

## **Wafaa Bilal: The Hierarchy of Being**

**By Sara Raza**

Art, architecture, and public space and time are part of an evolving process that is constantly redefining itself in lieu with 21st century modernity to meet the demands of technological advancement, fast track globalisation, and consumerism. We reside in an age where mobile technology, fast speed broadband internet, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth allow connectivity to take place in an instant with the touch of a button, enabling hand and eye coordination to work simultaneously and information along with images to be absorbed instantaneously. Art and architecture are inextricably part of this lived experience, where everything exists in motion and is emerging as a consequence of the changing social, cultural, and political influences of its makers and occupiers, who inhabit non-static cities and places that are constantly on the move. As a contemporary artist Iraqi-American Wafaa Bilal's main line of inquiry has been an exploration into the relationship between the body and mechanical motion, a subject that links both movement and space with the built and unbuilt environment. Retrospectively, Bilal is renowned for producing high profile technology driven art projects that have employed the use of robotics, the internet, and photographic mobile mapping. These projects have served to create interactive platforms that critique both formal and informal spaces ranging from the gallery to the internet chat room within real time modernity as a means of confronting cultural and military apparatus concerning conflict between his native Iraq and the US.

Bilal's current project entitled *The Hierarchy of Being*, (2013) is a portable interactive sculpture commissioned by Maraya Art Centre, Sharjah, to inaugurate the Maraya Art Park and explores his concerns as an artist and assistant professor at New York University's Tisch School of Art's Photography and Imaging Department. The sculpture that Bilal has designed for Maraya explores both perception and mobility and draws from historical Islamic sciences that bode well with the city of Sharjah as a cultural and historical city, that will celebrate its crowning as the Islamic Cultural Capital of 2014, a title bestowed by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO). In 2012 ISESCO awarded the title of Islamic Cultural Capital to Najaf, Iraq the city where Bilal was born and forced to flee in 1991 following Saddam Hussein's bombardment. After two years living statelessly in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Bilal immigrated to the US and re-trained as an artist at the University of New Mexico and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he also taught before moving onto NYU. Throughout his artistic practice the issue of Iraq is always at its core, it is after all Bilal's first lived experience of a built infrastructure, which he refers to as

his first home from his new remote position in the US where he permanently resides. Subsequently, as a reference to the location of home and culture the narrative and inspiration behind *The Hierarchy of Being* was the thinking of two Iraqi scientists and thinkers from the Golden Era of Islam, the 10/11th century inventor of the camera obscura Ibn Al-Haytham and 12th century Al-Jazari who developed engineering practices for mechanical devices. Both figures are celebrated polymaths and their astounding contribution to modern day sciences was adapted by Bilal in order to experience a new way of seeing and experiencing spatial form. The sculpture that Bilal has created probes the potential of the camera alongside architecture to produce a modern day sculpture that re-creates the function of a pinhole camera and adopts a rotary method. The result observes the physical and the ephemeral as it is absorbed from the outside world, inside the sculpture, which creates a poetic dream like experience that dissolves the scientific barrier between the mechanical process, the looker and the onlooker.

Incidentally, Bilal's first instance of exploring the use of the pin-hole camera and Al-Haytham's discoveries in the field of optics were explored within the highly performative *3rdi* (2010-2011) project in which the artist mounted a camera on the back of his head and employed 3G technology to transmit images to an internet site [www.3rdi.me](http://www.3rdi.me). The website played host to images that were taken by Bilal's camera every minute, 24hrs a day for the duration for one year and were openly available for public consumption and distribution. This project was Bilal's first exploration of a nomadic artistic expression of the mundane, which one could experience both locally and globally as they were being transported through the mechanical extension of the body (the camera) through a Wi-Fi connection linking both the community and the environment where Bilal was located and the events that transpired.

In relation to *The Hierarchy of Being* the event that Bilal has created was one that aspires to perform architecture alongside the lived experience. He has produced a portable sculpture that is a graduation of the *3rdi* project where the potential of the camera has enabled the mobilisation of an architecture of vision, opening up a wider discussion on the relationship between space and time. The flexible nature of the sculpture means that it was designed to be easily dismantled and reassembled in different public spaces with very minimum reconstruction needs. This intentional factor was pre-determined to allow the public's encounter with the sculpture event to be performed in a way in which permanent architecture is not able to do and therefore responds to the shifting terrain of global culture, which is neither fixed nor static. *The Hierarchy of Being* serves to map movements via an interactive process that involves the audience, space, and performance. When the

camera obscura effect is performed it illuminates the entire sculpture and projects the external landscape, thus, uniting architecture with the lived experience.

As an artist Bilal is someone who is interested in how the study of optics and mechanics, which both move and change, can and allow a happening to be experienced through a new and profound way within the context of modernity. He seeks to explore through the making of *The Hierarchy of Being* how real movements can be mapped via an interactive process. Through the performance of the camera obscura effect Bilal connects architecture with cultural memory and the memorable experience of how architecture can adapt to the every day.

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