

5

AL-BAHITHUN: SOUNDS THAT CALL TO THE (OIL) FIELDS

Ala Younis

The Searchers

Al-Bahithun (The (Re)searchers) is an art project that highlights the link between nationalised knowledge and oil wealth. The nationalisation of the Iraqi oil industry in 1972 allowed the Iraqi state to utilise unprecedented revenues from the sale of oil. My work explores how this wealth was dependent on, and tied to, the empowerment of local expertise and how a good portion of oil revenues went into training and educational programmes as well as supporting the welfare of scientists, researchers and university graduates. My project's name is borrowed from an Iraqi film made in 1978 entitled *Al-Bahithun* (The Searchers).¹

I play on the double meaning of the Arabic term *al-bahithun*: 'the searchers', and 'the researchers'. While the *al-bahithun* featured in the film are primarily oil explorers, assembled to search for oil in the marshes of Southern Iraq (*al-Ahwar*), in my work I explore what has been made possible by the revenue generated by these (oil) discoveries: the development of a national research culture that helped secure the autonomy of oil as an Iraqi national industry as well as the structures of power and politics underlying it. This chapter describes how the objects I featured in my art project *Al-Bahithun* reproduce the condition of (re)searchers who oscillated between the projects of nationalisation, knowledge, art, architecture and war as precipitated by

oil. Finally, I aim to highlight how these oil movements are, as in the film, accompanied by attempts to hear the sounds that call(ed) the (re)searchers to the oil fields.

The core team featured in the film *The Searchers* represent a constituency of Iraqi society in the late 1970s – an engineer, a revenge-seeking peasant, a geologist and a treasure-seeking explorer. These men live and work on the water and conduct their explorations with a strange-looking tractor (Figures 5.1 and 5.2), a floating workstation equipped with telecommunication devices. When a phone call alerts the team that they are floating on a sea of oil, they explode with joy, except two of the men, who split from the group to embark on a secret search for a legendary land, a ‘lost paradise’. After a long, tedious cruise, guided by science-fiction sounds and lights torching the sky pointing towards a mysterious destination, the two separated men finally

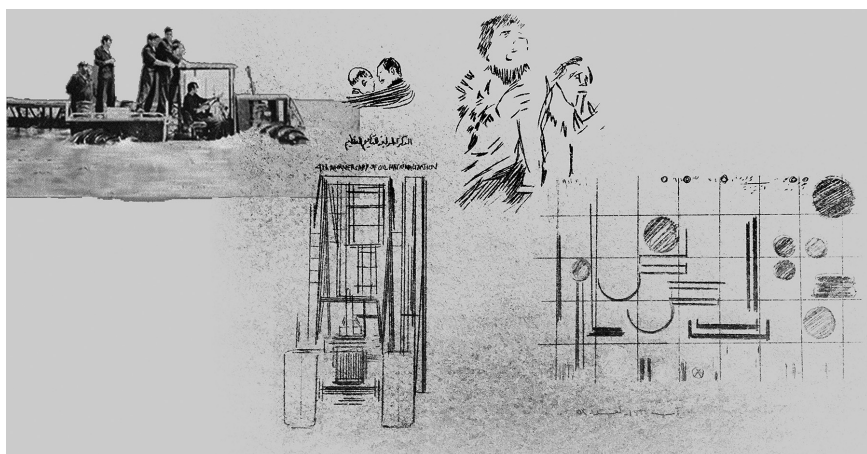


Figure 5.1 This drawing shows some elements featured in the installation *Al-Bahithun* (2018) by Ala Younis, which the artist discusses in this chapter. This installation was commissioned for *Crude*, the inaugural exhibition of the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai held between 11 November 2018 and 30 March 2019. Pictured left to right is an image of oil explorers or searchers on a water tractor from the poster of the Iraqi film *Al-Bahithun* (1978); a redrawing of a stamp issued in 1976 showing Saddam Hussein embracing Ahmad Hassan Al-Bakr, then President of Iraq; a drawing of the film’s water tractor merged with one of the Dutch buildings on Haifa Street in Baghdad; the film’s two protagonists as they survey the oil field; and the 1966 mural by Nuha al-Radi commissioned by the Iraq Petroleum Company. By Ala Younis.



Figure 5.2 Left: Plastic model of a building and a car juxtaposed over the body of the water tractor that appears in the film *Al-Bahithun* (1978). Right: Special edition stamp issued in 1976 celebrating the fourth anniversary of the nationalisation of Iraqi oil [*Al-Bahithun* (2018) by Ala Younis].

find themselves at the foot of fuming oil towers in the Rumaila oil fields, the largest in Iraq, which had been nationalised a few years earlier. One man cries knowing his lost paradise to be a delusion, while the other is enchanted by the revelation that the oil fields are just this paradise.

The sounds calling the men in *The Searchers* are wavering sounds similar to those popular in the science-fiction films of the era. Only one of the two men can hear them, and he becomes obsessed with the messages he thinks he is supposed to decipher. As he realises that the lost paradise he is looking for is an oil field he collapses to his knees, trembling, weeping and unable to speak. Next to him is his companion: a scientist (an archaeologist or geologist), who did not hear the sounds but believes he can understand the drive of his companion in pursuing them. His encounter with the oil fields, a pleasant surprise, is rechannelled into his scientific reasoning, instinctive optimism and national pride. For him, this is the real paradise, as he utters to the other searcher: ‘Real signs for a physical Eden. A paradise that is capable of creating

a coherent mix of myths and reality. Symbol and logic. I think this is what you were looking for, isn't it?²²

As the two explorers lose contact with their team they are left in 'paradise' under the sun without help or guidance. They can no longer hear the leading sounds. They sit thinking about a solution to their return dilemma, while their colleagues are already on a mission to find them. They are finally located with the help of a helicopter that can hover over the marshes and see them from a distance. As the helicopter lands nearby, the two men shout joyously 'They found us!' and run to the helicopter. The group finally re-unites, while the pilot, in dark sunglasses with a thick moustache, looks at the lost men from a distance. The team return to the workstation in the middle of the river and resume their work riding the same strange water tractor. The last scene of the film shows the men's return from the outdoors (the fields) to indoors (their station).

I am interested in the surfaces, sounds, objects and processes that we encounter when moving between the stories that relate to the production of oil. There is a parallel liquidity between riding a water tractor in search of oil and finding it as another liquid lying under the water. The unknown sounds guiding the searchers on their oil sub-journey are less scientifically understandable. The burning fumes mark the evaporation of doubts (or hopes) at the sight of the oil fields. There is an exchange of gazes in the act of rescue coming in the guise of a helicopter from the sky. And the sun de-colours the time of the final scene of the film as the two men return to the floating station to continue their mission.

The Presidential Embrace Stamp

A special edition stamp, a redrawing of which I have also incorporated in my installation, was issued on 1 June 1976 marking the fourth anniversary of the Republic of Iraq's nationalisation of oil (Figure 5.2). It depicts two men in embrace: the then President Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr (1914–82) and Saddam Hussein (1937–2006). Saddam Hussein was appointed deputy to the President in 1968, the year the two men and the Ba'ath party came to power following a series of military coups in the decade-old republic. The stamp is a map of power relations within a state and provides a window into an intimate moment that portends the gradual transfer of power in Iraq's

first office while celebrating the transfer of control of the country's most precious resource. Saddam Hussein led the nationalisation negotiations with the foreign oil companies that controlled the industry. He asked for an adequate share of revenues as well as for the regulation of barrel production and minimum exports, all of which increased Iraq's annual budget. He also entered into a fifteen-year agreement with the Soviet Union which sent a technical team to Iraq to advise on negotiations, to drill wells in the Rumaila oil fields, to train Iraq National Oil Company (INOC) staff, to provide pipelines and equipment, and to acquire a portion of the crude extracted from Rumaila in return for these services.³ On 1 June 1972, Al-Bakr arrived in a Mercedes sedan with Saddam Hussein at the National Radio and Television building in Baghdad. Al-Bakr was filmed entering the building and reading aloud the decree that nationalised the assets of the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). This announcement was made into a promotional clip that staged Iraqis of diverse backgrounds, particularly workers, listening to al-Bakr's declaration. The film *The Searchers* was one of several cinematic features that were produced in the wake of Iraq's nationalisation.

Between 1973 and 1975, and then up until nationalisation was completed in February 1979, the state continued to oust one European shareholder after the other, all of whom were associated with the foreign oil companies that had extracted Iraqi oil. The government, however, continued to maintain special relations with France, which entered into a deal with Iraq to provide nuclear reactors, equipment and know-how. In this period, Iraq's Ba'ath party also continued to invest massively in national education. The percentage of technocrats among senior government officials increased and professional administrators were replaced by technical experts and academics.⁴ Saddam Hussein assumed his new role as President in July 1979.

In many ways, this stamp can be read as a field – a process of production – charting Saddam Hussein's ascent to power and how oil enabled it. This stamp has borders around an expanse of a dense, interwoven visual pattern that looks like a field (or a sea) of infinite eyes. Within the inner frame of the stamp the figure on the right is younger, taller and over-powering in appearance. His face and features are visible, and his arm is extended around the President, the back of whose head is more visible than his face. While the stamp is celebrating another year of oil nationalisation after decades of exclusive possession

and control by foreign corporations, Saddam's visible face and posture depict an impatient deputy head of state who has accumulated great(er) power (than his president) in the high echelons of the Iraqi government. The two bodies performing this transfer of power are not photographed, but illustrated. The field of interwoven eye-patterns that surrounds them further drives our attention towards a special feature of this stamp, Saddam's eyes: his experts, scientists, workers and informants who propped up his power.

This special edition stamp, *The Searchers* film and the clip of Al-Bakr's announcement of oil nationalisation were elements of national propaganda that aimed to foreground the main players in Iraq's new revolutionary happiness: oil, Saddam Hussein as deputy to the president, and a growing group of local (re)searchers. The latter were key to the making and receiving of the propaganda message. One can read the actions of the protagonists of *The Searchers* using the logic of the stamp. The two men who find the Rumaila fields in the film are the President and his deputy, or perhaps one represents the presidential couple combined and the other embodies the researchers as the carriers of oil knowledge and technical logic.

Nuha al-Radi's Ceramic Mural

One month before the nationalisation of Iraq's oil companies in 1972, the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) published the last issue of *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* (The Oil Workers) (Figure 5.3), a magazine that had circulated since 1961.⁵ Distributed free to IPC employees, the magazine also had a literary and artistic mission. In addition to offering regular news on the oil industry, archaeological findings, fashion and sports highlights, the magazine sourced literary works from young and upcoming writers, and published reviews and images of Iraqi art as well as interviews with writers and artists. Each issue had an Arabic front cover, often showing images of art works by Iraqi artists, oil fields or refineries, and a rear cover with photos taken at one of the workstations of the various IPC's subsidiary companies operating in Iraq. The magazine was published under the supervision of the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and in many ways encouraged readers across Iraq to identify with the locations, technology and faces that brought wealth to their country. By the time the magazine ceased to exist in 1972, the careers of many of the artists it showcased had become established.

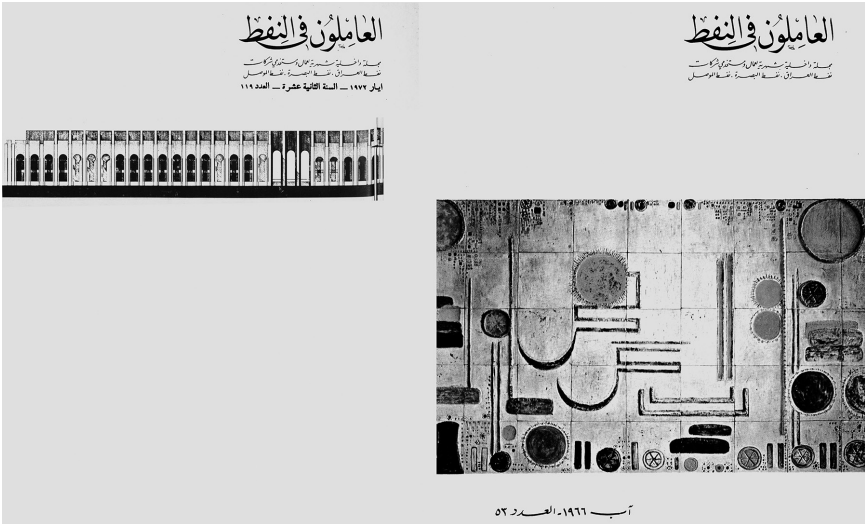


Figure 5.3 Two reproductions of *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* magazine covers. Right: Issue 53, August 1966, featured a ceramic mural by Nuha al-Radi, commissioned by IPC for its headquarters in Baghdad. Left: An imagined cover for the magazine’s last issue, 119, which came out in May 1972. This issue featured the work of two architects before they led the Haifa Street development projects less than a decade later [*Al-Bahithun* (2018) by Ala Younis].

Among these talents was Nuha al-Radi (1941–2004), an artist whose ceramic mural was featured on the cover of the August 1966 issue of *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* after having been installed at the entrance to the IPC headquarters in Baghdad. Inside the issue, an article expanded on this mural and how its 25-year-old author had been the first in Iraq to revive the local ceramic heritage as art. It also mentioned how al-Radi’s moderately priced works had earned her the IPC commission:

Although the work was generally abstract in design, the artist based it on the concept of oil. Looking for a phrase connected with Iraqi oil, the Arabic lettering of which would provide the centre of her design, she hit upon the words ‘Baba Gurgur’, the name of the place near Kirkuk where oil was first struck in 1927, which formed the nucleus of one of the richest oil fields in the world. The two words were so designed as to combine Arabic letters, crescent shapes, and motifs resembling storage tanks and pipes. Decorative details were also based on oil motifs – valves, pipes, resembling towers, etc.

with a border displaying traditional Iraqi ornamentation. When firing the tiles, she [al-Radi] minimised the glazed parts, in keeping with an ancient Sumerian practice, and did the background in an earthy yellow interspaced with brilliant suns suggestive of the visual effect of the locations where oil was usually found.⁶

A decade before the film *The Searchers* was made, therefore, Nuha al-Radi attempted to translate the sounds of the names of the oil fields in Arabic letters into ceramic patterns. In the IPC mural, she disconnects the letters to modernise *Hurufiyya*, an art style based on Arabic calligraphy and letters that was emerging in Baghdad at the time.⁷ Al-Radi revives the Iraqi pottery heritage as new tableaux in the shape of a tiled mural which features not one but many suns. With the inclusion of the name of the oil field she acknowledges the geographic and geological features of a national treasure, despite the fact that oil revenue at the time was only partially accessible to the Iraqi government. The sun in the mural awakens the viewers' senses to the colour and heat felt by the workers in the oil fields. It is interesting to think of al-Radi's use of clay cooked with fire to produce an art work while under Iraq's very hot sun (Figure 5.3).

In *Al-Babithun*, I leave out the Arabic letters but take Nuha al-Radi's choice of ceramic as a medium. I think of oil as it springs from under the feet of the workers in the oil fields, not of oil as in the mural or the film made in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, but of oil as experienced in Iraq in more recent years. I acknowledge the tiles as pieces of research culled from several resources and thus influenced – and perhaps sometimes sent off-track by – my narration of the multi-layered oil histories in each of the elements that I put together in this project. Oil, when imagined, prompts a variety of visuals: black liquid, bursting out of earth, running in pipes, indicating on a world price ticker, smell-spreading at gas stations, and seducing/begging/spying eyes as it morphs into lives, vehicles, buildings, wars, lootings, and so forth. While oil's imagination rattles between one that nourishes and one that diminishes, it is this morphing image of petroleum that leaks from between these fragments of stories: crude, thick, heavy, opaque, inflammable and ambiguous. How do I reproduce oil as a morpheme in an art installation, one that is part of a larger meaning and historicity, that can also change its

meaning in accordance with the size or context of the story it has created, while having a stable connotation across all these stories? In my installation, one ceramic piece is made in the shape of a bubble that resembles oil gushing out of the earth dug out illegally by smugglers and militias. Another piece is presented as a leak that comes out of an oil dictionary pointing to the seepage of expertise funded by Iraqi oil (Figure 5.5), also with reference to the wave of assassinations that targeted scientists and researchers in the aftermath of the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003. The latter piece makes us tread these 'waters' more cautiously, as I consider how to speak of scientists and artists as products of an oil era, but also of their own scientific or creative capacities. Here, I hear oil, in a multiplicity of Iraqi Arabic and Iraqi English accents uttering technical terms, negotiating with management, conversing anxiously

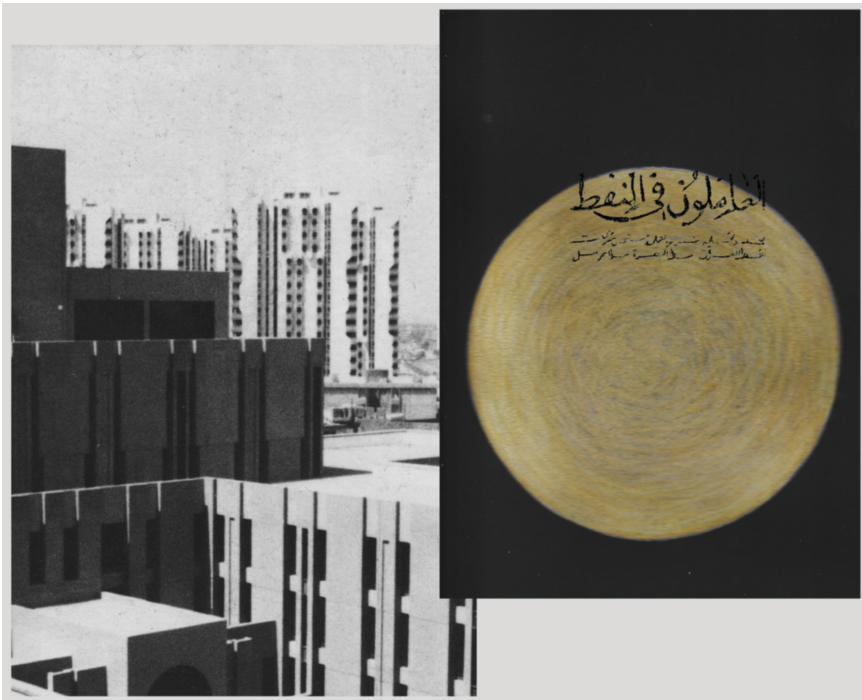


Figure 5.4 Left: Saddam Centre for the Arts in the foreground and the Dutch Buildings in the background of Haifa Street. Right: An invented cover for *Al Amiloon Fil Naft*, using the same name calligraphy juxtaposed with a drawing of the sun [*Plan for Greater Baghdad* (2015) and *Al-Bahithun* (2018) by Ala Younis].

or excitedly with colleagues on pertinent issues, or casually greeting a neighbour on their way back from buying their groceries. How far from and close to the oil fields were they, how did they endure a form of life generated by a tight grip on power, and how dangerous did their careers become (for them) on the demise of this power? It is this shifting headlight that renders the multiplicative presence of Nuha al-Radi's suns. There is no single but many (oil truths under the) suns.

The Researchers

Approximately fifteen years after her work featured in *Al Amiloon Fil Naft*, Nuha al-Radi produced another art piece with two components: a model Mercedes with human brains oozing from its windows, and the same brains flying Mercedes flags. This was the artist's critique of the new social trend that had emerged as a result of the state granting privileges to college graduates and thus encouraging more Iraqis to pursue a research or academic career in order to foster national knowledge and sovereignty. Graduates were offered, in addition to subsidised land or housing, good tax exemptions on cars.⁸ These exemptions made many of them opt for Mercedes-Benz Sedans, which became a familiar sight in the neighbourhoods where academics lived.⁹ I was searching for any images or further descriptions of this art piece by al-Radi, but to no avail, until I spoke with two of her close friends who confirmed that they had never seen or heard of this piece. Yet its description is included in an obituary written by another close friend of the artist.

In my project *Plan for Greater Baghdad* (2015), I research the story of commissioning, delaying and building a gymnasium in Baghdad over twenty-five years that witnessed shifts in political powers. My research was obsessed with finding clues in printed and oral narratives, many of which lacked not only pictures but also witnesses that could confirm them. The project's methodology was to extract elements from several materials and combine them together to produce non-existent documents on architectural (de)feats and the characters that shaped them. This combination produced an aesthetic of the time: elusive, faint, hesitant and, again, opaque. Oil ran through the stories as a side character, an enabler but not at the centre, because the events represented a timeline of happenings taking place in Baghdad, where oil revenue was spent. In 2018, I presented the timeline once again, from the

perspective of the ‘personas’ who were entangled in these shifts, but who had no control over them. Nuha al-Radi was one of these characters, through her Baghdad Diaries which she penned during the First Gulf War and in the following years. She writes of how lifeless the infrastructures of their lives became once the oil that Iraq had always sold became of no value. Buildings became powerless, the state helpless, and knowledge was suppressed. Her nightmares were of US soldiers taking over Baghdad’s most modernised neighbourhood, Haifa Street.

I consider this nexus of the knowledge economy and oil in *Al-Bahithun* as well. In a plastic-sculpture part of my installation *Al-Bahithun*, a Mercedes comes out of a housing block that resembles any of the nine identical buildings, informally known as the ‘Dutch buildings’,¹⁰ that were erected on Baghdad’s Haifa Street between 1980 and 1984 (Figure 5.4). The fifteen-floor buildings, which cost 17.5 million Iraqi dinars (c. 50 million USD) and consisted of two- and three-bedroom flats, were designed by the design department of Baghdad’s Municipality which was established to produce in-house architectural plans for state projects. This is another example of the nationalisation of services that had previously been outsourced to international contractors. The flats were sold to academics and graduates at high but subsidised prices (37,000 Iraqi dinars, a substantial amount equivalent to approximately 100,000 USD). The cost of designing, supervising, building and subsidising these blocks and paying the wages to their tenants came from oil revenues. The same revenues paid for the Iran–Iraq war (1980–8), which was waged at the same time as their construction. In *Al-Bahithun*, a plastic sculpture of the building and the car sit on a strange water tractor, a miniature of the model used in *The Searchers* film. In the film, the tractor shuttled the searchers between their work and their accommodation unit on the river. In *Al-Bahithun* the tractor is carrying the building and the car, all dipped in black. Stuck to its wheel is a stack of books which are suspended there, in a state of tensed fragility.

While, up until 1972, the oil-funded *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* had offered artists and intellectuals a venue for showcasing their talent and expressing their voices, under the Ba‘ath regime access to books was a privilege for academics, who also lived under strict mobility regulations and censorship. This strict travel policy was part of a national strategy that aimed at preventing brain

drain during the Iraq–Iran War. In this period, a surveillance regime scrutinised the activities of local experts (scientists, architects and others). The invasion of Kuwait in 1990 led to another war and economic sanctions.¹¹ Iraqi oil barrels could only be exchanged for a limited list of goods and the national currency was consequently devalued. Many academics sold their collections of books in the 1990s, one after the other as a consequence of the devaluation of their state-paid salaries. They also sold their Mercedes when these salaries could no longer pay for the fuel, or for spare parts. Mercedes thus exited the life of researchers while the housing blocks in Haifa Street sat still.

In my *Al-Bahithun* installation, a ceramic oil-bubble (Figure 5.5) sits close to the tractor-ensemble. I took this image from footage from a mobile camera (dated 2011) that I found on YouTube that shows oil flushing out of the earth as the pipes that carry it are pierced by a group of men. Close to the men is a tractor – not a water one – that de-earths the site while a line of oil



Figure 5.5 Left: Ceramic piece representing an oil bubble from YouTube footage documenting the illegal appropriation of crude oil in Iraq. Right: Another ceramic piece in the shape of an oil seep leaking out of Dictionary of Petroleum [*Al-Bahithun* (2018) by Ala Younis].

tanks awaits close by to collect the stolen crude, which is presumably going to be sold to secure funds and weapons. I hear the oil bubbling and therefore include in the installation a 3D effect of it in the shape of smaller bubbles fountaining in the sculpture.

Alongside the ceramic oil bubble stands another black ceramic piece. This resembles a leak coming out from the pages of an oil dictionary, like an oil (or blood) seepage (Figure 5.5). The *Dictionary of Petroleum (Mu'jam al-Naft)* had begun as a list of words compiled by Saudi Aramco – the American oil company that controlled oil extraction in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – that was then given to the Arabic Language Society in Baghdad, which organised an oil symposium in the second half of 1970s. In this thick volume, every English technical term used in the oil industry up until 1993 is rendered in Arabic. Since Iraq was not on good terms with most other Arab states in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, no Iraqi experts took part in the seminar organised by the Arabic Language Union of Societies in Damascus in 1994 to discuss the translation of the oil terms included in this dictionary. Over three days, participants from Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia scrutinised every page of the dictionary. I think of the sounds of war in parallel with the sounds of compiling, translating and uttering these Arabic terms. I am reminded of the indecipherable sounds that called men, artists, writers, graduates, scholars, teachers, engineers and foreign forces to speak in the oil fields using these terms. I make the ceramic spill drip out of the book for two reasons: thinking of the oil seepages caused by the two conflicts (the Iran–Iraq War and the First Gulf War), and the blood of the researchers and academics who were assassinated in the vicious decade following April 2003.

Architectures of Oil: The Plan for Greater Baghdad

In 1986, Nuha al-Radi completed a piece of public art on Haifa Street representing the fishermen that had their businesses close to the river-front near the Dutch development project (Figure 5.4) built by the government in the 1980s. This mural was one of the many projects commissioned by the government to mark the street as the new centre of Baghdad's intellectual life. In close proximity stood the Saddam Centre for the Arts. When this grand museum complex was completed in 1986, like al-Radi's mural, several thousand modern and contemporary art works from artists' studios and museums

of modern art across Baghdad were relocated there. Undoubtedly, it was oil revenue that fuelled (literally and metaphorically) machines of construction, production and acquisition.

Art and monuments are thus also contaminated by the history of oil. As Iraq continued to flare Iranian oil fields in the south, Iranian missiles were falling on Baghdad. War did not interrupt the city's daily life, the construction schedule of Haifa Street or the erection of the Martyr's Monument, designed as a circular platform 190 metres in diameter at the centre of an artificial lake. The monument had a forty-metre-tall glazed turquoise ceramic dome that was split into two halves. At the centre of the two half-domes stood a flagpole and a spring of water symbolising the blood of the fallen. It cost the Iraqi government a quarter of a billion US dollars, at a time when one Iraqi dinar was worth over three US dollars.¹² The names of dead soldiers were to be inscribed on the inner walls of the museum that lies below the monument. At the time, however, the architects were unsure how to calculate space for the casualties of an ongoing war. Inscribed seamlessly in the texture of the stone cladding, the monument should have memorialised the several hundred thousand names of those killed in battles for the annexation of more oil fields. The sounds of oil here are not of bubbly crude or wiggly science-fiction signs, but sounds of authority, exchange of bullets, and (again) heavy vehicles.

These and the other stories that constitute *Al-Bahithun* represent a stream of thought drawn from a larger research project titled *Plan for Greater Baghdad*.¹³ The project, as noted above, is a timeline of monumental, architectural, artistic and political interventions in Baghdad from 1956 up until today (Figure 5.6). When, in 1952, Iraq started to negotiate with IPC for a larger share of oil wealth, the increase in revenue led to the establishment of the Iraq Development Board which became legally entitled to 70 per cent of all oil revenue. This wealth allowed the country to invest in infrastructure, invite star architects like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright to visit Iraq and design projects, and enabled young Iraqi graduates to participate in the infrastructural development of the country. These international guests were hosted by local artists and architects whose own experimental work started to mushroom in Iraqi cities. These infrastructural works were redrawn and modified by continuous political fluctuations as Iraqi artists and architects had to negotiate their projects with the regime.



Figure 5.6 Ala Younis, *Plan for Greater Baghdad* (2015), two- and three-dimensional prints, drawings, archival and found materials, and model. Image: Alessandra Chemollo. Courtesy of the artist and La Biennale di Venezia.

Le Corbusier's first set of designs for a Sports Complex in Baghdad (which included a stadium, gymnasium and swimming pools) were approved by the Iraqi Government two days before the 14 July 1958 revolution overthrew Iraq's monarchy. The Portugal-based Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation had offered to sponsor the construction of the Baghdad Stadium (also part of Corbusier's commission) on condition that a Portuguese architect designed it instead. This offer of funding came directly from Calouste Gulbenkian, who had brokered Iraq's original oil agreement in the 1920s and was committed to paying back his 5 per cent commission on Iraqi oil sales. Oil was a protagonist in a complex set of histories linking architects, presidents, monuments and budgets. In addition to the stadium that was inaugurated in 1966, the Gulbenkian Foundation sponsored the museum of modern art in Baghdad, which was completed in 1962 and then moved to the Saddam Centre for the Arts in 1986.

Le Corbusier's commission for the rest of the Sports Complex, on the other hand, remained dormant until an influx of capital from the oil crisis of 1973 infused new life into the project. The construction of the new gymnasium did not start until 1978, and when it opened in 1980 it was named after Saddam Hussein. Its completion came at a time when the government was developing a more ambitious plan of designing and building

the intellectual district of Baghdad on Haifa Street. The President himself was sitting in architectural conferences discussing how Iraq's heritage could be incorporated into this new architecture. It is in this period that the President announced the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war over the oil fields of southern Iraq. Architects who sat in these conferences did not realise that they were imagining an architecture of (oil) war. Oil became a contamination of architecture, as much as it attempted the containment of knowledge. These conferences, just like the web of monuments that were built afterwards, remind me of the field that surrounds the presidential embrace in the 1976 stamp.

In a film titled *Love in Baghdad* (1987), a man from the city loses his memory and is taken care of by a family who live in the countryside. He regains his memory as he returns to Baghdad wandering through the new Haifa Street. He cannot believe that the Baghdad he left has now become the paradise he had been promised. The sounds we hear are of astonishment.¹⁴ A decade after the *Al-Bahithun* film, the promised paradise is witnessed in Baghdad's new neighbourhoods housing Iraq's scientists; oil sounds are close and loud, as if the fields have moved to the city.

The Oil Spill Song

I was in early elementary school in Kuwait when, in 1983, a locally-produced song called *The Oil Spill Is Approaching Us*, about an encroaching oil spill in the Arabian Gulf, became popular. Local news reported that oil was seeping from Iranian oil platforms that had been attacked by Iraqi missiles. Too young to understand the threat posed by oil spills to the surrounding marine environment, beaches and the lives of birds now dipped in black, we recited the song with amusement. We heard it on the radio as we moved around in our Mercedes Sedan through the streets of Kuwait or danced to it when it was featured in the soundtrack of Kuwaiti television dramas. I was thinking of the song and the faint memory in my head of an encroaching oil spill as I was looking at the weird tractor carrying the searchers/explorers in the film becoming smaller and smaller, a receding spot in the river. How fragile, evanescent and entangled their lives could have become! Sounds of oil fields were dominating everything.

Notes

1. Directed by Mohammad Yousef Al-Janabi and produced by the Iraqi state's Cinema and Theatre Department. I found a reference to this film in a catalogue published by this Department in the 1980s, then located a copy on Youtube.com.
2. The quotation is taken from the film.
3. Michael E. Brown, 'The Nationalization of the Iraqi Petroleum Company', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979), 120.
4. John Galvani, 'The Baathi Revolution in Iraq', *MERIP Reports*, no. 12 (1972), 15–16.
5. An earlier IPC magazine was published in the 1950s called *Ahl al-Naft* (Oil People). It ceased publication after the 1958 Revolution. *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* was its replacement which started to be published in 1961 with a circulation of 8,000 copies, selling for 0.25–0.30 Iraqi dinars, and offering subscriptions. Its editorial office was based in Baghdad, unlike that of *Ahl al-Naft*, which was based in Beirut.
6. *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* no. 53 (August 1966).
7. An aesthetic movement that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century among Arab artists who experimented with traditional Arabic calligraphy as elements of their modern art.
8. Hayat Sharara, *When Days Dusked* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research & Publishing, 2002), 183. Translated by the author.
9. Since the tax was almost three times the price of a car, investing in Mercedes cars that could be sold in the future at their market price was worthwhile.
10. Named after the nationality of the contracting company that built them.
11. Following its defeat in the First Gulf War, Iraq saw a near-total financial and trade embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council to pay reparations and disclose and eliminate any weapons of mass destruction. The sanctions led to a severe drop in value of the Iraqi dinar. The salaries of the academics remained the same in the first years of the sanctions but afforded only one tenth of their original purchase power. The sanctions also led to spare car parts becoming scarce and expensive.
12. Samer al-Khalil, *The Monument, Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq* (London: André Deutsch, 1991), 22–3.
13. Commissioned and premiered in the context of *All the World's Futures*, the 56th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, curated by Okwui Enwezor, 2015.
14. Directed by Abdul Hadi Al Rawi in 1987. Available on Youtube.com