

Knowledge Production: Examining Arab Art Today

Public Colloquium

Saturday 7 July 2018

The Lab | 1:30-7:00PM

In 2011, Darat al Funun launched a Fellowship program, providing an opportunity for doctoral candidates to reside at Darat al Funun, develop their dissertation research and benefit from our resources and archives.

For our 30th anniversary, a public colloquium about knowledge production will bring Darat al Funun fellows together in Amman for the first time to examine the ways in which knowledge about modern and contemporary Arab art is generated and disseminated. They represent a new generation of scholars who are expanding knowledge about Arab art, challenging previous paradigms, and calling for a reassessment of conventional narratives about the region and its diverse cultures.

From the vantage point of their individual research experiences and methodologies, the Fellows will elucidate how their work addresses lacunae in existing scholarship, and highlight the myriad opportunities as well as some of the challenges that stand in the way of documenting and understanding Arab art. The colloquium aims to speculate about the global status of Arab art today, asking how it is produced, perceived, supported, documented, and theorized.

Participating Fellows are: Amin Alsaden, Edward McDonald-Toone, Elizabeth Rauh, Fares Chalabi, Holiday Powers, Nisa Ari, and Reema Salha Fadda.

Moderated by Dr. Silvia Naef and Dr. Adila Laïdi-Hanieh and coordinated by Fellow Amin Alsaden.

The colloquium will be in English; simultaneous translation into Arabic will be provided.

PROGRAM

1:30-2:00 PM – Introduction by Amin Alsaden, and Address by Adila Laïdi-Hanieh

2:00-3:30 PM – **First Session:**

Research Methods: Regional Constraints, Revisionist Appraisals

Paper 1: "Geographies of Research, Geographies of Modernism" by Holiday Powers, Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar

Paper 2: "On Researching the Political Economy of Contemporary Palestinian Art" by Reema Salha Fadda, Oxford University

Paper 3: "The Sectarian Image: Crypto-Troglodism" by Fares Chalabi, American University of Beirut

Comments by Moderators

3:30-4:00 PM – Break

4:00-5:30 PM – **Second Session:**

Research Objects: Old Grounds, New Questions

Paper 1: "Art, 'Regional' Exhibitions and the Geopolitics of Symbolic Capital" by Edward (Ted) McDonald-Toone, University College London

Paper 2: "New Soil: Institutions and Artists in the Arab World" by Nisa Ari, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Paper 3: "Visualizing Islamic Artistic Heritage in the Modern *Mashriq*" by Elizabeth Rauh, University of Michigan

Comments by Moderators

5:30-6:00 PM – **Keynote Speech:**

"Writing the History of Modern Art in the Arab World: Historical Overview, State of the Art and Critical Remarks on an Emerging Field"

by Dr. Silvia Naef, University of Geneva

6:00-7:00 PM – Group Discussion and Concluding Remarks

ABSTRACTS

First Session, Paper 1: "Geographies of Research, Geographies of Modernism"

Holiday Powers

This presentation/article considers the ways in which the multiple layers of the narratives of Arab modernism require us as researchers to continually navigate the borders between the global and the local. Starting from my own doctoral research and the multiple geographies this work required, I am interested in how the physical space of research necessitates a shift in the potential narrative that we write. Just as researchers follow in the footsteps of the artists, artworks, and art networks they focus on, the act of moving through space also forces us to confront the many scales on which artworks intervene. By placing these geographies on top of one another, I suggest the importance of research that continually tries to re-articulate the interplay between the local and the transnational. It is by perpetually re-defining these terms and the relationship between them that we can re-write the histories of Arab modernisms both in dialogue across the region and with global modernisms.

First Session, Paper 2: "On Researching the Political Economy of Contemporary Palestinian Art"

Reema Salha Fadda

This paper offers a brief reflection on using ethnography as a methodology to research contemporary Palestinian artistic production as it travels through a networked art economy. I begin my discussion with a brief account of my denial from occupied Palestinian territories—a crucial turning point from which my discussion takes its cue. On October 2016, on arrival at Ben Gurion airport, I endured endless interrogation and detention by Israeli authorities, with a Ministry of Interior official threatening me with the claim: ‘you will only see Israel through the image, do you understand?’ The cruel irony of his statement—not least, owing to the fact that my research focuses on the political economy of art-making—set in motion an alternative strategy of producing knowledge about Palestinian artistic production from outside the “national” context. Offering an outline of the methods I used to document Palestinian artistic production in the present—as it travels across multiple sites and locations—this paper seeks to position Palestinian art beyond (often exceptionalising) nationalistic frameworks by considering its position within a regional art economy. With neoliberalism as the dominant political-economic system guiding the contemporary art world, this paper considers the im/material negotiations of conducting a multi-sited ethnography on and about the transnational context. Exploring the difficulties and dilemmas of navigating a highly monetized and eventicized art world, and my embedded position within it, I consider how this offered a unique insight into the complex politics of locating Palestinian art within its contemporary field of production.

First Session, Paper 3: "The Sectarian Image: Crypto-Troglodism"
Fares Chalabi

The *Sectarian-Image* is an attempt to think artistic production under sectarian regimes. The approach consists in studying specific cases in order to show how the Sectarian Regime unfolds in *existential categories* that format the modes of perception, affection, action, memory, narration and description generating specific types of seeing, acting, feeling, remembering etc. that are irreducible to the hegemonic categories proper to the "First World" nor thinkable in terms of cultural and identitarian categories which usually characterize the specificity of the "Arab World". Negatively the task consists in stigmatizing the Cultural-Hegemonic categories as a source of blindness and intellectual repression that separate us from a clear awareness of the existential situation in the sectarian context. Positively the task consists in elaborating new categories that will allow us to have a proper evaluation of the existential situation in the sectarian context in order to intensify its artistic and intellectual production. Given that we reject all overarching unities that could characterize the "Arab World", be it common history, language, or religion, this approach can only deal with specific case studies, in our case Lebanon. To sum up we need then to re-think the Arab Nations as varieties of the Sectarian Regime, to reject the Hegemonic-Cultural categories that describe these nations, and to elaborate existential categories that are specific to these varieties.

Second Session, Paper 1: "Art, 'Regional' Exhibitions and the Geopolitics of Symbolic Capital"
Edward (Ted) McDonald-Toone

The increased international visibility of art from the Arab world in recent decades has prompted questions about the nature of globalisation, of infrastructures and institutions, and of the role of paradigmatic forms – including the exhibition – in defining the category of Arab art. No matter how much rhetorical tribute is paid to the potential for art to be a space of ambiguity and indeterminacy in "regional" survey exhibitions, Arab artists and their works are often expected to function correctively: as superior (truer) kinds of knowledge addressing a moral geography defined by geopolitics. My paper examines how artists and artworks from the Arab world and the wider geography around it have been signified in and through survey exhibitions – mechanisms of visibility where identity, geography and signification are tied in a Gordian knot. It will discuss how the impetus to question this model has come to play an important part in defining the critical and art-historical discourse around art from "the region". Finally, it will consider how Darat al Funun offers a location from which to grapple with the necessity to untie the Gordian knot described above and (to paraphrase Darwish) write over the blackness of truth with the light of a mirage.

Second Session, Paper 2: "New Soil: Institutions and Artists in the Arab World"
Nisa Ari

My contribution takes the form of a provocation: what happens to the writing of modern and contemporary Arab art histories if we consider institutions, rather than just geography or national identity, as part of the “native soil” from which artistic identities form and artistic processes develop? While my research theorizes the emergence of one such geographically- and nationally-located artistic category—“Palestinian art”—my methodology revolves around an understanding of how institutions catalyze, mediate, or alter the artistic practices which come to define these categories. As the formation of both national borders and arts institutions in the Arab world collided with colonial interests and national movements in the region, questioning the construction of institutions and the artistic practices they illuminated (or obfuscated) provides an alternative approach to identity-driven histories of Arab art. The institutional lens in my historical research was stimulated by my observations of contemporary non-profit arts centers and residency programs in the Middle East, including Darat al Funun, Al-Ma’mal (in Jerusalem), and Salt (in Istanbul), where such institutions often perform as artistic collaborators, and by importing artists and imposing time and environmental constraints, act as catalysts for innovative artistic movements. Can organizing artists and their artwork by institutional affiliation instead of grouping them by national heritage reveal linkages, blur distinctions, and provoke new questions about the history of Arab art and artists?

Second Session, Paper 3: "Visualizing Islamic Artistic Heritage in the Modern Mashriq"
Elizabeth Rauh

In researching the diverse ways in which artists document and wield historically Islamic materials through contemporary art practices, my project examines artist mediations and rematerializations of Islamic artistic heritage, with artworks from late 1950s Tehran to today. Through such interpretive parameters, my project’s case studies demonstrate the persistently productive relationship between popular Islamic traditions, vernacular religious practices, and socially engaged artmaking, while simultaneously challenging the supposed modernist rupture between Islamic art collections and regional modernity. Research materials that resulted from my fieldwork at Darat al Funun speak to Jordan’s diverse and expanding network of the region’s archives and collections, as well as to the specific archival history of the Darat enmeshed within local artist undertakings over the past thirty years, as evidenced in one case study on Ali Jabri and his artistic heritage practices in Amman. From 1960s Shi’i Communist banners, talismans gathered for both museum collections and abstract paintings, to the Hand of Fatima beautifully rendered on a Ma’an village refrigerator, materials gathered across a broad array of spaces and contexts speaks to the wide-ranging movements of artists, and to the state of conducting fieldwork on Islamic artistic heritage and art practices in the modern *Mashriq*.

PARTICIPANTS' BIOGRAPHIES

Adila Laïdi-Hanieh

Dr. Adila Laïdi-Hanieh published in 2017 the artist biography Fahrelnissa Zeid. Painter of Inner Worlds and in 2008 published the first cultural review of contemporary Palestine: Palestine. Rien ne nous manque ici. She received a Post-doctoral fellowship from the Arab Council for the Social Sciences in 2017, and received her Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from George Mason University in 2015, obtained as a Fulbright Scholar. Dr. Laïdi-Hanieh was the founding director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre from 1996 until 2005 where she curated the internationally touring memorial art exhibition 100 Shaheed-100 Lives (2001-2003).

Amin Alsaden

Amin Alsaden is an independent scholar whose work focuses on the global exchanges of ideas and expertise across cultural boundaries. His interests include modern art and architecture, especially in the Muslim and Arab worlds; questions of globalism and universalism in art and architectural history and theory; politics and aesthetics; cultural production in conflict zones; sociopolitical, epistemological, and disciplinary agency of cultural institutions; and monumentality in modern and contemporary art and architecture. His current research investigates a crucible moment in post-WWII Baghdad, when the city became a locus of unprecedented encounters, contributing to the profound transformation of art and architecture globally all the while engendering unique local movements. Alsaden holds a PhD and MA from Harvard University, MArch from Princeton University, and BArch from the American University of Sharjah.

Edward McDonald-Toone

Edward (Ted) McDonald-Toone completed a doctorate at University College London in 2017, and was a PhD research fellow at Darat al Funun in 2015. His work focuses on the role of exhibitions in the reception of contemporary and modern art from the Arab world and the so-called Middle East. Since the late 1990s, exhibitions using geography as their curatorial leitmotif have been central to the increased visibility of artistic production from “the region”. Consequently, artists and scholars have questioned the regional historiography produced around these exhibitions, while new art-historical work on the history of exhibitions has refocused our understandings of how institutions mediate art. McDonald-Toone’s research is a critical examination of some key moments in the recent history of exhibitions and the implications of defining places and identities at the intersection of two cultural structures: the exhibition and the geo-political imaginary as applied to the Arab world and beyond.

Elizabeth Rauh

Elizabeth Rauh is a Ph.D. Candidate in History of Art at the University of Michigan. She specializes in modern and contemporary art and visual cultures of the Middle East, and is currently writing her dissertation project examining how prominent artists in the twentieth-century Middle East harnessed Islamic traditions and folk practices in their artworks as mediations of vernacular Islamic culture in global modern art. Along with studies in modern and contemporary artmaking, she also works in early modern Persianate book arts, Shi'i Islamic visual cultures, and issues of image making across different eras in the history of the Islamic world. In 2013, she was awarded the Rhonda A. Saad Prize for "Best Graduate Paper in Modern and Contemporary Arab Art." She was recently awarded the Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellowship at the University of Michigan Museum of Art for 2018-2019.

Fares Chalabi

Chalabi was born in Beirut in 1977. He obtained his BA in philosophy in 2002 from the Lebanese University, and a diploma in architecture from ALBA in 2004. He continued his studies in philosophy at Paris 8 where he obtained a Master 2 in 2008, and his PhD in 2016. Today Chalabi teaches philosophy at AUB, and art theory at ALBA and USJ. His main fields of interest are the forms of ontological argumentation, metaphysical constructions, and esthetics, in the line of the deleuzian approach.

Holiday Powers

Holiday Powers is Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at VCUarts Qatar. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University, where her doctoral research focused on modernism in Morocco. She has contributed to publications including *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, *Higher Atlas/Au-Delà de l'Atlas: The Marrakech Biennale [4] in Context*, and *The Journal of North African Studies*. She was the Artistic Program Coordinator and in charge of Parallel Projects for the fifth edition of the Marrakech Biennale, and she recently curated solo exhibitions of Khalid Albaih and Zineb Sedira in Doha.

Nisa Ari

Nisa Ari is a PhD candidate in the History, Theory, and Criticism of Art and Architecture department at MIT. She studies late-nineteenth and twentieth century artwork from the Middle East, with a special focus on cultural politics and the formation of art institutions in Palestine and in Turkey. In addition to *Darat al Funun*, her research has been supported by fellowships from the Palestinian American Research Center, the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Mellon Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Her recent essays are published in *Third Text*, *Arab Studies Journal*, and *Thresholds*.

Reema Salha Fadda

Reema Salha Fadda is writer, editor and researcher, primarily focused on contemporary art practices from the Middle East. She is completing her DPhil at the University of Oxford, working on the political economy of Palestinian artistic production for which she has been awarded fellowships from the Centre for British Research in the Levant, Darat al-Funun and the University of Oxford Pachachi Award. Her writing has been commissioned by leading international publications including *Sternberg Press*, *TANK magazine*, *Art Papers*, *Ocula*, Institute for Palestine Studies, and *Ibraaz*, where she was Commissioning Editor of Reviews. In addition to developing a lecture series on Arab visual cultures for The University of Oxford and Darat al Funun, she has programmed cultural events in Palestine, Cairo and London. Reema holds an MA with Distinction in Cultural Studies from SOAS, University of London and an MA in English Literature from the University of Edinburgh. She tweets @reemafadda.

Silvia Naef

Silvia Naef is a full professor at the Arabic Studies Section, University of Geneva. She has taught in Tübingen and Basel and has been a visiting professor at the universities of Toronto (2007-2009), Sassari (Italy, 2012), the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris (2016), St. Joseph, Beirut (2017) and a visiting researcher in Princeton (2003) and Göttingen (2013). Her research focusses on modern art, visual representations and images in the Arab and Islamic world; she is also interested in gender issues. She has recently co-edited *Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Turkey and Iran: Reintroducing the 'Missing Modern'*, in *Asiatische Studien/Etudes Asiatiques* (2016). She has been the principal investigator of the research project *Other Modernities: Patrimony and Practices of Visual Expression Outside the West* (2013-2017), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, in collaboration with I. Maffi (University of Lausanne) and W. Shaw (Free University Berlin).