Manaf Halbouni / What If? / 2017

Project Report
What If?
Manaf Halbouni

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Project Report: Manaf Halbouni: What If?
1. Introduction / The Project

Syrian-German artist Manaf Halbouni joined us for 3 months in March 2017 to realise What If?, a project which reimagined the history of the Middle East and Europe through asking the question: What if Europe had been colonised by the Ottoman Empire?

Using his interest in the 1916 Sykes Picot Agreement as a springboard, Manaf set about creating a play which imagined a meeting between Arabian and Syrian representatives in Huntly to divide up Europe into the ‘United States of Arabia’.

In developing his play, Manaf worked closely with four young men from the Syrian New Scots, the newly resettled refugee community in Inverurie. Through a process of weekly rehearsal sessions and meetings, they created an improvised script which imagined this meeting. They acted in the play alongside Manaf which was filmed in the Huntly Hotel in May 2017.

In order to get as many people from the local community engaged with the play, Manaf asked that all audience members film the performance on their cameras or smartphones. A film was then created using all these varied perspectives, alongside a more conventional film of the performance. The two films were screened at Understanding the Middle East, a symposium held in June which brought together...
various perspectives on Middle Eastern history, politics and culture with talks from academics, members of the Syrian new Scots and the Imam of Aberdeen Mosque. The film went on to be screened at the Goethe Institut in Glasgow and at the Edinburgh Arts Festival.

A major result of What If? was the development of our ongoing relationship with the Syrian new Scots. The filming gave a unique opportunity for the young men to work with Manaf developing the script and performance with him, building their confidence, creativity and English skills. We were also able to engage with the wider community through cooking together for the Understanding the Middle East event and organising a coffee morning in aid of their newly established charity, the Amal Project.

2. The Artist

Manaf Halbouni’s is an artist who was born and raised in Damascus, Syria and now lives in Dresden, Germany. His art practice centres around his interest in history, politics and identity, often involving controversial topics such as war, religion and the current refugee crisis. He has previously exhibited his artwork at the Venice Biennial, the Museum of Fine Art in Leipzig, and the V&A in London.

Manaf originally studied sculpture in Damascus before leaving Syria to avoid military service in 2008. After his request to join the German army was rejected, Manaf studied Fine Art at Dresden University where he graduated with a masters degree in 2016.

In February 2017 Manaf’s work Monument, a sculpture made from 3 upturned busses, gained international acclaim and media attention. The work was inspired by an image Manaf saw of 3 vertical busses used as a barricade to protect civilians from bombing in war torn Aleppo during the Syrian Civil War.

Manaf placed his sculpture in Neumarkt Square in front of the Frauenkirche Church in Dresden, which was badly bombed during the Second World War and had only recently been restored. The works placing drew parallels with the current civil war in Syria and the destructions caused to Dresden by Allied bombs in 1945, causing controversy and a national debate. The buses were seen by the far right as a provocation, and a way to block protest marches organised by the anti-Islam Pegida movement, which has used the Neumarkt square as a rallying point. The work will be exhibited in Berlin later this year.
Clockwise from top: Monument in Dresden; the image that inspired it; Manaf’s imagined Monument in Huntly
3. The Context and Background

Manaf came to work with us at an uncertain and tumultuous point in history. Many Middle Eastern countries are in disarray, with war, mass displacement of people and the rise of Isis while Western countries are undergoing a swathe on anti-progress, anti-immigrant feeling with Brexit, Trump, and the rise of right wing parties across Europe such as Pegida and the Front National. What If? responded to these issues, dealing with an alternative history timeline of colonialism in the Middle East.

The Sykes Picot Agreement, in which the borders of the Middle East were drawn during the First World War by a Briton, Mark Sykes, and a Frenchman, Francois Picot, formed the initial inspiration for this project. The secret agreement was signed in Paris and London on May 16, 1916, and has become the basis on which the Middle East is shaped up to this day. The diplomats divided the map of one of the most volatile regions in the world into states that cut through ethnic and religious communities. Even after 101 years, the Middle East continues to bear the consequences of the treaty, and many people across the region continue to blame the subsequent violence in the Middle East, from the occupation of Palestine to the rise of the Isis, on the fall out since the Sykes-Picot agreement.

Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, are some of the countries whose borders were shaped by this agreement. Manaf, who grew up in Damascus with a German mother and Syrian father, has always felt torn between two conflicting identities. In an interview with The Guardian he stated:

“I am rootless, in the sense that the war has taken my childhood away from me, by killing or scattering the friends of my youth all over the globe [...] since then I have been in transit, because I still feel that people here struggle to take me seriously as a German.” 07 Feb 2017

In imagining an inverted Sykes Picot agreement in which the Middle East had split up and colonised Europe, Manaf was exploring his dual identities and cultural inheritances as both a Syrian and German citizen.

What If? was a continuation of a previous project of the same name which Manaf realised in 2015. Imagining a similar series of historical events, Manaf asked what would happen if the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century had taken place in the Ottoman Empire? He imagined that under these conditions, Middle Eastern powers would have supplied the world with weapons and technological
achievements, colonising Europe, changing borders and place names with no regard for the diverse peoples and cultures living in these regions.

Manaf took on the persona of General Yusef Hadid of the 6th Army for the Liberation of Europe (a character he would later resurrect for his 2017 play). He created a series of maps in which he recorded the fictional movements of his general’s troops and as well as documenting alliances and important military targets. This work was exhibited in Leipzig and awarded the Marion Ermer Prize for Young Artists in 2016. During the residency Manaf came back to this idea, working with members of the local community to create a series of alternative world maps.

Manaf was particularly interested in working in Huntly as he wished to draw upon the historical divides and tensions between Scotland and England, especially in reference to Brexit and the possibility of a second Scottish independence referendum. In the film General Hadid talks of stirring up tensions between the Scottish and the English, creating parallels with the (historical and contemporary) agitating of ethnic and religious divisions by the West in the Middle East.

This project was made possible with funding from the Goethe Institut, a worldwide cultural organisation dedicated to promoting the study of German abroad and encouraging international cultural exchange. In July 2017 Manaf was invited to the Goethe- Institut in Glasgow to deliver a talk about his project.
4. What If? Events

What If? Practices and Rehearsals

Various dates, March 2017 – June 2017

Inverurie Community Centre and the Huntly Hotel

Over seven sessions in the run up to the filming of What If?, Manaf developed his script and performance with Abdul Alhabe a young person from the Syrian New Scot community alongside three others, Muhammed, Muhammed and Leo. They met in both Inverurie and Huntly and rehearsed the play in the Huntly Hotel.

These meetings were very successful, the actors returned to see the screening at the Understanding the Middle East event. Abdul also went to the Edinburgh Art Festival and gave a talk about his experience of being part of the project.

Amal Project Meetings

Various dates, March 2017 – June 2017

The People’s Café, the Huntly Hotel and Inverurie Community Centre

Manaf conducted five meetings with representatives from the Amal (Hope) Project, a charity set up by the Syrian new Scots of Aberdeenshire and led by Dured Alhalbe recent winner of Young Scot of the Year 2017.

With his Arabic speaking skills Manaf acted as liaison between Deveron Projects team and the Amal Project, as many of them speak little or no English. This provided opportunities for liaison and discussion, they talked about what they need from us, what would make their new lives in Inverurie more culturally interesting.

The Amal Project also provided the food for the What if? Screening. In preparation for baking for the Understanding the Middle East event, Claudia Zeiske, Jemima Wilson, Alice Evans and Alexandra Vlaserou visited the Alhabe family in Inverurie where they were given a tutorial in cooking traditional Syrian cakes.

Through these meetings the idea was developed to put on a coffee morning in Huntly on 1st July. The Stewarts Hall, where the weekly Saturday coffee morning is normally held, was booked on this day for the wedding of former Cultural Health worker Catrin Jeans, and so Project Manager, Rachael Disbury, came up with the idea to hold a replacement coffee morning in the Huntly Hotel. The new Scots provided Arabic coffee, tea and a selection of twelve different Syrian cakes. The event was run by interns Alice and Alexandra. Over 150 people attended this event, raising £350 for the Amal Project.

Friday Lunch
21 April 2017

Brander Kitchen

Manaf talked about his current work, influences and past projects as part of our Friday lunch series talks. Manaf also put us in touch with Ghaith Adib, an interior designer in Beirut, and Hasan Youssef, a journalist from Damascus, who took part in our series of Skype talks with artists who are unable to visit us due to political restraints.

The People’s Café Event

Saturday 22 April

Manaf, along with Interns Alice Evans, Alice Bottoni and Alexandra Vlaserou, held a drop-in information day about the project in the Peoples Café at No. 11 Gordon Street. There was a screening of Lawrence of Arabia while Manaf chatted to various community members about his project over coffee and biscuits.

Main Event: What if Filming

Huntly Hotel, Sat 6 May, 12pm - 1pm

The day of the filming began with a coffee morning between 10am-12am put on by the Amal Project. They provided Arabic coffee, tea and an assortment of Syrian sweets and cakes. This was successful in drawing people into the Hotel to see the performance. The Deveron Projects team also went in to the farmers market giving out fliers to passers-by and talking to them about the event.

On arriving each audience member was asked to film the play on their camera or smartphone. Manaf gave a short talk before the performance explaining his ideas and the concept behind What If? The performance lasted 15 minutes, Rachael and Oscar then collected the films from each of the participants. 14 people in total filmed the event on their smartphones, with 80 people attending the performance.

These films showing various perspectives and camera angles were then cut together in the following weeks by Oscar HR. Manaf organised the subtitling, translating the dialogue with the help of Rachael Disbury from Arabic to English.
With specialist equipment loaned by the BBC, Oscar HR was able to capture a more conventional version of the performance the night before the filming event. This was also shown at the Understanding the Middle East event a month later.

This was the first of 2 large events held for this project.

The filming took place in the Huntly Hotel, a space we have recently gained access to through Jacques Coetzer’s Room to Reinvent project in Spring 2017.

Rachel and Oscar gather in the foot

**Pop Up Promotion Event**

**Town Square, 30 May 2017**

In order to promote Understanding the Middle East to local people in Huntly we organised a pop up event in the square.

Manaf’s maps were displayed around the Deveron Projects gazebo, while Rachael, Manaf, Alice, Alex and Jemima handed out fliers and talked to locals about the event over fresh mint tea.

Over 70 people were reached through this event.

**Main Event: Understanding the Middle East**

**3 June 2017, The Huntly Hotel**

After the filming of What If? Claudia and Manaf came up with the idea to explore these issues surrounding the Middle East further, its history, context and future, with a day of talks at the Huntly Hotel. They came up with the idea for Understanding the Middle East symposium - a day of talks and film screenings around topics such as colonialism, islamaphobia and Middle Eastern history and politics.

This event offered an opportunity to appreciate and comprehend the Middle East and its society with a platform that brought together: artists (Manaf Halbouni); academics...
(Paul Starkey, Wafa Khalfan); professionals (Munir Emikdeh); local people (Lynn Rutter, Donald Boyd), including Syrian new Scots (Hayat and Soubie Shahoud, Dured Alhalbe) and Imam Ibrahim from Aberdeen Mosque.

The programme for the day was as follows:

9.30 am    Mint Tea
10.00 am   Manaf Halbouni / Artist Talk. In conversation with Claudia Zeiske
10.30 am   What If? Film Screening 1
11.00 am   Hayat and Soubie Shahoud (Syrian new Scots) / Personal Story. In conversation with Katie Maclean
11.30 am   Prof Paul Starkey / History of the Middle East: how we got to where we are now.
12.00 pm   Munir Emikdeh / Law and Order: a human rights perspective. In conversation with Lynn Rutter
12.30 pm   Lunch / Middle Eastern soup
1.30 pm    What If? Film Screening 2
2.00 pm    Wafa Khalfan / Women and Gender in modern Middle East. In conversation with Fiona Wilson
2.30 pm    Dured Alhalbe / Personal Story in conversation with Jordan Gillespie
3.00 pm    Imam Ibrahim / Islam, Ramadan, Mosques and Qur’an in Syria and Aberdeen. In conversation with Donald Boyd
3.30pm     Discussion over mint tea and traditional Syrian sweets

The two What If? films, one made using audiences collected smartphone perspectives and the other filmed by Spanish video artist Oscar HR, were also premiered on the day.

The event was attended by 90 people, from the local community as well as attendees from Aberdeen, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

A lot of effort went in to decorating the Hotel, with flags, tablecloths, rugs and flowers brought in to make the space look more in theme with the day. Interns Alice and Jemima cooked Syrain cakes the night before (using recipes provided by Aber Alhabe of the Syrian new Scots). Maps were sourced from the local school and used to decorate the rooms and provide a backdrop for the talks.
Talk and Film Screening at the Goethe Institut

27 July, Goethe Institut

Manaf screened his two films along with a trailer for the What if documentary he has produced with Oscar HR. He and Oscar talked about their process and discusses with the audience their plans for continuing the project.

Talk and Film Screening at Edinburgh Art Festival

29 July, Edinburgh Art Festival

Manaf presented his two films and trailer with Oscar HR as part of Edinburgh Arts Festival. The event took place at the royal academy and was chaired by Dr Janet Strakey, who has written much on the history of Syria and Scotland. Kawther Luay also spoke at the event about her interest in her Iraqi heritage and fusion Arabic-European Cuisine. She also cooked for the event. Dured and Abed Alhabe were invited to take part in the event but were unable to attend due to other commitments.
5. Education / Outreach Programme

*What If?* Friday Lunch Talk

21 April 2017

(see previous)

**Hanover House Talk**

(see previous)

**Community Map Interviews**

*Various dates, March 2017 – June 2017*

Throughout his project, Manaf developed a series of alternative maps each based on the ideas of community members in Huntly. He interacted with many members of the local community including artists, secondary school students, people in the nursing home and a local Arabic speaker.

This aspect of the projects drew upon his previous maps created for his *What If?* project in 2015. He asked each participant to create their own vision for the world, drawing borders, invading countries and creating capitals. Each map showed different results; while some participants did not want to change anything about the world, others set about invading countries and renaming cities, while others wanted to abolish borders all together.
The conception of these maps created a space for Manaf to reach out to many different members of the Huntly community, many of whom would later attend the filming and symposium events. Manaf was particularly interested in responding to Brexit, the ongoing war in Syria and the currently refugee crisis in his project, these meetings gave him the opportunity to discuss world issues and politics in-depth with community.

**The Gordon Schools**

Manaf visited The Gordon Schools and presented his project to the pupils. He talked with them about the themes he was interested in and worked with 3 students from the high school on his community mapping project (see image).

**Meeting with Alexander Burnett MSP**

Manaf and intern Jemima Wilson met with local MSP Alexander Burnett to discuss the projects as well as wider political issues such as Brexit and the Refugee Crisis.
### 7. Event Statistics

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<th>Participants</th>
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<td></td>
<td>10/4/2017</td>
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<td>What If? Practices</td>
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<td>Amal Meetings</td>
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<td>10/04/2017</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Friday Lunch: What If? Manaf Halbouni</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>People’s Café Event</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>What If? Filming</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding the Middle East</td>
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<td>90</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>338</td>
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8. Media

Manaf’s arrival to Huntly gained strong coverage in the local and national Press, getting covered by *The Times*, *The Press and Journal*, *The Scotsman* and the *BBC*. Throughout the project, events were covered steadily by the local press. The final event, Understanding the Middle East was reported on BBC Radio Scotland and Manaf was interviewed by *The Times*.

The project was featured in the following places:

**Press Coverage**

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<tr>
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<th>Newspaper/ Magazine</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<td>21/02/2017</td>
<td>The Times</td>
<td>What If the Ottomans Ruled In Huntly?</td>
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<tr>
<td>21/02/2017</td>
<td>The Herald</td>
<td>Controversial Syrian Artist asks What If in Scots Project</td>
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<td>21/02/2017</td>
<td>The Scotsman</td>
<td>Syrian Artist to Work With Refugees</td>
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<td>Press &amp; Journal</td>
<td>Project Brings Artist to Area</td>
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<td>21/02/2017</td>
<td>Evening Express</td>
<td>Artist Manaf Halbouni to take up Residency in Home of Gordon Highlanders</td>
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<td>23/02/2017</td>
<td>Art Daily</td>
<td>Manaf-Halbouni to make new work in UK inspired by the conflict in Syria</td>
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<td>24/03/2017</td>
<td>Huntly Express</td>
<td>Top Artist to ask 'What If'?</td>
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<td>Huntly Express</td>
<td>Help needed with art project</td>
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<td>26/05/2017</td>
<td>Huntly Express</td>
<td>Film event will focus on Middle Eastern culture</td>
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<td>02/06/2017</td>
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<td>Filming at Huntly Hotel</td>
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**Radio/TV Features**

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<tr>
<td>22/02/2017</td>
<td>BBC Radio Scotland</td>
<td>Report on Manaf’s Arrival in Huntly</td>
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<tr>
<td>03/06/2017</td>
<td>BBC Radio Scotland</td>
<td>Interview with Claudia Zeiske on Good Morning Scotland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Link</td>
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<td>27/07/2017</td>
<td>The Skinny</td>
<td><a href="http://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-festivals/art/manaf-halbouni-what-if-deveron-projects">http://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-festivals/art/manaf-halbouni-what-if-deveron-projects</a></td>
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9. Evaluation

The *What If?* project started off very well, with Manaf offering some exciting ideas and interesting concepts for his film in Huntly. He quickly formed good relationships with the Deveron Projects team, organising film nights and cooking food for our Friday Lunch.

Manaf’s contact with the Syrian new Scots was one of the most beneficial outcomes of his project. It was a great idea to include them in the film, both as actors and to listen to their ideas and contribution when developing the script. Manaf quickly formed a close relationship with the four young men he was working with, especially Abed, and the wider new Scot community in Inverurie. He regularly made trips to visit them and the fact that so many turned up to the *What If?* filming and *Understanding the Middle East* event is testament to the strong bond he formed.

This connection is something that we continue to build on. On Saturday 1 July, interns Alice and Alexandra organised a coffee morning with the Syrian new Scots which raised £350 for the Amal Project. Dured and Abed were also invited to participate in the Edinburgh Art Festival talk and film screening on 29 July 2017.

Manaf’s good friendship with the boys appears to have made a lasting impact. It would have been good to have had more time to work further with them after the project had ended. Having formed a close connection with potentially vulnerable people, it is important to consider aftercare in this situation and how we can continue that support in some way. This could be either through making the residency longer or having a point of contact who continues to work with them after the project has finished.

The change in staffing at Deveron Projects could have been a factor in this. With the Art and Community Worker role becoming vacant, community outreach with the new Scots was partly filled by interns who, despite forming good relationships, are only here for a finite amount of time.
Manaf’s fluency in Arabic was an invaluable resource for the Deveron Projects team, without which we would not have been able to work so closely with the Syrain new Scots. At times relying on Manaf to translate for other artists we were working with, such as May Murad who was beginning her Walking Without Walls project, caused some issues. While it was very helpful that Manaf could communicate for us, this is not a sustainable solution. It would be useful if in future (both for artists and the team) if we could hire a translator, so that we can continue these community partnerships beyond the period of the residency.

The Community Mapping sessions were successful and provided a way for Manaf to engage with members of the local community. Many of the people involved with the mapping went on to attend the filming and symposium events. However, staff had to take the lead on instigating most public and community events, which Manaf was often hesitant to attend. While Deveron Projects often works with artists who have little or no experience of socially engaged practice, it is important that the artist understands that this element is as much part of the residency as the final artwork produced.

Manaf came to Huntly with a fixed idea in his mind about what he wanted to produce for What If?. This concept did not change throughout the residency. As the project was a continuation of a similar work from 2 years ago, it could have been that much of the development and experimentation had happened at that stage rather than during the residency period. Unfortunately, this left very little space to improvise and try out new ideas and experiment with the introduction of new concepts.

While the Sykes-Picot agreement formed the starting point of this project, very little was discussed about it during the residency, and by the end it’s examination, outside of broad and well-worn points about colonialism and borders, still did not seem to be particularly in-depth. Further research about this topic would have been beneficial. While the Understanding the Middle East symposium did go some way to explaining some of these issues more thoroughly, it would have been good if this had taken place sooner in the residency.

More engagement with local community, especially with reference to politics, would have also been valuable to the project. It would have been valuable to spend more time meeting local politicians and attending the hustings for the General Election. Consequently, issues such as Brexit, Scottish independence, and the Refugee Crisis, despite being presented as part of the inspiration for the film, were not explored to their full potential.

The two main events - the What If Filming and the Understanding the Middle East Event - were both very successful and well attended. The team worked very efficiently together and we received good feedback from attendees.
10. Legacy

Coffee Morning Hosted by the Syrian New Scots

On 1st July members of the Syrian new Scots held a coffee morning in aid of the Amal Project. They served Arabic coffee, tea and 12 different varieties of Syrian cakes. The event was a great success with over 100 people attending. We hope to continue working with the Syrian New Scots on our future projects and have established stronger relationships with the community as a result of What If?.
11. Funding and Thanks

Artist
Manaf Halbouni

Team
Claudia Zeiske (Director)
Rachael Disbury (Art and Community Worker, Project Manager)
Joss Allen (Project Manager, Green Coordinator), Interns: Alice Evans, Alice Bottoni, Alexandra Vlasenov, Jemima Wilson

Education and Outreach
Gordon Primary School
The Gordon Schools
Inverurie Community Centre
Hanover House

Photography and Filming
Sophie Lindsey, Oscar HR, Stuart McAdam

Partners and Funders
Creative Scotland
Aberdeenshire Council
Goethe Institut
Aberdeenshire Wellbeing Festival
The German Consulate in Scotland

Special thanks
What If? Actors: Abdul, Mohammed, Mohammed and Leo
Syrian new Scot Community: Hayat and Soubie Shahoud, Dured Alhalabe, Aber Alhalabe and family
Katie Maclean
Paul Starkey
Munir Emikdeh
Lynn Rutter
Wafa Khalfan
Fiona Wilson
Jordan Gillespie
Imam Ibrahim
Donald Boyd
Jacques Coetzer
BBC Scotland

Thank You to our generous funders for their financial support: Aberdeenshire Council, Creative Scotland, Aberdeenshire Wellbeing Festival, the German Consulate in Scotland and the Goethe Institut.
Appendices

Appendix A: Website Text

It’s not necessary to build a sculpture to have a monument of freedom.

Manaf Halbouni

A performance piece to imagine a different geo-political scenario.

Manaf Halbouni, originally from Syria and living and working in Dresden, is our resident artist in Huntly in Spring 2017. Manaf will be looking at the question of What if the Arab world had colonised Europe rather than the other way round?

At a time where Europe and its nation states are under question What If? deals with an alternative history timeline of colonialism in the Middle East. Most of the countries in that area today were formed by British and French agreements through the Sykes-Picot Agreement which, in 1916 divided the Middle East into the countries we know now: Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, ... are some of those who fell into that agreement. Manaf is turning this history round, fictionalising a world where the Ottoman Empire and United States of Arabia split Europe instead.

Manaf is creating a theatrical play depicting a secret meeting between representatives, discussing the splitting of Europe. Manaf wants to explore our history, thinking about how colonialism provoked wars, conflicts and the consequent migrations to Europe. Working with recently resettled Syrian new Scots from Aberdeenshire, and local Huntly folk, Manaf invited the community to come and watch the play, and also film it on their own digital devices, contributing to a film from multiple perspectives. The resulting films will be screened at events in Huntly, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Supported by: Goethe Institut
Appendix B: Summer 2017 Newsletter Interview

What If?

Manaf Halbouni in conversation with Claudia Zeiske, Deveron Projects

CZ: Marhaba Manaf! You came to Huntly to realise your project What If? Tell us a bit about the ideas behind it all.

MH: For the past two years I have been contemplating the idea: ‘What if the Industrial Revolution had happened in the Middle East?’ So I imagined that the Turks (Ottomans) and Arabs had a highly advanced technical innovation and started to sell weapons and technology to everyone. At the same time they also started to colonise new countries and support revolutions all around Europe.

CZ: And how did you get to What If?

MH: I developed an alternative historical timeline by writing fictional stories and drawing new European maps. When I got to Huntly, I developed this project into a performance of a secret meeting between the Turks and the Arabs and I made a short film out of it.

CZ: How important was it to you that this took place in Scotland?

MH: I was very interested in working with the Syrian New Scots, the refugee community in Aberdeenshire. I remember when I first heard this title, I thought it was so great that the Scottish people decided not to just label them as ‘refugees’ and welcomed them into their community by giving them the title ‘New Scots’. It was also important for me to bring a little knowledge of the Middle East to people in Scotland, so that there can be a bit more understanding about the political and cultural situation there.

CZ: Can you tell us a bit about the background behind What If?

MH: The short film is a response to the Sykes Picot agreement of 1916, in which the UK and France divided up the Middle East in to the countries we know now. In my play, I reimagined these events as if they took place in Huntly, I therefore had a Turkish and an Arabian representative meet in Scotland to divide up a map of Europe and support Scotland in the revolution against the English.

CZ: Why did you think that Scotland would be a good place to set your film? And what about the maps? Tell us about them.

MH: The reason why I based my film in Scotland is because I wanted to engage with Scotland’s historical relationship and rivalry with England, and also look at how
current political events such as Brexit and the Scottish independence referendum affect this situation.

While I was in Huntly I also developed a project which looked at maps. I interviewed many different people from the local community (artists, secondary school students, people in the nursing home, a local Arabic speaker etc.) I gave them each a map of the world and asked them what they would create or change if they had the political power and influence. Each person I interviewed reacted differently to these questions, and different world visions transpired each time. Some people did not want to change anything because they were not interested in politics. Others created new countries and made unions with other nations, while some wanted to become peaceful dictators...

CZ: When I did the mapping I think I wanted to abolish all the borders.... What would you do if you were in power?

MH: Well, I believe that humans can't live without rules, that's a fact we can't change unfortunately. But I would try my best to unite people wherever they come from.

CZ: You first created a play, then a film of this performance, and a documentary of its making, and then a communal film made using the audience’s smartphones. Can you expand on what particularly attracted you to this unusual process?

MH: I wanted to use a medium that would engage as many people as possible. So I thought it would be interesting to ask people to film the performance on their smartphones and to create a film out of these different perspectives.

I was also interested in examining our use of smartphones as mediums for looking at the world and recording information. During the Arab Spring and the subsequent war in Syria, people have relied on their phones as a source of news. Whereas when the Sykes Picot agreement took place there would not have been this resource. I wanted to think about this democratisation of news; how this changes the way we see things and influences our view of the world.

CZ: It’s a really interesting way to make digital work that’s also socially engaged. Thank you very much Manaf for the time you spent with us in Huntly. Before I close, can you tell me what was the best and what the worst thing you experienced here?

MH: Actually I did not have any bad experiences except of the food! I think the best experience was the fresh air and it was great to work with everyone at Deveron Projects!

CZ: Well, you personally addressed the food situation with your magnificent cooking! Thank you very much Manaf for being with us and also for this conversation.

*Manaf Halbouni is a Syrian artist based in Dresden, Germany. He stayed in Huntly from March to June 2017.*
Appendix C: Manaf Halbouni: Artist Report

I was very happy to be invited by Deveron Projects for a Residency in Huntly to work with the community. The day I arrived in Aberdeen was a lovely sunny day and Claudia Zeiske, the Director of Deveron Projects, picked me up at the airport. We directly went to the first meeting in the University of Aberdeen. It was a bit combated for me because I needed some time to switch from thinking in German to thinking in English.

My first impressions were good, and it was interesting to see how people in the UK start their meetings. On the way to Huntly I started to see all the green hills. I was fascinated by how peaceful everything looked and I totally loved it especially after the dramatic month I had had in Dresden before. We finally arrived Huntly. The first thing I always look at when I come to a new town is how everything is built. At the beginning did not like the black/grey stone. But after a while I started to like it and I think it's because the colours are changing here very fast from grey to blue to green.

After having my first observation of the town, we went to the Office of Deveron projects where I was introduced to all the team: Rachael, Joss, Alice, Alice and Alex. I had a great time with all the Team during my residency and it’s a time I will never forget.

The Project

After having a week to discover Huntly and see what kind of people are living here, it was time to start work on the project I came for. My plan was to do a short film with the Syrian new Scots. So we arranged a meeting with them in the ‘People’s Café’ a popup Project by artist Jacques Coetzer, who was also working with Deveron Projects. It was a very nice first meeting seeing the everyone and getting in touch with them. After the first meeting, I arranged the next meeting with them to select the actors and talk about the play.

After writing the main dialogue of the script I went to Inverurie and meet the Syrians at their home. It was a very nice and warm welcome with great food, it was a day full of funny conversations and I learned a lot about them. At the end of the day I selected Abed Alhalabe as my main actor and we started working together.

The Play

It took us four weeks to write the dialogue for the film and develop how we are going to play it. We developed a lot of things together. The experience of working so close with someone on a project was great. I was able to transport a lot of Western ideas to him and explain a lot of his curios questions. Question he probably would not ask a Scottish person. The good thing was also that he transported all these story’s to
his Friends. In this case I managed to do a social engagement by working only with one person.

After practicing the play we arranged the set. It was in the Huntly Hotel an old, unused hotel. Oscar HR my cameraman did the filming of the first part. It was an exciting day for all the actors and to see how a camera is set up, what to look like and what you have to look for when filming. It took us around five hours of filming and repeating to have the best shot. We were now prepared for the next day where the play would be performed in public. In the early morning of the next day we started to prepare the café because the Syrians were also making coffee and Arabian sweets at that day. It was fantastic to have that because people started to come into the café and talk and ask questions about what we are doing. It was good that we could explain everything and talk about the play. The concept of the public play was that we need people to film everything on their smartphones and give us what they captured to make a second film out of it. The event went extremely well, the only thing I noticed that we were all very nervous during the play.

After that day, it was Oscar's job to edit the movie and I did the translation for the subtitles. I also did a lot of interviews during that time with people from Huntly. I was asking questions about my maps. I wanted people to imagine themselves as presidents with the power to change the world and their country. It was interesting to see how people reacted to these questions and how each one of them head an idea for their map.

This lead us to our final event ‘Understanding the Middle East’. With this event, we wanted to communicate a bit of the history of the Middle East so people could understand a bit more about the problems that we are facing. An interesting group of speakers were invited to the event to talk about different topics like, history, culture, art, food and religion. The complete event was great success and it was important at that time and place to do something like that. I think other places like Huntly need events like this to explain a lot of things to people.

Positives

- Great Team
- Very comfortable work atmosphere
- Good talks to develop the Idea of the project
- Great community even after the work times
- Very nice nature
- Great experience

Negatives
- No workspace
- No basic tools (Drill, Hamer, Saw …)
- No Good Food (unless you want to cook everyday)
- Too much pressure to engage into project of other artists with my own work.