, and has been since, a huge archaeological interest in the region, and this is why a lot of Mesopotamian archaeology exists in Western museums. In this context, the question of what art forms are deemed worthy of preserving and why, as well as who has the jurisdiction to make that decision, has been very interesting to me. The British political officers neither saw the political value nor the value of an art form in Mîrmîran.

TR: Within your practice, which spans sculpture, writing, film, sound and installation, you’ve been

exploring the pervasive depths and enduring repercussions of British, French and US-American imperialism and colonialism in Kurdish art practices and archaeology. Could you elaborate on that and explain how you specifically explore questions around the performativity of politics in *Mock Kings*?

JW: I think about performativity not only in terms of politics but in terms of the potential of material, sound and sculpture, the performativity in writing and the respective subject matter I am interrogating. I’m very much interested in the emotional charge that something can carry. Reading written content in various archives, I became aware of the performance in political literature, whether this is memos, telegrams, conference minutes or meetings. It is very emotively written because a lot of that writing was internal. There is a sort of intimacy and casualness to the way it is written, where it gives away the interpersonal desires of the person who is writing. Sometimes it feels almost confessional.

The altercation between the British political officers and those performing Mîrmîran is a similarly charged political moment that gives itself away in terms of the desires of the people performing it and of the British political officers that eventually banned it. How do I translate this emotive charge, and perhaps private moment that comes to the fore, into a work or an exhibition? In a lot of the research material I read, I see a lot of theatre, choreography, strategy and scheming and the emotive intent of decision-making is a thread I’d like the work to embody.

TR: Mîrmîran was performed as part of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year and spring festival, which takes place on 21 March. Today, however, the festival is predominantly considered a day of Kurdish resistance and political expression, representing the struggle for freedom and identity. The politicisation of the

festival can be traced back to the 1970s, a time that also coincides with the formation of the Kurdish freedom movement. During that time, the festival and even the term 'Newroz' was banned in Turkey. In Iraq, Iran and Syria, too, violence was implemented against the festival, or, in some cases, it was renamed in the respective language. It still strikes me that a dance, like Rashbalak, a performance like Mîrmîran, or a festival like Newroz poses such great danger to autocratic and repressive regimes that respond with bans, censorship and even imprisonment. However, it clearly shows that theatrical performances are able to develop considerable political power and might serve social purposes. Mari R. Rostami uses an appropriate term for that, namely "theatrical resistance".² In your opinion, what is politically subversive within the Mîrmîran performance?

JW: Political resistance within Kurdish history was a way of being able to freely exert cultural expression, but also cultural expression became a vehicle for political resistance. Historically, there is a real twinning between resistance and cultural expression, and one becomes a vehicle for the other. Mîrmîran is a good example of that. It was performed across Kurdistan and would involve the election of a mock king. The local authority would relinquish their power for a period of several days. In that time, whatever law was passed had to be obeyed. The laws would range from the comical, such as all the men would have to shave half of their moustache, to the very serious, like innocent prison inmates should be released.³ In my understanding, it was a jovial way of the local population being able to gently but seriously make clear what they were happy or unhappy with, and the local authority would observe this while taking part as a regular civilian. Eventually, two British political officers were thrown into jail for laughing at the carnival performance or another one was fined for drinking.⁴

Seeing this as a real threat and subversion to British political jurisdiction, the performance was banned. Although this performance was temporary and only happened once a year, the fact that power can move and can be reallocated so freely was unfathomable and posed a risk.

TR: As in previous exhibitions like *Newroz* (2019, Sophie Tappeiner Galerie) or *Conflagration* (2022, BALTIC), in the Kunstverein you focus on one symbol, the bull. Different histories, attributions, time periods and views converge within this symbol. Could you say more about this moment of convergence and also about how the installation in which the bull is placed incorporates the architecture?

JW: Yes, my approach to *Mock Kings* has been very similar to recent exhibitions where a single event, image, or piece of text would generate a body of work, for instance, the single event of discovering the significant oil field of Baba Gurgur near Kirkuk in 1927, or the image of toxic clouds masking the sun when ISIS bombed the Qayyarah oil fields in 2016.

The Kunstverein's space is incredibly beautiful in its symmetry, its height, and in the way the light comes through. At the same time, because of how it operates, it feels very oppressive, a place that attempts to seduce but also belittles you. I didn't want to negate this contradiction but to work with it. That for me embodies Mîrmîran: it is a playful, inclusive and collaborative performance, but its purpose is also subversion, to parody and to put a specific person or type of politics under scrutiny. I'd ask myself how to distil or translate a complex piece of history into its most essential components without removing that complexity but rather drawing attention to it.

Considering that the anecdote of Mîrmîran is slippery and ephemeral, I wanted the sculpture of the bull to exist as an outline. You couldn't fully flesh out

the space where this performance unfolded nor how, nor whether this art form existed in variations across Kurdistan – essentially, the details missing from our knowledge are unknown. I wanted the jail and the bull to be made of the same components, material and sensibility so that the installation appeared as a singular piece. I also wanted it to be cohesive and seamless with the architecture, seeing the jail and the bull as an extension of the space to highlight the fusion of the way the space operates with the way the performance Mirmiran works.

TR: Based on the correspondence with the architecture, what role did the light play?

JW: One of the first things that really struck me about the space was the skylight and how the light could change quite dramatically. Considering that the space is severe, didactic and deliberate in the way it works, it's very interesting that light is the one component that implicates the space from the outside, beyond its control. The performance Mirmiran occurred outside, and this is why I wanted to allude to a time of day and the conditions of the performance, something that would talk about the beginning or aftermath of this performance. The light also became a device for reinforcing the relationship between the installation and the space, and extending the force the sculpture exerts. I wanted to create a certain relentlessness, a feeling of the jail as inescapable as it surrounds you but also bleeds, in colour, into the entire gallery, almost bullying the audience. This starting point of the work is all about play but it gives way to something much more serious.

TR: What role does the bull play?

JW: For me, the bull is less a historical symbol and more an image of unpredictability and volatility.

It is also an animal put to work, made use of since the mock king would ride on a bull into the mountains where the performance would then play out. I see it as a double meaning: it embodies something unwieldy but, jailed, it becomes the opposite of that. Historically, the bull might be an icon, but for the show, I didn't think about its historical symbolism or iconography, but thought of it as an unwitting protagonist in this performance and as collateral damage.

TR: Alongside the installation downstairs, you also conceived a new series called *Metaphysical Reunification* (2023) which is shown on the upper level. It contains 54 playing cards cast in aluminium. The motifs partly refer to actual archaeological sites and artefacts in former Mesopotamia but also to imagined ones. Why did you choose the format of the playing cards?

JW: After the U.S. army invaded Iraq in 2003, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a deck of playing cards to the army in 2007. Each card shows an image of either an ancient Mesopotamian or Afghani artefact or a piece of history with a small caption that, for example, discourages looting or encourages the preservation of artefacts. The premise was that they were preserving their own history and not only the history of the people who lived there. To respect this history was viewed as an investment in themselves, and a form of self-preservation.

The work that I made for the upper floor is an alternative deck of playing cards. The spades and clubs show real artefacts that have been discovered, and the hearts and the diamonds are imagined artefacts. Throughout my research, I came across this strong relationship between war and archaeology that occurs on so many levels. Mesopotamia is one of the most archaeologically rich regions but at the same time one of the most under-researched regions

due to war and conflict as well as looting, destruction and archaeological research used for nationalistic means. For example, Saddam Hussein draining the marshes in Southern Iraq revealed ancient settlements, or the building of military roads has revealed ancient artefacts.

TR: I kept thinking about a text from one of the playing cards by the DoD, which says: "Respect monuments whenever possible. They are part of our collective cultural history." The self-conception implied by "our" is terrifying, but also explains how this part of the world, the so-called cradle of civilisation was seen as a site of storage to which Western powers would always have granted themselves access anyway. The wide range of artefacts that the British Museums holds – the department of the Middle East contains 300,000 objects – is scarily only one result of this "myth of archaeological stewardship".⁵ In the past, you visited the British Museum many times. For your research, you also recently met curators there. Could you tell me more about these conversations and your experiences there?

JW: The moment in the 1920s when Mirmîran was banned and the moment in the 2000s when there was a distinct impetus to preserve archaeology is a twinning of moments. It ties in with the question of what is in the Western interest to preserve and what needs to be censored, as well as the fact that both the performance and the deck of cards are a form of play. For me, it was a small, but very distinct formation of the sentiment around the invasion, the attitudes towards archaeology, the history, the people and towards themselves and what they thought belonged to them. It was another moment in a series of moments where the relationship between archaeology and colonialism is one and the same. Archaeology, and the act of discovery, is inherently political. A single

person discovering an artefact, finding something that was made thousands of years ago and claiming, "I found this!" is political.

What was hugely interesting to me when speaking to the archaeologists at the British Museum who helped in my research, was how they reconciled not knowing everything and how they dealt with gaps in knowledge. Up until this point, gaps in my research were always infuriating because they were a continual reminder of who the gatekeepers of history are and I always felt I was being denied knowledge of a shared history which involved and implicated me. This would then give way to using devices such as fiction and speculation as a way of rewriting narratives. What was interesting was hearing from archaeologists that, in fact, having fragments of information allowed them to slowly piece together an understanding of past events or civilisations and understand the relationships between various discovered elements in a way that would be more distinct and less overwhelming than if we were presented with a gargantuan amount of information.

I also realised that it is impossible to know the extent of the amount that has been discovered with respect to the total amount of artefacts, sites, etc. because there is no way of knowing all that exists beneath us. This brings us back to the first question and my sort of personal motto for the show: "I'm unaware of what I don't know." This, however, gives way to something else: that archaeology reveals just as much about the discoverer and our own desires and anxieties, as it does about the desires and anxieties of the people who lived thousands of years ago. At the British Museum, for instance, I looked at artefacts that were made to protect against miscarriage or death which we still attempt to protect ourselves against today.

TR: It seems as if different research threads from past years come together in your deck of playing cards. Could you talk about artefacts that awakened your interest and about two or three playing cards in more detail?

JW: One artefact I really enjoyed modelling, the 6 of Clubs, was a neolithic clay figure that resembles a baby. It was discovered in the Kermanshah Province of eastern Kurdistan, measures 43×22×16 mm and is currently held in the Oriental Institute in Chicago. With its quizzical, mischievous expression it looks so much like a jelly baby sweet and I love that something 8,500 years old can resemble something of today – that images, icons and motifs rendered thousands of years ago are repeated throughout history, taking on a cyclical nature. This conflation of time becomes a way of instantaneously moving back and forth in time.

Another playing card, the Ace of Spades, immediately transports us to a final, tender moment. The Hasanlu Lovers were human remains also found in eastern Kurdistan, discovered by a team of archaeologists from the University of Pennsylvania. The skeletons were found in an embrace, as though kissing in their dying moments. The assumption that they were male and female, an example of a heteronormative culture's projection, was later disputed. I was both interested in how the speculation surrounding the remains revealed more about their discoverers, but also in how the image of a tender moment makes an emotive reading so tempting to make. In both examples, there is this urge to relate to what has been found, likening it to something we already know or experience.

The presumption that we could know anything is interesting to me. I'm both frustrated, dumbfounded and excited by how little I could ever know about these magical past objects and events, yet fascinated by this continued persistence towards knowing, which

has historically manifested in colonial occupation. These slippery attempts at grasping understanding were dealt with in the 9 of Diamonds: a bite mark circling the phrase "divine stupidity".

TR: Could you specify why you describe this reunification as metaphysical in the work's title?

JW: When I was handling objects in the British Museum it was a really transformative experience holding something that was made thousands of years ago and I kept trying to imagine who the maker was: whether they'd have the same thoughts, frustrations and excitement I have when making, and what their drive was for making this object in the first place. The object embodied the emotional charge of its maker which I could only guess at. Its material quality held immaterial forces to do with identity, space and time in a way that seemed unfathomable to me and I enjoyed this mystery and not knowing. Holding these artefacts, and subsequently making the deck of cards, was an instance where I could begin to contend with the metaphysical qualities of these ancient objects. Yet, it was also important to remake and imagine these found and undiscovered objects not as they were discovered but perhaps as they might feel – another way of trying to understand the colonial context and repercussions of their discovery.

The deck of cards becomes yet another attempt to understand, but also a moment where these artefacts, looted and scattered by institutions, are reunified across space and time. These objects were made across various points in time, in places that have no bearing on the borders that define and categorise their discovery today. The civilisations that made them, would have spanned areas we not only define differently, but they would have expanded and contracted rendering borders inconcrete. While *Metaphysical Reunification* similarly embodies

complex desires around discovery, it looks to mock the DoD deck of cards which unrelentingly asserts western colonial ideas of borders, nations, history, power and ownership.

Jala Wahid (b. 1988) lives and works in London, GB.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Conflagration*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, GB, 2022; *Aftermath*, Niru Ratnam Gallery, London, GB, 2022; *Rock Fortress*, CAS Batumi, Batumi, GE, 2021; *Cry Me A Waterfall*, Two Queens, Leicester, GB, 2021; *Rock Fortress*, E.A. Shared Space, Tbilisi, GE, 2020; *Newroz*, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, AT, 2019; *Akh Milk Bile Threat*, Seventeen Gallery, London, GB, 2017.

Selected group exhibitions: *Testament*, Goldsmiths CCA, London, GB, 2022; *Reconfigured*, Timothy Taylor Gallery, New York City, US, 2021; *Searching the Sky for Rain*, SculptureCenter, New York, US, 2020; *Being Towards The World*, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, AT, 2019; *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance, Acts 1, 2, and 3*, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, GB, 2018.

The interview is based on a conversation held online on 8 March, 2023.

¹ Rostami, Mari R. (2019): *Kurdish Nationalism on Stage. Performance, Politics and Resistance in Iraq*. London: I.B.Tauris.

² Ibid, p. 2.

³ Ibid, p. 28.

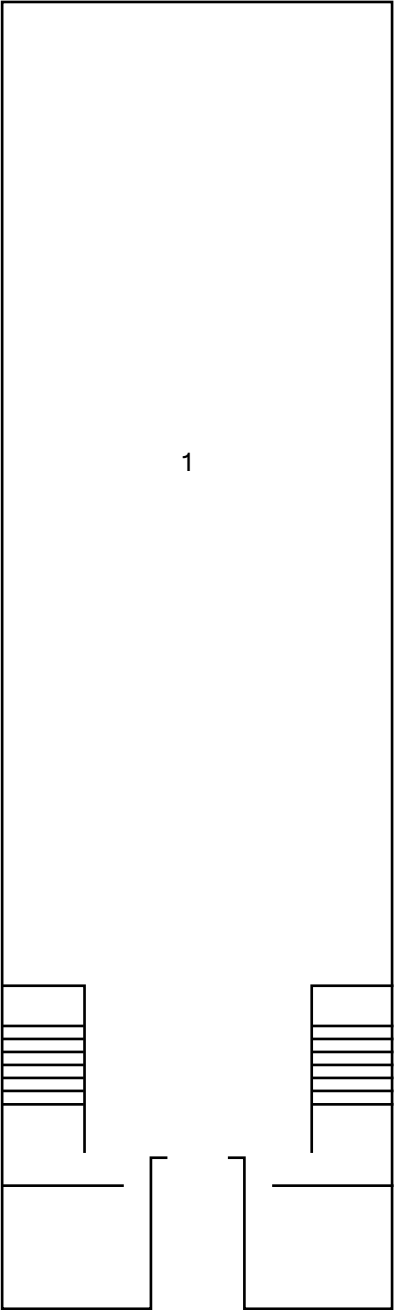
⁴ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵ Malley, Shawn (2008): *Layard Enterprise: Victorian Archaeology and Informal Imperialism in Mesopotamia*, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 40, No 4, p. 623–646.

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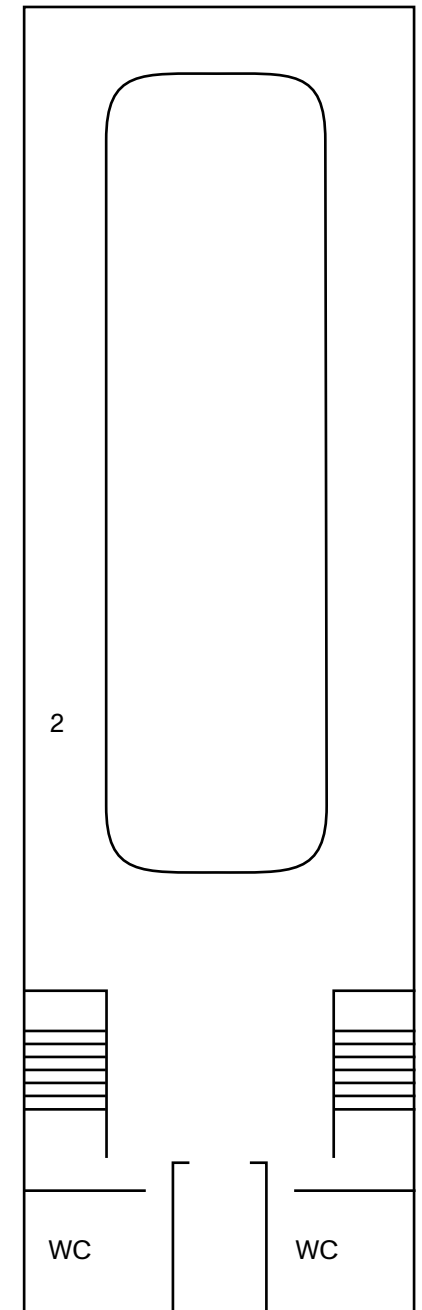
Mock Kings, 2023
Steel, powder coated
Dimensions variable

Hall



2
Metaphysical Reunification, 2023
Aluminium
each 10.5 × 15 × 4 cm

Gallery



Programme	Sat, 6 May 2023, 2–5 pm <i>I have something important to tell</i>
Fri, 31 Mar 2023, 7 pm Opening Night with an Introduction by Theresa Roessler	Workshop with Feministische Geschichtswerkstatt
Thu, 13 Apr 2023, 7 pm Curator's Tour with Theresa Roessler	Sun, 7 May 2023, 2–5 pm <i>Telling Magical Stories as Animated Films</i> Workshop with Fanny Kranz for Children 8–12 Years (Registration required)
Wed, 19 Apr 2023, 7 pm Junge Kunstfreund*innen <i>Resistant Bodies</i> Workshop with Fatma Sagir (Registration required)	Thu, 11 May 2023, 7 pm Guided Tour with Heinrich Dietz
Thu, 20 Apr 2023, 7 pm <i>die verbrechen</i> Reading and Talk with Ronya Othmann	
Thu, 27 Apr 2023, 7 pm <i>Theatrical Forms of Political Resistance</i> Lecture and Talk with Hawre Zangana	

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Awaz Jehad Xedan
Hawre Zangana

Opening Hours

Wed–Fri, 3 pm–7 pm

Sat–Sun, 12 am–6 pm

7 Apr, 9 Apr open

Entrance: 2 € / 1.50 €

Thursdays free

Members free

The exhibition is supported by:



Accompanying programme in cooperation with:



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