Review of Middle East Studies, 53(2), 294–299
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DOI:10.1017/rms.2019.61

CURATOR'S CORNER

Is There an Art Scene in Abu Dhabi?

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"Abu Dhabi's art scene: is it thriving? What is most exciting about it? And how do you think the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi will affect the art world over there?"

This series of questions came to me from an arts journalist in 2017, on the eve of the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. These are the questions that I've been asked by international journalists on a regular basis, for years now. Of course, journalists aren't always so explicit in their framing of the art world "over there," instead asking about "the changing art scene in the Gulf" and the "future of Middle Eastern Art." What I find interesting in these questions is how explicitly they locate the journalist within an art world "here" (where they are) separate from one "there" (the Gulf).

I can easily get lulled into a sense of a shared international art world, witnessing the concerted efforts of certain London and New York museums to internationalize their collections, the advent of an Art Basel Hong Kong, the attendance at the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh by figures such as Hans Ulrich Obrist (Artistic Director at the Serpentine Galleries) and Glenn Lowry (Director of the MoMA), and the participation of artists such as Amar Kanwar (of Delhi) on the jury to select the next Documenta curators (themselves from Jakarta). These important cross-pollinating international activities generate a sense of a globalizing, singular Art World. Questions like those of the journalist above, therefore, shock me back to my senses, and remind me that these are art worlds: plural, lower-case – and they are not well acquainted. [1] Although Obrist and Lowry travel to these international sites, and acquire art for their

[1] When a member of this art world over here (West Asia) enters that art world over there (US, UK, Europe), she faces the reality that her practice, and sometimes, her existence, needs to be "translated" into the new context. I notice the struggle writers have to discuss the work out of context. One can feel the temptation of phrases such as "the Picasso of India" (MF Hussain of India), or "the Keith Haring of the desert" (referring to Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, a core member of the longest-standing avant-garde in the UAE).

https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2019.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

collections on an international stage, the origin sites of creation and display of these internationally sourced artworks remain "over there" in the mind of the journalist, and their frame and regional terms of interpretation remain fixed.

This type of question can leave me briefly speechless: how to answer, and translate my answers, from the UAE back to their "art world over there." How to build into my answers a frame of reference that the writer can adopt? How convey my perspective on this art scene, having curated "over here" for the last eight years? Also, why do so? Can I answer this question in a way that does not feel like auditioning the UAE for the Tate's canon?

And finally, it is useful to consider what I am not asked: How do you conceptualize an exhibition program for an audience that hails from over 140 different countries? Abu Dhabi's public, and the NYU Abu Dhabi student population, that both visit the NYU Abu Dhabi university gallery that I run, represents one of the most densely diverse populations in the world, in ethnicity, nationality, and class. Imagine: you are magically granted a diverse audience, of the kind many North American and European institutions struggle to reach. What now? What are exhibitions for now?

Eight years ago, I left a job as curator at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery to plan and launch the university gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi (a four-year, degree-granting liberal arts college that includes majors in Engineering, the Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities). Before Brown, I'd been at The RISD Museum: university galleries and museums had become my area of expertise. I curated exhibitions of contemporary installation and video artists and drew connections between their work and that of their predecessors, from Vito Aconci and Nam June Paik to Marcel Duchamp and Josef Beuys. I also worked on a major survey of a kind of punk "underground" scene in Providence, Rhode Island, a curatorial process that elicited an off-color remark comparing my work to that of Margaret Mead. Here again, I noticed a distinction between a kind of "here" and "there" of the art world – in essence, the canon versus everything else. Still, even curating from the "underground" speaks to a specific kind of audience, and it relies on a certain shared frame of reference. Meanwhile, well-meaning curators attempted to integrate artists from other cultures into exhibitions, but they resorted to cobbling together a cultural/anthropological explanation of the artist's contexts, and awkwardly the work joined the exhibition even as it resisted admission into a canonical narrative.

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As I began to study the audiences and art references that make up the UAE context, it was immediately clear that I must get a handle on what would be "meaningful" here. A few stumbles make a quick lesson in respect for one's audience. The frame of reference in modern artists here is more MF Husain, Etel Adnan, Parviz Tanavoli, and Hassan Sharif than Vito Aconci or Nam June Paik or even punk rock undergrounds. Too often I see attempts – here, certainly, but also in the US – to "convert" audiences to a certain art-historical frame of reference, with hopes that they will see the value of a particular work. Instead of trying to convince an audience to love Fred Sandback or Cindy Sherman by emphasizing their role in a contemporary art canon, I set out to develop and support exhibitions that engage in a meaningful dialogue with existing frames of reference.[2] That might be Fred Sandback and Cindy Sherman, but conceptualized and represented with a diverse range of audience frameworks in mind.

From my years here, there are two moments that stand out in my mind that exemplify the electrifying challenge and opportunity of looking at art through the diverse lenses of my audiences here. The two moments described below are, in some ways, straightforward: diversity of perspectives allows for complexity in interpretation. However, there are two conceptual steps contained within the challenge to engage art through diverse lenses: first, to recognize the shift in one's own vantage point as an inherently meaningful act in itself (if, perhaps, uncomfortable); but second, to recognize that this shift in perspective enables the art to "speak" with more complexity. Ultimately, it is the experience of the work in the gallery with a diverse audience that enables a curator to more profoundly complicate her interpretation for other audiences. I need not spell out the implications of this for cross-cultural (and cross-political) dialogues more generally.

The first example is from 2015, when we mounted what was at the time perhaps the largest installation of work by the collective Slavs and Tatars to date. This artist duo works on what they describe as the area "west of the Great Wall of China, and east of the Berlin Wall." Although they worked on Islamic cultural history, among other things, they had rarely shown in – or been studied by – institutions outside the European-North American corridor until our exhibition. What might be an exotic witticism

[2] These two were represented in *Ways of Seeing*, a recent exhibition at the NYUAD Art Gallery guest-curated by Sam Bardouil and Till Fellrath, which included art from around the world, in dialogue with the idea of different viewer perspectives.

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in a New York context took on a different gravity in our context here (such as their use of prayer beads and Quran holders).

Included in our exhibition was *Mystical Protest*, which included a row of green neon tube lights mounted vertically over a textile. I might immediately think of the artist Dan Flavin, famous for his colored light tubes. The embroidery on the textile reads: "It is of utmost importance that we repeat our mistakes as a reminder to future generations of the depths of our stupidity." This phrase sits on top of a textile traditionally used in Shiʿi commemoration ceremonies during Muharram. The specific green of the tube lights is associated with Islam, generally, and the use of the tube lights is commonly seen in the minarets of mosques, and quite frequently in the UAE. Some have read this work as a subtle reference to the political tensions among Sunni and Shiʿi groups as they align with regional politics. If I had presented this work at Brown or RISD, it's entirely possible that one of my audience members would have interpreted this as Sunni-Shiʿi tensions playing out in the work, but I was much more likely to have read it as a Dan Flavin reference on top of a traditional Islamic one – Islamic in a monolithic, uncomplicated sense. Experiencing the work with a mixed audience that might see one, the other, or both readings simultaneously gave the work a remarkable vibrating edge, a thrill of discomfort, challenge, and aesthetic *frisson*. At that point, I also became viscerally aware of legibility issues with art work vis-a-vis any given audience, and that bi- (or tri-) cultural fluency can enable such work as that of Slavs and Tatars to reach exceedingly complex registers.

A second example complements the Slavs and Tatars one: the late Emirati artist Hassan Sharif created a remarkable collection of floor-based sculptures, made from scraps and refuse found in his 1990s Dubai surroundings. Trained in a British art program, he was fluent in modern and contemporary European art, and his work suggests an affinity with Arte Povera, Josef Beuys, and Marcel Duchamp. Early on in the UAE, many saw his work as – literally – trash. He often collected discarded cardboard with which to make sculptures and installations, and, legend has it, garbage collectors removed it from its location on the roadside where it was on view as part of a Sharjah Biennial. Meanwhile, encouraged to make art that expressed his cultural heritage, he pointed out that the rapid expansion of Dubai and its cardboard and refuse were part of his heritage.

In 2017, we mounted an art-historical exhibition surveying the UAE avant-garde, of which Hassan Sharif was a core member. It is worth noting that we titled it *But We Cannot See Them* (from a poem by Nujoom Al

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Ghanem) as a result of a story from the early 1990s, when several European museum curators came to the UAE in search of the art scene and, unable to find (or recognize) it, ultimately concluded that there was no true contemporary art in the UAE.

It is tempting to see Hassan Sharif's work only in terms of his London art studies. But as we developed the research, I traced distinctly non-European references: the coir rope he used was made in India and for locals was associated with the regional fishing trade, while one of his closest art collaborators was Indian and from the family that made this rope. He was also responding from across different canons, from Sufi Islamic poetry to North African pop music and beyond.

I included Sharif's sculpture *Cloth and Paper 2* (2005), made up of small, brightly colored cloth-wrapped packages piled on the floor. To my North-American-trained eye, it was in dialogue with Felix Gonzalez-Torres' famous pile-of-candy sculpture, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991). The show received a visit by a very old woman of regal bearing, dressed in the traditional Emirati burqa (distinct from the chadaree), and she sported henna-dyed fingers. To my pleasant surprise, she was enjoying the exhibition. When she came upon *Cloth and Paper 2*, she gasped – I worried she was offended by the visual of "trash" as art. Instead, she exclaimed to her companion, "It is clear that he understands the beauty of the Bedouin way!" She was referring to the way that Bedouins save everything, and make use of it; there is no trash. Traditionally, also, women here tie small packages of their belongings into the sleeves of their gowns,[3] creating an effect that this sculpture seemed to capture. In that moment the work took on a wholly different beauty from what I had been seeing, and the gestalt shifted. I had not fully read the work, at all.

In both of these examples, the work rewards many frames of reference, from the Euro-North-American art historical canon, to Islamic sectarian history, to Gulf and West-Asian heritage. Of course, all of what we saw in the examples above can be explained in a wall text. Still, they resonate most strongly with a point of entry for the viewer from their own frame of reference. As we know from the famous retort "my 5-year-old could paint that," the frame of reference always changes how and what we see.

One might be tempted to start breaking down the viewing experience anthropologically and begin generalizing about ethnicity and art-going.

[3] Traditional Emirati gowns, unlike the black Abayas worn over clothes, are covered in large brightly colored dots, known as *teela* fabric. *Teela* is also the name of a marble-type game played locally – two more points of resonance with the brightly colored dots of Sharif's fabric packages.

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Or, worse, one might limit oneself to curating by region and suffer from a spate of decontextualized Arab art survey shows. I would instead propose that the onus is on the curator to better understand the extent to which the *audience* shapes a meaningful show. What plays in New York just might not play here, and vice versa. The frame of reference truly changes what one sees, in effect changing the work itself. An excellent curator can help translate and develop a framework for more nuanced audience reception, but even the devoted wall-text-reading audience will remain primarily in their own frame. What can a curator learn from her audience about interpreting art? To what extent can a great artwork withstand the shock of a new frame of reference? Is this a fair litmus test?

So, to return to the journalist's list of questions: yes, the art scene here is thriving (sadly, this response often surprises the journalist, who may look at me askance). And, to the question of what is most exciting about the art scene "over here": the discovery that art can mean so much more than any single audience can understand. Art is just that complicated and that multivalent. The exciting question "over here" when I look at a new work is, "What am I missing? What might I discover?"

I'll close with an anecdote from a faculty member here at NYU Abu Dhabi. He is a professor of history and teaches primarily Chinese history. After having taught at Stanford, Columbia, and Brown Universities, he had become accustomed to teaching about China for North American frames of reference. As he developed his teaching for the students of NYUAD, where a 12-student seminar often represents 12 different countries, he realized he could not teach the same way; this frame was too narrow. As he put it "I had to learn to see more in China than I'm accustomed to seeing, I realize how limited my own interpretation has been because I was always interpreting for the same audience."

And, to answer the last of the journalist's three questions, "And how do you think the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi will affect the art world over there?" I would propose to reverse the question: how will the art world over here affect the Louvre Abu Dhabi?

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