

Bridges, Hearts, Cash: Neoliberal Markets of Cultural Understanding

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‘Cultural diplomacy’ has played an instrumental role in fostering a particular mode of self-identification among Arab artists and practitioners. This paper investigates the effects of this ‘Arab self’ on the capitalisation of the field in the context of the development of the Arab art market.

Arab artists’ self-identification (i.e., Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, etc.) is increasingly shaped by the agendas and geopolitical cartographies of foreign funders. Consequently, institutional grant-makers organise contemporary Arab artists into categorised localities. Such groupings encourage artists to subscribe to standardised conceptions of social, political, and cultural identifiers, and to account for their personal experiences and ‘transgressions’ in relation to these identifiers.

Philanthropic support for Arab art promotes the perspective of a cultural ‘elsewhere’ and a personified ‘otherness’. The result is a sort of ‘love’ that configures the ethos of the art market.

In art circles and art historical discourse, a taxonomic approach to non-Western identities has resulted in the capitalisation of a specific conception of the ‘Arab’ self as well as its national dividends in art. This conception has been further influenced by postcolonial scholarship in conjunction with ‘war on terror’ apologetics. Here, I include a few observations regarding the interplay between art’s role in ‘cultural bridging’,^[1] the construction of Arab identity politics, and the logic of how Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips describe the ‘art fund’ industry.^[2] The observations put forward here do not seek to claim that the notion of ‘Arab’ associated with modern and contemporary art is simply a by-product of cultural bridging and the art fund industry. Rather, I argue that its currency today, as a unique and inalterable identity marker, is not reflective of the anxieties intrinsic to it, to say the least, and that have been evident in the works of Arab artists since the 1960s. I question here how this conceived Arab self as an effect forecloses the inquiry into what is excluded and the realities of power at play in this narrativised – that is, linguistically and discursively capitalised – order.

Before setting out to problematise the financialisation and professionalisation of Arab identity politics, I will first situate the ‘art fund’ industry within a related context. I am not the first to identify or refer to the connection between the galvanisation of contemporary art production and institutionalisation in the Arab world and the dynamic of foreign funding. This dynamic is concomitant with the inception of current agendas regarding cultural diplomacy, and has been generally administered under a

political edict of building ‘bridges of understanding’.^[3] I want to briefly venture into formulating a possible area of inquiry regarding the understanding of value-making of regional (Arab) art within the framework of cultural bridging. In other words, this area of inquiry seeks to position what is called cultural bridging within the stipulations of the new market economy.

Hanan Toukan has drawn a genealogy of the connection between regional contemporary art and the art fund industry from the early 1990s onwards, specifically in the years following the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, in 1993.^[4] In her article, ‘On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production’, Toukan points out:

The general consolidation of funding patterns under the umbrella of democratization, along with the increasing significance of cultural diplomacy that uses arts and culture to encourage international understanding, has meant that the cultural and artistic domain in the Arab world has recently enjoyed an unprecedented level of international financial and technical support.^[5]

The key words in this passage are ‘cultural diplomacy’, ‘democratisation’, and ‘international financial support’. The direct association between these three mandates conveyed by Toukan is evidenced not only through the proliferation of internationally-funded art institutions and proto-institutions in the Arab world, but also in the conditions of production and circulation within international exhibitions for contemporary Arab artists. In this context the notion of cultural bridging emerges as a particular brand with a specific

ethos that structures market values.

Change and/as Control

The approach devised to present art from the Arab world, which took centre stage in the 1990s, was set on dispelling the stereotypical image of the Arab. Partly shaped by what Prita Meier calls ‘the mutually constitutive relationship between North Atlantic imperial governmentality and modes of knowledge production’^[6] in academia until the mid-1980s, and partly by media-diffused clichés, this image had so far been marred in the Western grand narrative of progress by assumptions that ‘Arabness’ meant backward, derivative, undemocratic, and essentially non-modern. In response, the conceptual frameworks advanced by postcolonial criticism in the last two decades of the 20th century sanctioned a new wave/trend of regionally-focused exhibitions whose aim was to redress the hegemony of Western modernist art discourses, humanise ‘the other’ and sate the contemporary Western ‘hunger’ for cultural connections.^[7] The diplomatic, financial, and curatorial efforts that ensued, thus, were caught, on the one hand, flirting with universalist assumptions about the humanity of art and the celebration of its role in fighting prejudice towards the Arab world post-9/11. On the other hand, they displayed a genuine attempt to resist homogenising the notion of Arab and Muslim. Consequently, welcoming ‘the other’s’ art often fell under the expression of benevolent love – while circulating within an economy of hospitality and pity – where terms such as ‘philanthropy for arts and culture’, ‘fostering freedom of expression’, and ‘offering expertise’ featured amongst the rhetoric of many funding institutions.

‘Change’ was, thus, a theme that motivated the majority of art funders and exhibitions alike during this time, forming a key strategy in presenting an alternative picture of the Arab. As a theme, ‘change’ focused both on the reception

of Western audiences and on social realities within Arab polities and, as such, ‘change’ held a double agenda. On the one hand, these exhibitions targeted artists whose various projects were critical of the social and political realities of their regions/countries of origin and were open in their struggle against dictatorship, opposed to state institutions, and critical of political Islam.^[8] This agenda was particularly apparent in the sources and categories of international funding from which Arab artists benefited. For instance, grants by the Ford Foundation consistently fell under the category of ‘Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom’. Alongside funding for artists, Ford also offered grants in the areas of ‘Asset Building and Community Development’ and ‘Peace and Social Justice’.^[9] The categorisation of funding under such titles clearly suggests a policy of cultural diplomacy that is directly connected to building ‘internal’ or ‘local’ agents for Western-approved change through art and non-governmental initiatives. On the other hand, these exhibitions often genuinely aimed to ‘change’ public opinion in the West, regarding the conflation of ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ with ‘terrorist’. For example, Jessica Winegar has pointed to the way art has been perceived as way of humanising non-Western – and in this case, Arab – peoples.^[10]

The notion of change was even incorporated into the titles and catalogues of some of these exhibitions, as in the case of *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, organised in the U.S. in 1993 by the International Council for Women in the Arts. In the exhibition’s introductory pamphlet, the organisers called for ‘us’ to ‘unveil our minds to explore and appreciate the art of the “other” for what it is, not what we conceive it to be’.^[11] More importantly, one of its four principal themes, entitled ‘Present Reflection’, was aimed at ‘demonstrat[ing] how the artists in the Arab world have *integrated* the language of modern art into their own visual cultures’.^[12]

While not wishing to dwell on this particular exhibition, it is worth asking whether this notion of ‘integration’ – which has already been complicated and criticised through theorisation of the concepts of ‘multiple’, ‘alternative’, and ‘hybrid’ modernities – has in fact left the vocabulary dealing with non-Western and particularly Arab art at all. Equally, it is also worth considering whether the aforementioned concepts have succeeded, in practice, in decentring Western discourse on ‘other’ art. In light of the power imbalances evident in the structuring of Arab artists’ visibility, the answer is: not quite.

In a report published recently by the Cultural Policy in the Arab Region online platform, Fatin Farhat, a Palestinian cultural activist and policy researcher, problematised the association between the visibility of Arab artists of certain nationalities and the magnitude of political transformations taking place in their respective countries.^[13] With Syrian artists rising to international prominence after 2011, Farhat cautiously drew parallels with the discontents of Palestinian contemporary art by tracing the bearings of the Israeli occupation on cultural identification and creativity in Palestine, which, according to her, have been ‘strictly and rigidly framed to represent an image/version of what a “Palestinian” is expected to be in relation to diverse internal and external perceptions’.^[14]

She calls this *modus operandi* ‘Palestine as a profession’, where Palestinian artists – of whom it is demanded that they give voice to their people and preserve their heritage and their very existence – have often yielded to conceptual frameworks, thematics, and conditions of production, circulation, and reception. These, in turn, have reproduced generic constructs, such as the ‘transgressive’, ‘dissident’, or ‘victim’ other.^[15] Whether in the direct aftermath of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, or in the Arab uprisings of 2011, the evaluation of

Arab art is based not on what is produced but rather dwells more on readings that tend to subordinate artistic practices to immediate political and social realities. As significant and transformative as these realities are to the artists and to the contextualisation of their work, the adverse repercussions of the aestheticisation of 'war', 'conflict', and 'dictatorship' unfurl in light of what Sarah Rogers has described as 'works made to present a politics of identity rather than a politics of the visual'.^[16]

Extrapolated to the environment within which artists from war-torn areas are invited to operate, Syrian artists today are faced with a similar risk of becoming 'professional Syrians'. This not only requires subscribing to and internalising a mode of self-representation – an essentialised identity – rather, it also determines the way in which this intricately positioned identity, under the rubrics of multiculturalism, sponsorship of 'democratic change', and reversal of civilisational conflict, transforms into a currency in the contemporary art world and art market. In other words, this professionalisation indicates the devolution of regional artistic practices to direct political and humanitarian agendas, and consequently determines how the geographic specificity of art folds into a pre-set political rhetoric, which is then assigned with a market value. It involves prejudgment of what Palestinian, Syrian, Egyptian, or Lebanese is, and should be, and, in effect, how the place of origin of the artist speaks in terms of politics and how it sells.

Professionalisation, in this sense, indicates an institutionalisation and capitalisation of the personal desires, responsibilities, and responsiveness of the artist as much as it dictates the visions and directions of art spaces, collectives, and institutions. Toukan's words resonate as she asks whether universalising and totalising modernist tendencies have not been ironically employed in positioning this 'other'

art scene as a space of transgression (or 'change'), which is then commodified and naturalised.^[17] In a similar tone, Farhat's article voiced the critical concerns among Arab artists and cultural workers as to how they could enact their agency as individuals and institutional structures in view of the current modalities of contemporary art practice as imposed by institutional programming and dependency on international funding schemes. In dealing with these dilemmas, artists have been compelled to deconstruct their situation as the subject of artistic contestation while paradoxically, regional survey exhibitions – their most popular platform of exposure – have become their only site.

In recent years, curatorial propositions put forward by exhibitions such as *Here and Elsewhere* (New Museum, New York, 2014), *Tarjama/Translation* (Queens Museum, New York, 2009), and *Contemporary Arab Representations* (Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2002–3) attempted to redress the problematic conflation of 'Arabness' as an identity and place marker with a particular aesthetic quality and value. Most of these propositions seem to have fallen short of achieving their potential critical scope, precisely because they were consistently impeded by territorially-defined representational frameworks. Artists were expected to 'serve as privileged translators', as Claire Davies noted in her review of *Tarjama/Translation*.^[18]

In contrast to the general belief that increased financial support for politically and socially reflective contemporary artists offers a space of independence from commercial market demands and, thus, freedom to contribute to internal 'social change' and external change in terms of modes of reception, various determining conditions regarding presentation and context can, instead, stifle their works with marketable tropes. For Farhat and others who operate within cultural circles in the Arab

region, there are no illusions with regard to how territorially-defined representational frameworks – whether regionally-focused exhibitions, cultural programming, or collecting – enforce the standardisation of certain artistic tendencies as well as their commodification. As relative latecomers to the chain reaction of political events in the Arab region, Syrian artists are a case in point for Farhat when it comes to the deploying of particular narratives of identification. These are deemed desirable and translatable in terms of the conception of ‘transgression’ and ‘victimhood’. Given this, one could further question the exacerbation of treating this ‘otherness’ and the affinity to it as a quality (both in relation to the West and to mainstream gallery art) to be capitalised on in the global art market. With that in mind, we may note the correlation between the two seemingly different modes of financial operation that affect contemporary artists: transactional, i.e., the buying, selling, and collecting of art through commercial gallery and auction-house circuits, and the institutional.

A ‘Market of Care’

Starting in 2001, Arab art has been systematically explored as a site for potential investment, and thus has been inscribed in relation to investment portfolio diversification, risk management, and long-term financial returns. Regional financial reports with a special focus on the Middle Eastern art market have consistently cited increases in the sales potential of Arab art, predominantly modern art, with a significant, rising interest in contemporary art, since 2006.^[19] An ArtTactic report from 2008,^[20] for instance, mentions a seventeen-fold increase in value at auction of modern and contemporary Arab art between 2006 and 2008 alone. In 2014, a Deloitte report citing Hala Khayat, Christie’s Specialist in Modern & Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art, stated that the total value of sales

of Arab art had amounted to \$250 million between 2006 and 2013. The report included a graph showing that sales of contemporary art garnered 57% of total Middle Eastern art sales in 2013.

The demonstrative increase in cultural capital can be seen simultaneously as cause of the parallel increase in regional institutional funding as well as an effect thereof. For instance, the Ford Foundation’s annual budget allocation for art and culture in Arab countries has grown steadily (albeit with a slight hiccup in 2008) from just above \$1.5 million in the early 2000s to nearly \$5 million by the early 2010s. Corresponding increases can be tracked in the number of grants awarded by regional funders, such as the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC), which grew from 20 grants in 2003 to over 120 grants in 2012. The 2012 ‘Funding Guide for Culture and Arts in the Arab Region’, compiled by Al Mawred Al Thaqafy (Culture Resource),^[21] is a long list, amounting to a total of more than \$80 million in the form of art production and institutional support grants, of which the Ford Foundation’s annual \$5 million were but a fraction.^[22]

The opening of major museums across the Arab world, especially in the Gulf states, marked a new step in establishing the Arab art market as a viable choice for investment. In fact, the ArtTactic report of 2014 expected and commended a ‘shift from auction-market driven model to institution-oriented recognition as various museums open at key regional hubs’,^[23] a necessary step for validation of the rapidly growing interest in art from the Arab world. Meanwhile, expert views on investment in the emerging Middle Eastern art markets have come out with an increasingly optimistic outlook rooted in the mutually supportive structure of production and validation on the one hand and trading on the other. Under the title ‘Why the Time Is Right to Invest in Middle Eastern Art’, a recent article in *Arabian*

Business's 'Lifestyle' section cited 'increased funding', along with the relatively low prices of artwork in the region, as an indicator for a 'bright future for Middle Eastern artists'.^[24] The writer, Ashkan Baghestani, Sotheby's Deputy Director, Contemporary and Modern Arab and Iranian Art, pointed out that 'institutional support in the region has helped promote a wider understanding and appeal of [regional contemporary art] works'.^[25]

Emotional currency is what lies at the crux of this appreciation, which, I argue, stems from a desire for 'other' art, popularised by the efforts and networks of cultural diplomacy. Perhaps further affirming the centrality of this desire are the contradictory attempts by various art fund advisors to assert or downplay the 'love' for aesthetics in the area of art investment. Of the latter camp, Salma Shaheem, Head of Middle Eastern Markets at The Fine Art Group, once noted that investors should be distinguished from collectors, due to the former's advantageous 'ability to foresee financial returns'.^[26] Yet, the ability to foresee financial returns on art as an investment may not correspond with the actual drives within the art market, nor does it explain why art investments have failed to fulfil the promises made for them since the 2000s, either globally or in the region, despite the constant championing of spikes in auction sales. Moreover, as pointed out by Malik and Phillips in their article 'Tainted Love: Art's Ethos and Capitalization', the fact that art is considered a 'negative cash flow' asset means that the art economy has a 'weak pricing system': it lacks a 'single generally accepted valuation methodology', which is 'a primary and constitutive assumption for the finance sector'.^[27] It is known that art as an investment generates no earnings until its sale, and yet owning art is costly. These costs are not limited to the artwork's material conditions or the requirements of conservation. Malik and Phillips add:

[They] also arise from the specificities of its trading, which include 'high transaction costs, [...] limited arbitrage opportunities,' and highly 'opaque market information', in that actual transaction prices are not openly advertised outside of auction resales of art (the secondary market) even as the manipulation of these prices by the artists' dealers is a well-known part of such highly visible valuations. In other words, the ownership and trade of art is far from being the transparently- and openly-costed, easily-transferred, low-maintenance circulation of claims that modern global finance is built upon.^[28]

Rather than financial returns, then, Malik and Phillips turn to the 'love of art' as the central ethos pertaining to the concentration of social and capital power in art. Malik and Phillips observe that the art market's aversion to the standard pricing mechanisms at the heart of modern global finance operations means that instead, art dealers' 'antispeculative vehemence' makes for 'sound business sense'.^[29] This contravenes free market principles, investment assumptions, and patterns central to 'modern global finance', in almost every way. 'Antispeculative vehemence' along with monopolies and price-fixing in art, meanwhile, make way for a behaviour that is much more like gambling, 'in which the passion of the game is matched by other passions – the love of art and the performative instantiation of that love on and through "buying action" '.^[30] They conclude that the antispeculative vehemence of the art market is intimately allied to amorous/erotic involvement in art.^[31] What emerges, thus, within the art market is a 'market of care' along with peculiarities based on the impulsive and unpredictable gesture of love (of art) surmounting investment calculation. Not to be confused with collectors' standard duties of

care and control, the love of art in this market of care 'is not simply a fetish but a powerful agent in the redistribution of wealth, practiced in clear systemic collaboration with artists, curators, critics and other actors in contemporary art's infrastructure'.^[32]

Adopting the notion that love constitutes the primary ethos within art investment, one could look further into the particularly amorous relationship that drives investment in the Arab art market. The social, institutional, and ideological tools that this paradigm instantiates make it amenable to neoliberal multiculturalism. Emerging in the wake of the growing Arab art market, the notion of cultural bridging signifies a peculiar longing to embrace the 'other' through the humanising nature of art – to have it materialised, reproduced, and circulated throughout the 'supportive' networks of funding, institutions, and practitioners. An invitation is thereby extended to cultural actors to utilise and maintain bridges through cultural encounters across Arab polities in accordance with the gravity of humanitarian conditions and the advent of massive urban reconstruction plans. This calls for a critical evaluation of various self-identifications and representations amongst local and regional artists and cultural practitioners alike. Once such a critical inquiry is established, we could perhaps further investigate how cultural encounters and global finance are connected and mediated through 'othering' as well as Arab artists' self-reimagining as the 'other'.

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[1]

Cultural bridging is a phenomenon that has been promoted in the wake of September 11, 2001.

[2]

Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, 'Tainted Love: Art's Ethos and Capitalization' in *Art and Its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Changes and with Scenarios for the Future*, eds Maria Lind and Olav Velthuis (Berlin, Stockholm: Sternberg Press/Tensta Konsthall, 2012), 211.

[3]

Jessica Winegar, 'The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror', *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (Summer, 2008): 651-81.

[4]

Following the initiation of the peace process between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government in Oslo in 1993, several foreign funding institutions, among them USAID, began operating across different fields related to Palestinian youth. Their agendas aimed to promote 'tolerance', 'peace', and conflict resolution'. After Oslo, NGO-funded art colleges were opened, including the International Academy of Art, Palestine. Cf. Jonathan Harris, *The Global Contemporary Art World*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017).

[5]

Hanan Toukan, 'On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production', *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 142.

[6]

Prita Meier, 'Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History', *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 12.

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Kristina Nelson and Cynthia P. Schneider, 'Mightier Than the Sword: Arts and Culture in the U.S.-Muslim World Relationship', *Brookings.org*, June 30, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/mightier-than-the-sword-arts-and-culture-in-the-u-s-muslim-world-relationship/>.

[8]

Several examples of the use and appropriation of works by artists from the Arab region could be shown to demonstrate how the 'change' desired by cultural diplomatic mission and curatorial practices alike. From Lebanon, artists such as Rabih Mroué, Lina Saneh, Walid Sadek, and Ziad Abillama have voiced their concerns about such appropriation. For example, in 2004, Mroué made a video entitled *On Three Posters*, which reflected on the reception of his earlier collaborative work *Three Posters* (2000). Working with the recorded testimony of a leftist suicide bomber involved in resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon in 1985, the original work was produced with a Lebanese audience in mind. It demanded that they consider the limits of truth and its representations in the context and history of the Lebanese civil wars, according to co-creator Elias Khoury. In the final part of *On Three Posters*, titled 'Travel and

Translatability' the artist made clear that he stopped performing the work when 'it became clear that responses to the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001 foreclosed any possibility of insisting on a Lebanese specificity', according to Chad Elias. Mroué worried about how the work – which deconstructed the martyr figure in the context of the Lebanese civil wars – was appropriated and presented in relation to the much later proliferation of the image of the Islamist suicide bomber as the epitomisation of the Huntingtonian 'Clash of Civilizations'.

Cf. *Three Posters*, video-performance. Performed by Khoury, Elias, Rabih Mroué and Mona Abou Rayyan. Recorded 2000; Chad Elias, 'Artistic Responses to the Lebanese Wars', in Chad Elias (ed.), Tate Research Publications, In Focus, *On Three Posters 2004 by Rabih Mroué*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/on-three-posters-rabih-mroue/artistic-responses-to-the-lebanese-wars>; Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué, 'Three Posters: Reflections on a Video/Performance', *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (T 191) (Autumn 2006): 183.

[9]

Susan Heath (ed.), 'Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom Program: Advancing Achievement and Understanding', *FordFoundation.org*, 2, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/media/1735/2004-knowledge-creativity-and-freedom-program.pdf>.

[10]

Winegar, 'The Humanity Game', 658.

[11]

Le American University, 'Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World', *Al-Raida Journal*, (Winter 1993): 4.

[12]

Ibid., 5 (my emphasis).

[13]

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[14]

Ibid.

[15]

While not wishing to affirm these categories, it is important to acknowledge their use and circulation in the media.

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[18]

Claire Davies, 'Tarjama/Translation: ArteEast Exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, 10 May-27 September 2009', *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 342.

[19]

Report analyses are extracted from independent research conducted by Adham Selim.

[20]

ArtTactic is an art market research firm based in London and directed by the JP Morgan veteran Anders Petterson.

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Cf. 'Grants Database', *FordFoundation.org*, <http://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/grants-database/>.

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Alia Al-Senussi, et al., 'Middle Eastern Art: Market Report', (Portfolia, ArtTactic, Kingston Smith, 2014), 7. <http://www.kingstonsmith.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Middle+East+Art+Market+Report+FINAL.pdf>.

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[25]

Ibid.

[26]

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[27]

Malik and Phillips, 'Tainted Love', 215.

[28]

Ibid., 212.

[29]

Ibid., 213.

[30]

Ibid., 215.

[31]

Ibid., 214.

[32]

Ibid., 210.
