Fehras Publishing Practices: an email interview

Sami Rustom, Omar Nicolas, Kenan Darwich AND *Gustavo Grandal Montero*

Gustavo Grandal Montero (ALJ): The three of you founded Fehras Publishing Practices in 2015 in Berlin and since then have been working together in a series of long-term art projects focused on archives and publishing. Collectives, collaboration and networks are central to your practice, how much is this connected to an expanded understanding of publishing as a quintessentially collaborative cultural activity?

Fehras Publishing Practices (FPP): Our interest in the collective experience – specifically while researching the history of publishing in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa – is coming on the back of a self-observation of our own practice as a young collective, and it is a self-reflection about our position, demands, choices, compromises, and collaborations within the field of art, and through the interaction with others and institutions.

In our long-term research project *Borrowed Faces, stories of publishers during the Cold War,* we were particularly interested in understanding how the 1960s intellectuals from different Arab-speaking countries came together in a city such as Beirut under the umbrella of journal-making. What brought those people together to contribute to, or issue publications? Does the gathering around journals or even "publishing bodies" – whether it's a publishing house or an institution – offer spaces for forming national and cultural identities, and developing a common political perspective? How do interpersonal relationships such as friendship and love lead to collaborations in the field of publishing? Does the formation of collectives, or the collaborative practice create better conditions to face institutional frameworks?

It was very interesting to analyze these questions by observing projects such as Suhayl Idris journal *Al-Adab* and Yusuf Al-Khal *Shi'ir Journal.* The two projects were founded at the peak of the publishing activities in the region between 1950 and 1960. Both represent two different literary concepts and therefore different political approaches in relation to the role of cultural production. They published literature critics, articles, short stories and poems. While the first was adopting the commitment as a precondition for cultural production, the second was celebrating the concept of art for the sake of art. Both projects gathered the stars of Arab intellectuals. Despite the fact that both journals were originally a one-man initiative, they produced in the end lots of of collective historical works, which were the canon for new literary styles in the region and a place for the rise and demise of many intellectuals.

Maybe also to add that publishing projects – putting journal-making at the top of the list – were eventually cultural projects, which shape our understanding of the publishing practice as a collaborative cultural activity.

ALJ: You studied typography, book design, fine art and media in Syria and Germany, and I read with interest in your website that Sami is completing a Masters degree in Library and Information Sciences at Humboldt University in Berlin. Could you expand on your backgrounds, interests and experiences, and how those interconnect within the collective?

FPP: One of the things that are enriching the collective creative process, is our different professional backgrounds. Sami studied media science and journalism in Syria. His interests lay in collecting archival material with a strong focus on music history especially from Lebanon, primarily singer Fairuz and composers Rahabani Brothers. Through years of personal collecting Sami developed historical knowledge and long experience in understanding the relationship between history and cultural events. Also, he maintained relations with book vendors in Damascus and Beirut. In his master's research at Humboldt University, Sami focused on analyzing Franklin Book Programs, which was founded in New York as a non-profit organization in 1952, and its publications were distributed

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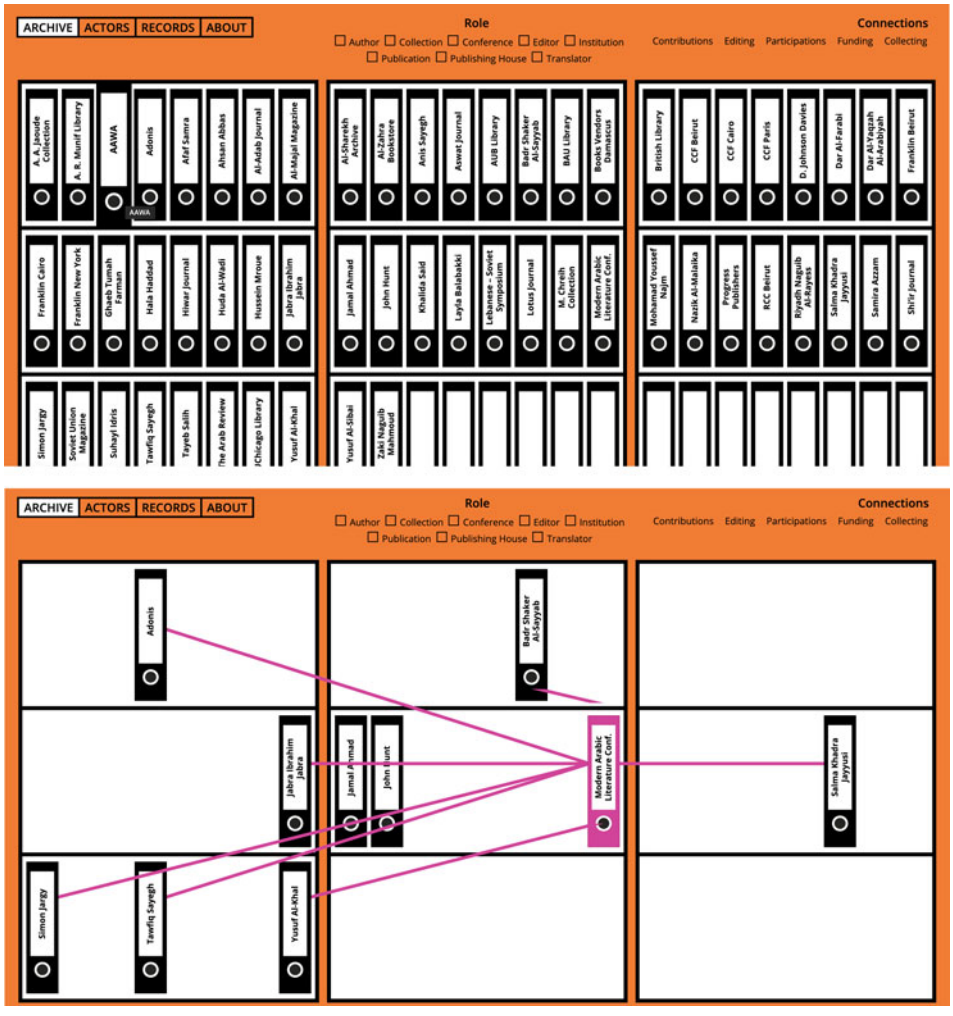
worldwide. In this regard, Sami examined the role of online and university catalogues as a tool for transferring historical narratives.

Kenan studied editorial design and typography at the Muthesius Academy of Fine Art in Kiel, where he later taught and co-created an academic space called "Raum der publication" for researching the medium of publication aesthetically and contextually. He continued his investigation by completing his master's at the Leipzig Academy for Visual Art in the department of "Cultures of the Curatorial", where he investigates the curatorial aspect in researching the space of publication as an exhibition space.

Omar completed his bachelor's in Fine Art at the faculty of Art in Damascus. He moved to Germany to continue his Mater study at the Muthesius Academy for Fine Art in Kiel in the field of Typography. His interest in Performance, push him to focus on understanding the body as an act of writing by examining the relationship between performance and writing.

All these individual interests were merging together, creating through the collective a new understanding of practicing publishing. These interests are most of the time complementary. It means that specific tasks circulate and go from hand to hand until a text or an idea gets its last shape. Part of circulating the tasks is also based on the trust that each one has a long experience in this or that field and then another spice or vision can be added from the other two. Though, it's not easy always to work in this way, especially in an art economy that celebrates collectives as a unified body and thereby participating in their underpayment.

ALJ: Your engagement with historical research projects related to publishing and its wider cultural and political context in the East Mediterranean and North Africa, and the Arab diaspora, is manifested via publications, exhibitions,



Borrowed Faces: The Digital Archive, 2021-ongoing, screenshots of the website.

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performances and films, as part of series that include Disappearances, Borrowed Faces and Institutional Terms. Could you introduce these projects and describe the role of research and the use of archival material in your work, how it relates and differs from art historiography, for instance in the use of fiction and visual narrative?

FPP: We created a series of long-term projects, starting with "Series of Disappearances" which observes the process of the shifting of knowledge and the displacement of libraries and books as well as their disappearances and transformation due to social, political, and economical changes in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. *When The Library Was Stolen* a project catalogued the private library of the novelist Abd Al-Rahman Munif (1933-2004) became the ground for this series, and opened for us the door for a new series "Borrowed Faces". This research examines publishing culture in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa during the Cold War era, focusing on the interrelation between politics, funding, and cultural production. In this project, we are interested in examining the implication of cultural and publishing practices in new international politics. This era witnessed the establishment of institutions and foundations to finance international networks and projects. Thus, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa became integral to the cultural Cold War.

Moving from the phenomena of libraries and archives to one of the bilingual art publications that became more and more visible since 2001 in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. We create the "Series of Institutional Terms" that focus on researching the form and content of bilingual art publications and their role in establishing a specific language that reflects the art scene in the region and its connection to the global art world. In this series, we are following the impact of the language, term, and institution on artistic practices today. In this context, we are rereading historical and modern forms of translations and researching the production of lexicons and dictionaries.

One of the leitmotivs of our work, whether in the exhibition, lecture, or film is to examine the interrelation between aesthetic formats and research by addressing how gained and transformed knowledge interacts with the art form. Since our researches are long-term investigations, where the material and the knowledge constantly increasing and transforming, it became part of the artistic process to move fluidly between the form and the content. Exhibitions and presentations became stations of translating the current phase. it became a game of showing and hiding, and a space for experiencing the result or the research in its playfulness.

It's hard to distinguish between artistic research as a practice and the academic one since we are using – in the research phase – similar methodologies of gaining and transferring knowledge in terms of resources and contextualization. Therefore, we don't see the approach of our research just in transferring knowledge. Our work is a presentation of doubts and assumptions.

Using the fiction to talk about the archive or perform it became a way to raise critical questions about the historical narrative the archive itself is telling, also a way to avoid the trap in which we could fall while working with this material: name it nostalgia, name it presenting facts and knowledge.

ALJ: I first came across your work in OOMK's *The Library Was* (Book Works, 2016) that described your project to document and reactivate the private library of Abd Al-Rahman Munif, When The Library Was Stolen, including a bibliography of 10,000 catalogued items. Could you explain your concept of disappearance and the role of the bibliography in this project?

FPP: We understand the term "disappearance" not only in the sense of vanishing books or libraries but also the disappearance as a process of transformation, and thereby as a way or strategy for a new appearance of relocated and decentralized knowledge and archives. Hereby, the disappearance became an act that provokes the research in its reasons, forms, and the new relations that came out of it. So to say, how a publication appears in new forms and contexts and which significance does this process have in the present and in relation to other materials and contexts.

We see in the library of Abd Al-Rahman Munif a mirror of political and cultural movements in the region of the East Mediterranean and North Africa. The library provides insights into the long history of epistemological production by

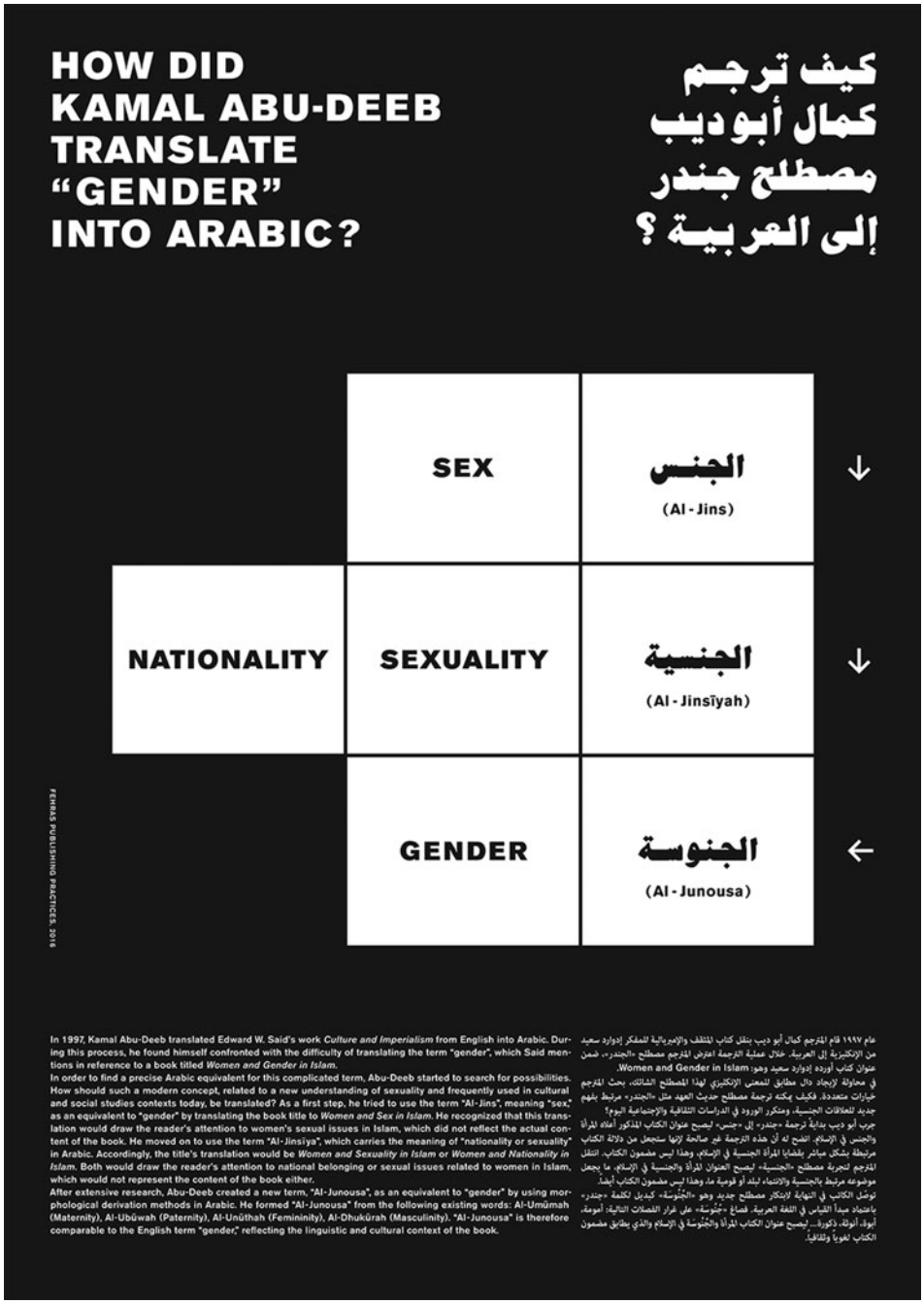
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Scenes of Borrowed Faces: The Beirut office of the Franklin Book programs, no. 1–6
2020, framed photographs, color (50 x 70 cm).

publishers in the Arab world. It reflects the practice of publishing and its development during crucial political and social change. A re-reading of its holdings offered new observations, but also provoke questions concerning the fate of

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HOW DID KAMAL ABU-DEEP TRANSLATE "GENDER" INTO ARABIC?, Poster Din A1, edition of 1.000. Installation view Mirroring Language, Extended Dictionaries in the group exhibition Something to Generate From, Kunsthal Aarhus, Denmark, 2016

these publishers. Munif's library thereby could be considered a reference for the migration of Arab intellectuals and the movement of knowledge, but it is simultaneously a space in which the disappearance and reappearance of publications take place.

The role of the bibliography comes from using this information as a way to re-read the library archive of Abd Al-Rahman Munifs through various statistical interpretations and diagrams. The statistics and diagrams provide information about the history of publishing in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa region and attempt to establish a link between political events, ideologies, intellectuality, and migration through the experience of publishing. Despite their claim to provide facts, these statistics and diagrams are inherently contradictory and full

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of gaps, because they use the moment of the private collecting and archiving by an author like Munif as an approach to create a historical narrative.

ALJ: Collecting, ordering and curating archival materials is a key part of your practice, and you have developed your own archive in addition to working with different bodies of material. Can you describe how you acquire and manage material for it, and how you use it in an exhibition context?

FPP: We do our research in public libraries, secondhand book markets. We dig into private collections or archives as well as collections of cultural or academic institutions. We research the history of publishers and search catalogues of universities as well as journalism, radio, and television archives. Memoirs, letters, and photographs are also part of our interest and research materials.

For sure we like to collect original material, but it is related to our financial resources, to the Institutional limitation, and the loss of material. Therefore the choice of collecting and capturing archival material is based on a negotiation between our capacities and the policies of the place we are researching. Taking the archive of Borrowed Faces as an example, we were moving between the archives of the AUB, the german orient institute, the Russian cultural center, and the private collections of persons from that 1960s era, and book vendors.

We use the practice of reproducing archival materials: For example, copying, scanning, and photographing them in their spatial form and dimension (on a bookshelf, on a table, etc...), or even documenting them in a text. The archival material after its reproduction carries for us similar value to the original one, and thereby it gives beside its knowledge value insight into its individual story (what it was, how it is being transformed, and what it becomes) when it is a part of our project collection form and content-wise.

ALJ: Through a playful deconstruction and reconstruction of archives (visual as well as textual), often fictionalising factual material, you question the authority of the historical record and canonical historical narratives. How much is your use of tools of librarianship and archival science, like bibliographies, indexing and classification, a critique of colonial hierarchies and structures of knowledge organisation?

FPP: The methodology we are using in researching is based on an "intuition" and doubts of "how history is being written and preserved" and "by whom is archived". During this whirl of intuition and doubts, we start usually to prioritize, re-classify, re-order and reconnect the materials, to create an open hybrid body of materials that owe different heads, legs, and hands. Maybe this methodology itself contains an act of reclaiming stories, by creating an archive that has been defined by our doubts and questions on the history and on "ways of its preservation".

The name of the collective "Fehras" is coming from Arabic and Persian. It's a term, that covers the two words "table of content" and "indexing". Through our experience, we tend to use freely tools from the librarianship and archival practices. Therefore, we create bibliographies, statistics, diagrams, build lists of terms, analyze catalogues and reconstruct their contents. These methodologies and tools seem to cover our thirst, to question the facts the resources are giving as a pre-process of using this knowledge in the artistic work. We are interested in gaining knowledge from metadata and para-textual layers by reorganization all the facts we get from archival resources whether physical or digital.

ALJ: Translation is another tool that you explore as part of your work, for instance in your project on bilingual art publications by Arabic cultural institutions, Index Cards of Publishers, 1-5, could you describe it?

FPP: In the project, we are interested in examining the translation in the institutional context and the language is being shaped and produced specifically by the institutions of contemporary art.

As an example, we are focusing on a young archive of bilingual art publications we are collecting since 2015. The cultural institutions established in the 1990s across the EMNA region, specifically in cities such as Cairo, Beirut, Marrakesh, as well as several- al cities in the Gulf peninsula, have undergone tremendous changes in the past decade. Since their establishment, art

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institutions and practices that have emerged within the region have contributed to new discourses.

In most publications, Arabic and English mirror each other; they begin at opposite ends of the book and meet in the middle. Attempting to create a balance between both languages, the layout follows a symmetrical principle, printing texts in similar sizes and across matching page numbers. The thematic focuses include exhibitions, projects, and symposia. Prefaces, biographies, and researches generally offer poorly translated contemporary art writing attempting to transfer content into an Arabic cultural context.

In their Arabic translations, these texts often exhibit language experiments in *Fusha*, playing with Arabic's classical structure and inventing new terminology modeled on western discourses. We underlined and excerpted terms that sounded unfamiliar in Arabic and tracked their equivalent in the English essays. We later classified and arranged them under various dis- course categories such as the body, globalization, public space, gender, etc.

To better understand the production process involved in art publications, we compiled detailed lists gathering imprint information such as names of authors, artists and curators, editors and translators, funding sources, an occasion for publishing, year of publishing, languages, designers, publishers, and ISBNs. Drawing up lists revealed a complex global co-production system comprising various players, institutions, local spaces, cities, languages, and western founders.

So the first years of the project we focus on more linguistic research ways of thinking. In the course of the research, the outcome took more a performative turn. We started to apply the issue of translation and power relations manifested in global art into the body of the artist and the viewer.

In our last phase, we are working with the format of Karaoke. This step aimed to give life and a critical view into the researched bilingual art publications through the performative voice. We developed song-lyrics out of these art essays by rearranging their content. The lyrics focused on the gap between globality and locality, the role of funding and institutions, and the notion of language's transformation. They were played on famous popular songs and the visitors were invited to sing and carry the voice of the text, of the discourse, and of the global art aiming to revive and to give access to the publications and their Arty language to a wider audience.

The idea came on the back of considering Karaoke as an interactive multilingual space, a place where different languages unfold through the performative voice and a place where languages can speak up with a non-judgemental attitude towards listening to others. It is a place where one can reclaim power through the performative entertaining translation.

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