IETM REPORT

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FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Report from the IETM Beirut Satellite meeting, 6 - 9 October 2016

By India Stoughton

Flanders
State of the Art

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The opening session of IETM's Beirut Satellite Meeting addressed the subject of freedom of expression head on. As previous IETM sessions on freedom of expression have shown, when it comes to the arts certain conditions are required in order to evade censorship. Following on from a discussion on freedom of expression at IETM's Spring Plenary Meeting in Bergamo, Italy, in April 2015, this session in Beirut delved into the complexities of what total freedom of expression means, and whether it should be extended to those whose views might be characterised as racist, totalitarian or otherwise problematic and intolerant. It also looked at the necessary framework that must be established in order to protect freedom of speech, from permissive legal and state attitudes, to open-minded audiences and the absence of self-censorship. As artists and cultural professionals, how do we articulate freedom of expression without self-censoring? How do we promote the artist's liberty without manipulating the public? How do we defend without inciting hate and discrimination? What strategies do we use, and how are they defined by and adapted to the local context?

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Moderator:
Hassan Abbas - Academic and Researcher, Syria

With:
Aadel Essaadani - Racines / Arterial Network, Morocco

Basma El Husseiny - Action for Hope, Egypt

Hassan Daoud - Writer and Journalist, Lebanon

Lina Khoury - Theatre Director, Lebanon

Thomas Engle - ITI Germany, Germany

Defining freedom

The moderator began by identifying three significant and interrelated rights when it comes to personal liberty: freedom of thinking, freedom of expression and freedom of information. These issues were taken up the speakers, who were asked to first talk about freedom of expression from a theoretic viewpoint, and then share some of their personal experiences with censorship and freedom of expression.

Several themes came to the foreground over the course of the discussion. Threats to freedom of expression were identified and enumerated – several speakers from the Middle East and North Africa region cited state and religious censorship as primary problems. From a European perspective the overriding threats to freedom of expression are more insidious, including the potentially restrictive policies of donors whose objectives might conflict with those of the artists they fund, and other economic factors and art market influences. Other, less tangible, external pressures and threats include community expectations and social norms, which can cause audiences to turn against artists and their work. Finally, self-censorship was identified as a major barrier to freedom of expression among artists conditioned by the need to evade external censorship mechanisms.

A divide emerged between those who felt that freedom is absolute and must be championed in every circumstance, and those who felt that freedom is governed by social, economic and political forces that in some cases need to be respected in order to avoid violence – freedom as a space of negotiation.

Models of success

Basma El Husseiny gave the example of a series of monthly cultural gatherings in a public square in Cairo, organised by Action for Hope and beginning in April 2011. Members of the public from different backgrounds were invited to take part in a gathering with no religious or political affiliations or agendas, to spend the day playing music and organising cultural activities for children. The gatherings became a platform for social discourse and debate, where people could discuss issues such as racism and women's rights, and began to attract audiences of thousands. She cited the lack of a formal structure – no slogan, logo, office or headquarters – as an effective way to unify a diverse crowd, but added that in July 2014, after the military coup, new regulations were put in place requiring a license from the municipality. This was not granted, and so the gatherings were effectively banned. In spite of this, she emphasised that the gatherings were a successful example of creating a forum for open and free discussion in a public setting.

Fiction was lauded as a refuge from censorship in contexts where the media is heavily influenced by political parties and their opposing agendas. While journalists are often subjected to censorship from editors, or taught to self-censor in line with prevailing religious and political stances, fiction writers have the freedom to explore taboo topics independently. They also have the ability to lend voice to marginalised segments of society and deepen public understanding of complex issue and sympathy for the other.

Lina Khoury gave two examples of battling censorship with plays she directed in Beirut. The first, Haki Neswan, was censored by the Lebanese state because it tackled taboo topics including violence against women, sex before marriage and rape. After a year and a half of discussions with General Security, responsible for approving plays for performance, she decided to stage it without permission, and was able to get permission on the day of the opening thanks to the intervention of the Interior Minister. The play opened in 2006 and ran for four years and General Security staff started to regularly reserve seats to come and watch it and enter in open discussions with her about the taboo subjects that had caused them to withhold approval.

The second example was a play called Limada, which was staged last year. In this instance the play was approved by General Security but faced opposition from the general public after a journalist wrote a negative article about it based on an old protest song that accompanied the trailer on YouTube. In both instances, Khoury went ahead and staged her play, refusing to bow to pressure from those who wanted to silence her.

There was also emphasis on the need to bring together different organisations who can work together to put pressure on the political classes and combat economic censorship. Thomas Engel highlighted the power of solidarity through the example of a theatre group, stating that a single artist can be imprisoned or exiled but it is much harder to take punitive actions against a group.

Tools for overcoming censorship

Aadel Essaadani expressed frustration with the cyclical nature of discussions around freedom of expression, pointing out that in some cases censorship can act as a catalyst for creativity. "How can we transform our public spaces into a space for freedom? How can we disagree without being in conflict? This needs the emancipation of the citizen, the construction of the citizen, a certain stage at which we can agree on some fundamentals in the public space, in order to be able to interact and to talk to each other without inciting violence," he said.

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Several approaches were suggested for furthering freedom of expression and building open-minded societies with emancipated citizens.

1. It is important to take note of the creativity of children, who ask questions without self-censoring or avoiding taboo subjects. Education about freedom of expression should begin in schools, with the encouragement of children's creativity and curiosity and the establishment of the value of critical thinking.

2. The internet was identified as a valuable tool for circumventing or overcoming censorship mechanisms, as was the idea of networks or unions to offer mutual support. No individual can alter the political and social landscape, but it is the responsibility of artists and cultural actors to aid one another in this task. It is also important to establish links and connections with donors, state actors and other forces to ensure that they help to champion freedom of expression, rather than limiting it.

3. Particular emphasis was placed on the issue of social expectations and audience censorship. If private conversations are governed and limited by religious, political and social taboos, then public performances cannot safely tackle these subjects either. There is a need to encourage open-minded dialogue on a one-to-one level, so that sensitive topics can be addressed calmly and rationally without descending into violence.

4. Lina Khoury stressed the need to work on increasing tolerance and open-minded attitudes across multiple fields of artistic expression. "Freedom of expression should be taken for granted, as something really natural that we should be living, but for that to happen in our society we need to construct a new and free human being, and, of course, this starts with us as artists. We need to always support each other in all fields, because one play is not enough to change mind sets – we need a book, a lecture, a song, a play, etcetera. Solidarity with each other and continuing to speak about this idea all the time will be essential for this change."

5. Public support was identified as a very important factor, equalling state and economic support for freedom of expression. In Europe, where anti-terrorism laws and fear of radicalisation threaten to erode existing frameworks that support freedom of expression, it is important to take the arts outside theatres and private spaces and into the public sphere, to generate debate and engage a broad audience.

6. Humour and jokes are also important when it comes to freedom of expression, as are joyful expressions of freedom, such as dancing in public spaces. In order for the public to support freedom of expression they need to understand its value and recognise the factors that threaten it.

Reclaiming the public space

Summary

Historically, Arab theatre has a long tradition of performances in public spaces, using stories and plays as tools of social cohesion. As a result, public spaces have often become politicised, resulting in state policing and reduced access. In spite of their purported purpose to serve as a space accessible to everyone, so-called public spaces can also become places where certain segments of the population feel welcome but others are excluded, due to class, gender, race or religious factors that lead to exclusion and marginalisation. Recent sociopolital transformations in the South Mediterranean have shown that it is possible to reclaim these spaces, but also revealed emerging challenges that must be met.

This discussion focused on examples of projects executed in public spaces, and how they successfully overcame a wide range of obstacles to engage local communities in reclaiming these spaces, promoting social cohesion and inclusion. Each speaker was invited to present a specific example of a cultural project involving a public space before the floor was opened up to the audience.

Moderator:
Pierre Abi Saab - Al-Akhbar, Lebanon

With:
Abir Saksouk - Architect and Urbanist / Dictaphone Group, Lebanon

Maya el Helou - Feminist Researcher, Lebanon

Mona El Hallak - Architect and Activist, Lebanon

Mohab Saber - Elmadina for Performing and Digital Arts, Egypt

Rachel Feuchtwang - Feuchtwang Projects, the Netherlands

Taoufiq Izzediou - Compagnie Anania, Morocco

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Case studies

1. Mona Hallak spoke about Dalieh, a patch of open land near Pigeon Rocks. In spite of being privately owned, the land had been used as a public space by people from diverse backgrounds for 7000 years, until 2014 when it was fenced off to prepare for a commercial construction project. A campaign encouraging citizens to reclaim Dalieh used artistic interventions as a way to protest the closure of this significant seaside space. A competition was launched asking urban planners to propose alternative uses for the site that would preserve its biodiversity and allow it to remain accessible to the public. The resulting publicity drew the issue to the attention of the World Monuments Fund in New York, who joined the campaign to preserve Dalieh as a public space. It also encouraged the Ministry of Environment to propose a draft law for the protection of the space, although it has yet to be approved.

   Hallak gave a second example of how cultural intervention can help to preserve public space, that of the Barakat Building in Beirut. On the border between East and West Beirut during the 1975-1990 Civil War, the building was used as a snipers' nest and badly damaged during the conflict, but the façade remained. Hallak spent 13 years campaigning to save the building from destruction. In the end, she convinced the municipality to turn it into a museum. However, although $20 million has been spent on renovations, the municipality has not agreed to a cultural policy and has refused to pay the additional $1 million for content, meaning that the building has been preserved but is not yet open to the public.

   She ended by asking if we are doing enough to reclaim public space, so that everyone has the possibility to interact with the city and with art, especially those who cannot pay to attend performances in private theatres. She suggested that more public interventions are needed in order to ensure that citizens can still interact with public space.

2. Taoufiq Izzediou spoke about Morocco's only festival of contemporary dance, On Marche, which he founded in 2005. The festival seeks to counter a lack of public awareness about the art form by holding performances in public spaces around the city. The name of the festival was inspired by the need to move forward one step at a time – to learn to walk before you can run.

   He described how at the first edition of the festival he was able to perform at a busy roundabout, drawing public attention to Morocco's dance scene and the value of public performance. He emphasised that one of the problems with performing in public spaces remains the need to acquire official permission. He was able to get verbal permission to do his performance but was denied written confirmation, potentially leaving him vulnerable to later claims by authorities that he had done something illegal. But he also highlighted the progress that has been made over the past 12 years, explaining that initially he had to put up dozens of barriers between his dancers and the public, but now a simple rope barrier suffices. "One day we will put nothing between us and them," he concluded.

3. Maya el Helou explored the damaging impact of capitalism, not only as an economic system but as a dominant regime that colonises public spaces. She noted that mobility and the creation of public art are both highly policed, using the example of graffiti, which is illegal in Lebanon, to show how artists who wish to work in the public sphere must be highly mobile to evade penalties. She also addressed the problem of gentrification, which exacerbates class divides, and the domination of public spaces by men, leaving women unable to access or enjoy public spaces without fear of harassment.

   She noted that it's important to find solutions to these problems, but that it's no easy task, raising important questions that need to be addressed, including: How can we think of a public space that is harassment free without increasing the level of state policing in it? How do you move into details of resistance without being overwhelmed by how powerful capitalism is and how powerful those who've built their power on it are? How can we still build communities interested in political mobilisation while those communities feel constantly policed and can never trust a stranger because some of them turn out to be political informants? How can we build trust again in public space that is constantly regulating us through surveillance? How can art become inclusive and emancipatory to all marginalised communities?

   The most dangerous part of not having public space is that it prevents communities from mobilising against oppression, but, in spite of that, resistance exists, she noted. Graffiti is illegal but most of the walls are sprayed, often with strong political statements, which are important for stimulating discussion. Women are harassed but still insist on maintaining a public presence. Gentrification is destroying Beirut's historical heritage, but people are fighting it.

   "My point is to reiterate that wherever there is oppression there is resistance, and wherever there is resistance, positive change can be achieved," she finished. "The question is: how do we resist against all those urban factors, without becoming oppressors ourselves, to other genders, classes and races?"

4. Rachel Feuchtwang said that the problems faced by European artists are similar to those faced by artists in the Middle East. Ultimately, she emphasised, access to space is all about ownership, and increasingly spaces are privately owned. She noted the danger of artists romanticising a nostalgic idea of public space, but acknowledged that increasingly cities are being taken over by advertising and private capital. In the Netherlands even natural spaces have become so highly regulated that it is almost impossible to make work outside a theatre. If public spaces are inaccessible because too many permissions are needed and only large event organisers can afford the costs, where does that leave us? She warned of a regression in access to public space over the past 40 years, but suggested that if what is most important to artists is finding a way to engage in exchange and dialogue with audiences, perhaps there are other ways of doing that.

5. Mohab Saber spoke about his experience working in Egypt, here he helped to run 18 workshops held in the streets between 2011 and 2014, all based on ideas submitted by the public. The aim of the workshops was to use public performance art as a means of empowering minorities through highlighting their positive cultural attributes and encouraging the public to empathise with and defend them. They also worked to raise awareness about and counter problems such a sexual harassment.

   At the beginning of 2016, he launched a project to fund street theatre in Egypt and work on improving laws governing artistic work in public spaces. He worked with 12 different organisations holding street performances in different provinces and launched two studies, one analysing the needs and difficulties faced by these organisations, and the other studying the bylaws relating to artistic work in all 12 provinces. The study revealed that there were no laws in place to govern public art performances, and that all the artists who had been arrested had been charged under the demonstration laws. They also uncovered problems with permissions, finding that the majority of provinces would not provide written permissions for performances, instead forcing artists to rely on oral permission.

   The solution to these problems, he suggested, is to focus on securing funding and audience support, in order to convince policy makers of the importance of street theatre, as well as amending the laws. The first step is raising public awareness through holding cultural events in public spaces that benefit the district by changing perceptions of marginalised areas and communities. To further these aims, they have begun holding artistic interventions based on stories collected from among the people of the district.

6. Abir Saksouk chose to present a project carried out by Dictaphone Group in Saida, south Lebanon, Come So That I Show You. The project sought to generate discussion about reclaiming public space. The group worked with young people from Saida to explore the way the city had changed, based on old photographs that showed how people used to interact with the city. Many of the old historic places where people used to gather had disappeared. Each participant chose a location that they had a relationship with and worked on researching how people used to use the space and how they used it now.

   The project resulted in seven public performances presented on land owned by the municipality on the outskirts of the city, where they attracted the attention of a diverse and unexpected audience who had come to the space to enjoy access to the sea. The project raised many important questions about nostalgia and views of the past, prompting discussion about which aspects of the past we would like to return to and what we sacrifice in the name of progress. It also highlighted the role citizens can play in determining the future of public spaces.

Outcomes and questions

These presentations and the audience discussion that followed them raised several important questions relating to reclaiming public space and suggested several possible approaches.

One of the interesting questions raised during the public discussion was how to ensure that public spaces are enshrined in cities as they are built. Using the example of Syria, which will need to be rebuilt from the ground up once the conflict is over, one audience member asked how the post-war reconstruction effort could avoid making the mistakes that were made in Lebanon, where private capital has come to hold sway even in places considered to be public before the war. Can we do something prior to the reconstruction of cities to protect public spaces from private greed and ensure that the right to public spaces is enshrined in the public consciousness?

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It was agreed that one important step is archiving, preserving or seeking out records of the pre-war public spaces, so that they can be enshrined in plans for reconstruction before the process begins. It is also important to raise awareness among citizens of the need for public spaces and their role in furthering social cohesion, and to encourage people to lobby for their rights.

Naomi Klein's book The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism was suggested as a potentially useful read for those who wanted to explore this subject further.

There was also discussion of the dangers of the public themselves becoming agents of censorship, echoing the talk on freedom of expression earlier in the day. Radical artwork often triggers negative public responses and it is important to work with local communities to ensure that the public understands the efforts being made by artists and that they are campaigning to reclaim public space for everyone, not just the elite.

Many people also stressed the importance of focusing on the real history of cities and public spaces, rather than simply taking a nostalgic view that supposes that everything used to be idyllic. One speaker asked if Lebanon was so peaceful and progressive during the 1960s and early 1970s, would we have had the civil war? When looking at reclaiming public spaces it is important to understand their real historical role and how they can be put to positive uses.

The issue of surveillance was also a prominent theme of the discussion, and was identified as a problem occurring both in the Middle East and in Europe. No solution was proposed for how to deal with this problem, but it was identified as a deterrent to people feeling safe and comfortable using public spaces and a potential point to be followed up on in future panels.

Likewise the issue of acquiring permission to hold performances and cultural projects in public spaces was a recurring theme of the talk. In the Arab world, many artists had trouble getting written permissions and were forced to rely on oral permission that could be rescinded. In Europe, the problem was often excess bureaucracy and the need to apply for permissions to private companies whose headquarters might be on the other side of the world. There was a consensus that efforts need to be made to study existing legislation pertaining to street performances and to lobby for improved policies that would allow for greater artistic freedom.

Decolonising the arts

Summary

Colonial forces were responsible for shaping the Middle East as it exists today, imposing their cultural, as well as political, agendas through occupation. Colonial history and the neo-colonialism of today are intrinsic to discussions of art production in the Arab world, affecting the choices of artists and the attitudes of local, as well as foreign, audiences. When it comes to artistic production and dissemination, artists face questions including binaries such as: The imported or the indigenous? The foreign or the local language? The exotic or the authentic? This panel aimed to explore these questions and seek to establish whether differences can become meeting grounds, instead of barriers, and contribute to building a common discourse. It also reflected on post-colonial attitudes as a continuation of cultural and intellectual occupation, taking into account representations of Arab artists, both without and within the Arab world, and narratives surrounding modern and contemporary art – who writes this history, and who receives it? There was also reflection on the idea of occupation as not only an external force but an internal problem, in part a colonial legacy, with repressive systems in place that try to limit artists and artistic production.

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Moderator:
Jumana Al-Yasiri - Sundance Institute Theatre Program, USA/France

With:
Abdallah Alkafri - Ettijahat.Independent Culture, Syria

Laila Soliman - Theatre Director, Egypt

Maya Zbib - Zoukak Theatre Company, Lebanon

Res Bosshart - Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland

Tony Chakar - Artist, Lebanon

Colonial past versus globalised future

During the panel, a clear divide emerged between those who felt that it was important to acknowledge and address neo-colonialist attitudes in artistic productions through creating work that presents cultural identity on its own terms, without conforming to foreign expectations, and those who felt that we have reached a post-colonial age where the true threat to the arts is globalisation and intellectual hegemony.

Performing Arab identity

When performing overseas in Europe or America, there is a hunger for certain types of production dealing with certain subjects – often relating to regional politics, revolution and conflict, while other topics are seen as being outside the scope of Arab artists. The importance of presenting a balanced and realistic insight into the daily lives and concerns of ordinary Arabs that contradicts or ignores these Orientalised preconceptions and narratives was emphasises via several examples.

Maya Zbib spoke about her work with Zoukak Theatre Company and their emphasis, especially when performing overseas, on performing individual identities, not the identities that are expected of or imposed on them. At the same time, there is a need to clarify and explain the meaning of a performance that might not otherwise be accessible to foreign audiences. The way to bridge this gap is to remain authentic to the ideas and not to bow to external expectations. "If we want to have some kind of integrity, we shouldn't carry a certain narrow identity." She mentioned their decision to use Grimm's fairy tales like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty as the basis for one performance about gender, rather than traditional Arabic stories, "not because these stories have come to colonise us, but because we know these stories since our early childhood. Of course there are Arabic versions of these stories, but I know the Grimm versions. Just because Disney took it does not mean I cannot use it myself."

One means of combatting neo-colonialist expectations and attitudes is to move from the personal to the universal – to tell an authentic story that is relevant and based in personal experience, but to find a way to make it broader, to open it up to a wide audience and encourage interactivity and inclusion.

Laila Soliman spoke about working with documentary theatre and how she staged a play in Egypt, Zig Zig, based on old British documents reporting the rape and murder of farmers in Giza by British soldiers in 1919. She was unable to find Egyptian accounts of the incident, in part because access to the national archives is very difficult. She was left with several questions about how to stage the performance, among them whether to translate the British documents into Arabic or perform the play in English. In the end, she decided to perform in English to show that the investigation was carried out by the occupying forces, and translate them onscreen into literary Arabic, to emphasise the fact that no one knows how Egyptian Arabic sounded a century ago. The aim was to create a sense of Occidentalism and alienation among the audience, who wondered why a performance for an Egyptian audience was being staged in English.

The play challenged stereotypes relating both to rural and urban women in Egypt and to the evolution Egypt has undergone in the last 100 years when it comes to speaking about taboo subjects such as rape. It is not tradition that prevents women from talking about these problems, but the political apparatus. Would the women have testified if the soldiers who raped them had been Egyptian? Questions such as this cannot be answered but provide important fodder for reflection.

Addressing globalisation

A second strand of the discussion dismissed the issue of the individual and how to represent cultural identity as a thing of the past. The advent of the internet has ushered in globalisation on a previously undreamt of scale. To what extent is personal experience still relevant in an age where artists are invited to international panels and exhibitions to discuss globalised topics? If new urban developments and construction projects in Amsterdam and Beirut and London and Singapore increasingly resemble each other, creating ghost cities owned by foreign investors who don't use them, is discussion of colonialism and neo-colonial and post-colonialism obsolete? Is what is happening now more important?

Tony Chakar spoke about the difficulty of criticising a system that you cannot work outside, describing his 2012 performance Mouthless, which he did at a symposium in Berlin where he had been invited to speak about the Arab Spring. He sat in complete silence during his presentation, which was given by PowerPoint. At the end of the presentation he was given an envelope, with the salary agreed upon for his appearance. He took out the money, counted it in silence, in front of the audience, and put it in his pocket. "It was to say that we are a part of this economy. I've criticised it, okay, but at the end of the day I am a part of the economy that I am criticising. There is nothing outside it, and, at the end of the day, if we assume that there's an economy outside globalisation, or ideas outside globalisation, that will be a deadly illusion, because we will be outside history and the dilemmas that we need to face."

Looking forward to what to expect, Res Bosshart detailed what he has learned from his students. At university, young artists are working with robots and digital technology and using the internet to communicate with the public, rather than staging traditional performances for a physical audience. For the past two years, his students have been collaborating with students in Hong Kong and Beijing, working exclusively online, rather than travelling to visit each other. He suggests that the public space for performing arts is no longer a physical location but digital. If this is the case, what does it mean for the performing arts, and art more generally? What does it suggest about cultural heritage and specificity?

He went on to explain that he had refused to work with students in Singapore, fearing it was too globalised, and had instead chosen to collaborate with students in Burkina Faso and Brazil. The important thing is not to become alike, but to acknowledge differences and use them to create more interesting work. At the same time, he argued that in today's world the concept of local no longer has much meaning. In order to counter the homogenising trends of globalisation, we need to focus on the local and celebrate our differences, using them on an international level to encourage creativity and collaboration.

Defining independence

One of the key words of this panel was independence. In order to combat both neo-colonial expectations and attitudes, and globalisation, it is important to establish independent agency. But what does it really mean to be independent? How can we realise and achieve independence in an intricately connected world? Abdullah Alkafri defined independence as a state that is achieved when we are able to take independent decisions, when we have a framework that allows us to work and achieve projects without being imposed on from any outside party. There is a need to develop a framework that allows artists from different contexts and cultures to freely express their creativity, while interacting as peers with others and not being made to feel inferior. Only in these circumstances can they feel able to create independently.

When it comes to institutions, it is important to think about how they can remain independent and create frameworks that allow them to respect local specificities while also presenting work in an international framework. How can institutions protect the identity of the artist?

Talking points

1. There is a need to present work that challenges existing neo-colonialist expectations and preconceptions, remaining true to its context while still allowing audiences to identify with it. There is an expectation for work to be either exotic or familiar. To create work that falls between these two poles can be difficult, but is important to express an independent identity while still encouraging fruitful dialogue with the 'other.'

2. The dominant global economy and growing intellectual hegemony are threatening to erode the idea of the local. In the face of growing globalisation, how are the performing arts changing? Should we be focusing on establishing a sense of individuality, or is that concept redundant in the globalised age?

3. Is globalisation helping to change the flow of knowledge out of certain countries and regions and into others? When Zoukak Theatre Company took on the role of teaching American students in Houston, what does this say about power structures? How can those who have been occupied establish an equal relationship with occupying powers?

4. How do choices of language play into colonialist narratives, and how might that change as globalisation increases?

5. The focus of this panel was not to talk about funding and its links to neo-colonialism, as funding and donors were discussed in a separate panel. But how do economic factors affect artists caught up in an art market that values certain types of cultural production, and certain genres of subject matter, more than others?

6. How do we defend the idea of the local in an increasingly internationally focused world, and what does it mean to do so? How can (or do) institutions play a role in this?

7. In the digital age, are traditional conceptions of the role of artist and audience still valid? And how might those roles change as the new generation of artists reach maturity?

Conflict, ethics and aesthetics

Summary

Representing conflict through art is a complex and sensitive process, a challenge for artist and audience alike. Fraught with ethical questions, it provokes thought on a number of topics relating to the artist's role and responsibility. What sets the line between artistic representation from an aesthetic point of view and the ethical repercussions of an artwork in conflict zones? What is more important, ethics or aesthetics? Is art a critical social practice with the capacity to enact change? Or is it a self-reflective process, a form of personal expression? Can art engage in, overcome or even prevent conflicts? What pressure does this place on artists and cultural practitioners? What responsibilities do they have to document, witness and reflect? How do we ensure that artists are free to make art about conflict, but don't feel pressured to do so by a market that fetishises work about violence?

Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Egypt © Mohamed Negm

Moderator:
Daniel Gorman - Shubbak Festival, UK

With:
Alma Salem - Independent curator and cultural advisor, Syria/Canada

Judith Knight - ArtsAdmin, United Kingdom

Maan Abu Taleb - MA3AZEF, United Kingdom/Jordan

Mohamed Al-Daradji - Iraqi Independent Film Centre, Iraq

Roger Assaf - Theatre Maker and Researcher, Lebanon

Tania El Khoury - Artist, Lebanon

Freedom of expression and representing conflict

The discussion began with a focus on the issue of freedom of expression when reporting on or representing conflict, particularly with reference to the media. The partisan nature of many media outlets means that reporting on conflict is often one-sided, biased or censored. Artistic institutions too, can be governed by these sorts of partisan political ideologies, preventing artists from true freedom of expression and limiting the work that is shown. In order to achieve true freedom for artists to reflect on conflict in their work, it is necessary to acknowledge and struggle against these forces. In order to create authentic and honest work, artists need to be able to express themselves freely, without fear of censure, be it political, social or economic.

Case studies on ethics

We're at a moment of global crisis, with multiple wars being waged around the world and an unprecedented number of refugees. In this context, how can artists engage with these issues in a way that is respectful of those directly affected by them and that evokes empathy and respect in audiences? And is there a risk that those audiences consist only of people who already sympathise and empathise? How can artists break out of the bubble of like-minded people and spread their work and its message to wider audience, to those who perhaps don't agree with the work and whose minds might be changed or opinions altered by the perspective artworks can provide? How do local artists working in conflict zones get their work out to a wider audience and avoid it becoming exoticed or transformed into "war porn"? And do artists working in countries with a responsibility for overseas conflicts and displacements have a duty to make reparations where possible?

When it comes to artists working in Europe to raise awareness of conflicts and refugee populations directly or indirectly caused by Western interference, occupation or intervention, Judith Knight has years of experience. ArtsAdmin was set up in London 37 years ago to work with visual arts, theatre and a wide range of other artistic disciplines on projects that often have an element of public participation. Much of the work is topical and in the current political climate in the UK and Europe, dominated by Brexit and frightening anti-foreigner rhetoric, several artists have made work focusing on the refugee crisis, and Britain's role in the suffering of other countries than now find themselves in conflict.

"Art can put a name to victims. It can put a name to refugees. It can put a name to a life. And instead of looking at people as numbers, the arts can actually look at them as human beings, their loved ones, their families... More and more artists have been coming to us with projects about the state of the world. I don't really have a problem with artists being used as instruments, as long as they want to do it," Knight said.

It is often easier to make artwork about conflict if you are not caught up in the middle of it. But there are ethical dilemmas that come with distance. Is it more useful for a photographer to take a photograph of a dying child, or to try to save the child? What does it mean to document as an artist, without getting involved? Is artwork more authentic when it is made with people, or about people?

All these are questions with no clear answer, but Iraqi filmmaker Mohamed Al-Daradji was able to address them from a different angle. His experience allowed him to speak about the ethics of working in a conflict zone as a local artist. He reflected on issues including the necessity of hiring crew members to help shoot a film during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, some of whom were directly endangered as a result of their work on the project.

Al-Daradji was studying in the UK when the war started, but after being profoundly moved by media coverage of a young girl caught up in the conflict he decided to return to Baghdad. He tried to find the girl and discovered that she had been incarcerated in a mental institution. He began going to the hospital every day and made a film about the inmates, hoping to raise questions about what it really means to be crazy in a city at war. Who is really insane? Those who chose to make war, or those who try to avoid it?

In times of war you begin to question: What is art? What it cinema? Is it a lie? It is hard to keep believing in your project when you witness people being killed in front of you. You begin to make fun of yourself as a means of survival, because it seems too ironic to make films and sing songs when surrounded by death. But ultimately art is a way to create life amid destruction. There is a need for art and cultural projects at these times, but it's important for artists to make sure that they are really close to the public, that they are communicating with them successfully and productively. Perhaps it is a lack of culture that encourages violence to prevail? Can artists find ways to counter that and even take a measure of the responsibility?

"You ask yourself, 'What is this cinema I am trying to make?' when you witness people being killed in front of you, or a colleague is shot when working," Al-Daradji said. "This question will accompany you and you will have to ask yourself if you believe in what you do and if you are willing to sacrifice yourself and others, especially when you are responsible, because responsibility is something very critical. But the strange thing is that when you enter the moment of crisis you won't be asking these questions. You have a problem and you will try to address this problem or be a part of the solution. And after every movie I make, or every workshop I do in Iraq, I always ask myself the question: Was it worth it? ... But when you see people that are not related to art, how they react, the happiness of their faces, that will give you an extra motivation."

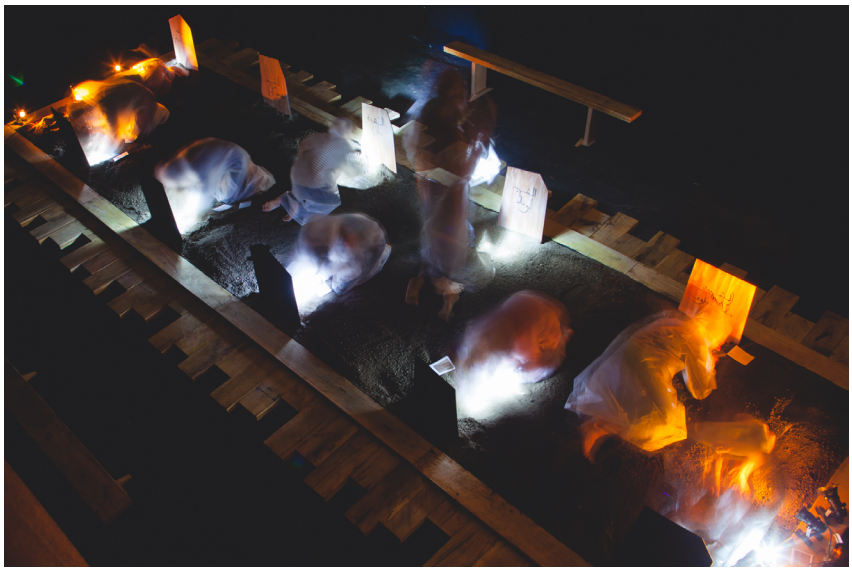
Quality and aesthetics

When it comes to creating art about conflict, the subject matter is so critical that the message can sometimes take precedence over the aesthetics. But as artists, aesthetics are crucial in creating a successful and impactful work. How can artists find ways to speak about violence in their work without sacrificing presentation? And does the work deserve to be judged by the same standards of quality?

Art can also play a propagandistic role and as such exacerbate conflict. But is one of the few safe forms of expression for those who want to express negative emotions, feelings of hate, of violence, of desperation. Is there a difference in artistic intent and value between works that express negative and harmful emotions and those that promote peace and empathy?

In the wake of the Arab Spring, artists across the Middle East have started producing new work, questioning and reflecting on the events of the revolutions and their complex and violent aftermath. Could this be the start of a new art movement, a sort of contemporary echo of the Dada movement that began a century ago in the wake of the First World War? Artists are embracing new mediums and modes of expression that may allow them to express themselves in a more sophisticated way. Perhaps these physical, political and social revolutions have served as fodder for a creative revolution, but only time will tell. Uncertainty has provided a space for questioning and art has taken on this role. Art should not be about providing answers, but about asking questions and provoking reflection in audiences.

It can also be a way to document and to pay tribute, a way to facilitate public mourning. Tania El Khoury spoke about her performance Gardens Speak and its relationship to conflict and aesthetics. The performance demanded something from its audience, asking them to participate and collaborate, rather than simply observe. The piece pays tribute to ten people, most of them civilians, killed during the early days of the war in Syria. Due to the conflict, their families were unable to bury their bodies properly, so they were all interred in gardens.



Tania El Khoury 's Gardens Speak © Jesse Hunniford

Designed to be interactive, Gardens Speak is performed for just ten people at once. Each audience member is invited to listen to the story of one of the dead, creating an intimate bond between subject and audience. When they have finished, they are asked to write a letter to the person and bury it in the soil that coats the floor of the room. The result is a highly immersive and personal production where audiences are forced to put themselves into the shoes of those killed in the conflict and to share their personal thoughts and responses.

The aesthetics of the show are intimately linked to the subject matter and El Khoury put a great deal of thought into them. She believes that political subject matter is closely linked to aesthetics because they are also political, particularly when it comes to the relationship with the audience. The content and the presentation of the artwork are not two separate things, but come together to form a whole.

Discussion points, questions and recommendations

1. The issue of how to unite the subject matter of work about conflict and the aesthetics of its presentation was key to this panel. The consensus was that art about conflict should adhere to the same high standards of quality as non-political work, and that subject matter and aesthetics are intrinsically linked, not aspects that can be separated.

2. A need for critical assessment of art about conflict was also identified. In the West, Arab artists are often seen as experts on conflict, and are held accountable for their political discourse and their opinions but not the quality of their artwork. This is a symptom of patronising and reductive attitudes and can be countered by establishing a strong critical traditional within the Arab world, initially, thereby raising standards and setting an example.

3. A big problem comes from Western expectations that Arab artists should produce only work that either portrays the artists themselves as victims or others as victims. An Arab artist is of interest when the work speaks about conflict, violence or displacement, but not if it speaks about universal human values such as love and parenthood, on which Western artists are seen as authorities. It's important to counter this expectation by producing work that speaks not only about conflict but about other subjects as well, and does so to a high standard that demands respect for the artistry, as well as the politics. The purpose and identity of Arab art should not be defined by those in Paris or London, but by Arab artists themselves.

4. The issue of audience and reaching the right people was also a prominent theme of this discussion. How can artists try to ensure that their work reaches as many people as possible, not only those who are used to valuing culture and agree with the premise of the work, but, perhaps more importantly, those who may not have a strong relationship with the arts or might not have been exposed to the perspectives the work offers?

5. There is also an issue of respect when it comes to art inspired by conflict. Artists must be careful not to take part in the process of reducing a person to a victim and glorifying this victim status. How can artists present a truthful and sensitive insight into the tragedies surrounding conflict without being reductive?

Funding: friend or foe of artistic freedom?

Summary

The development of the cultural sector depends heavily on grants from donors, whether state institutions or private benefactors. While these donors try to provide support that is helpful for artists and respond to creative demands, many artists often find themselves caught in a struggle to realise their creative visions while meeting the donors' demands or eligibility criteria. What role do donors and grant programmes play in the artistic landscape and promotion or side-lining of artists? How do donor demands or guidelines affect the work being made, and what happens when an artist chooses not to abide by those guidelines?

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Moderator:
Mary Ann De Vlieg - Independent strategist, facilitator and trainer, Italy

With:
Ammar Kessab - African Development Bank, Algeria

Jasper Walgrave - Pro Helvetia, Switzerland

Pascal Brunet - Relais Culture Europe, France

Rana Yazaji - Al Mawred Culture Resource, Lebanon

Stephen Stenning - British Council, United Kingdom

Acknowledging the power dynamic

Of course, there is no single answer when it comes to the question of whether funding aids or hinders artistic freedom. It can do either, depending on context. What is always true is that there is a power dynamic between donor and artist, and this dynamic needs to be acknowledged and negotiated to create as equal a partnership as possible.

Six different types of donor-artist relationship were identified, each with own power dynamic, some harmful and others beneficial.

1. When an artist asks for a donation or a grant from a state, whether public or private sector, if it's an authoritarian state, then the art will be constrained, and the artist will be expected to produce work glorifying the state.

2. At the same time, an artist living under an authoritarian regime may not be allowed to accept funding from an international donor, resulting in isolation and marginalisation.

3. An artist living in a democratic country where freedom of speech is more protected who applies for public funding may find they have more artistic freedom. Their work is less likely to be subjected to state interference or censorship and the relationship may result in artistic freedom

4. If an artist in a democratic country applies for private funding, then they become part of the art market, which has its own drawbacks.

5. If the country has a strong economy, the artist may be unable to apply for international funding, leaving them with fewer options to sustain mutually beneficial funding opportunities.

6. If the country has a weak economy, the artist may be able to apply for international funding, but the donor is likely to have specific guidelines and agendas, which result in the work the artist produces conforming to certain ideologies based on the strategies of the funding body and restricting artistic freedom.

Negotiating the power dynamic

Addressing the power dynamic is important in ensuring that international funding reaches artists working in weaker economies – often with limited access to local funds either from state or private donors – without limiting artistic freedom. There are a number of things that can be done in order to promote positive donor-artist relationships when dealing with overseas funding.

1. The donor should have transparent criteria based on competition, opening the playing field to a large number of artists and ensuring that the agendas of the donor match those of the artists.

2. Once the funding body grants money to an artist they should not interfere in the artistic process, otherwise the relationship comes to resemble that of an authoritarian state imposing its will on a citizen.

3. The artist's right to refuse funding that comes with conditions attached that go against his or her principles should be respected and seen as a sign of dignity and resistance.

4. If funding is being distributed overseas and the donors are not familiar with the context of the country they are funding, it is important to ensure that knowledgeable staff, preferably locals, are working on the ground to oversee the process and ensure transparency and good practices.

5. The colonialist overtones of international funding from a rich country to a poor one should be acknowledged and addressed. A good tool to ensure that the donor does not abuse the power dynamic is to check that whatever is being required of artists is something that would be fair and respectful to demand in the donor's home country. If the artist is being held to different criteria then the relationship becomes problematic.

6. Donor and artist should acknowledge that they both have agendas and try to ensure that these agendas match as closely as possible, in order to create a mutually beneficial relationship. The artist's agenda should not be treated as secondary to the agenda of the donor, as this creates a harmful power dynamic.

7. Finally, it is important to acknowledge the crucial importance of overseas funding for artists who struggle to find local support. It is important to encourage and promote beneficial donor-artist models to promote good practices and attitudes, and to emphasise the importance of clarifying intentions.

The role of institutions

One of the problems facing artists is that sources of funding have changed in the past few years. Cultural institutes used to serve as sources of funding for individual artists, but increasingly institutions have begun to seek funding from the same sources that individuals go to, making it much harder for independent projects to find financial backing. Smaller foundations now go to larger ones to seek funds, and have also become cultural initiators, throwing their own festivals and organising events in competition with independent artists.

Several speakers floated the idea of Arab institutions acting as mediators between international donors and local artists. This idea has several advantages but clear also disadvantages.

On the positive side, local institutions know the local context far better than international donors who may not have wide networks in the country where they are disbursing funding. They would be in a better position to assess independent projects and make decisions regarding their merit in the context of the local community and wider society.

On the other hand, placing the decision making power in the hands of local institutions could lead to forms of partisan distribution and corruption, allowing institutions to wield power over local artists. It would create a monopoly that gives institutions the power to choose which artists get funding and which don't, based on their own ideas of what constitutes a worthy project, adding a second layer of agendas and power dynamics into the relationship. Institutions might end up directing cultural trends, rather than allowing space for artists to experiment.

In addition, over time this mediation role could become burdensome to institutions and end up sapping the funds intended for artists.

A solution to these problems might be to organise regular meetings of donors and institutions and annual reports to ensure transparency and answer any questions about corruption. It is important to ensure the process is democratic and fair across a wide range of institutions with varying mandates.

An additional problem that needs to be addressed is the scarcity of donors and the need for more diversity. In the Arab world, the majority of cultural funding comes from international donors. There is a need to increase and diversify local sources of funding and look into alternative models.

Finally, a problem was identified with cultural funding from international donors with national agendas. For example, British Council funding is contingent on the work having some links to the UK, while the French Institute funds projects connected with France. In the absence of other options, artists end up adapting their work unnecessarily to include collaborations with British artists or links to France in order to qualify for funding. Ways to deal with this particular problem might make a good topic for a future panel on funding, neo-colonialism or freedom of expression.

Let's talk about networks

Summary

Networking is about building, establishing and maintaining relationships with people. But how do cultural networks enable professional exchange? What are the differences in structure between formal and informal networks, and which works better? How can artists make the best out of networking opportunities? This panel aimed to shed light on existing formal and informal networks and reflect on the role they play in the development of artistic practices at home and overseas. In the Middle East and North Africa, artistic networks are often highlighted as necessary points of strength, but in reality regional networks are weak as a result of limited resources and increasingly restricted mobility. Artists and cultural professional all agree that it's important to work together, but using what framework? How can we start to build trust? How does networking help to protect and sustain organisations, artists and institutions?

Many of the existing formal networking frameworks that have proved successful were coordinated by foreign funders. This means that they were imposed from outside, rather than conceived organically between local organisations. It's important to question the advantages and disadvantages of this mode. Does it work? Is there a sense of ownership or alienation? In addition, with a vast network of people who have been displaced and are living in exile or as refugees, how can networks help to establish links between artists from the same nationality scattered around the region and the world?

Moderator:
Fatin Farhat - Palestine Observatory of Culture, Palestine

With:
Hassan El Geretly - Al Warsha Troupe, Egypt

Joris Janssens - Flanders Arts Institute, Belgium

Sahar Assaf - American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Sofiane Ouissi - L'Art Rue, Tunisia

Stéphane Segreto Aguilar - Hors les murs/Circostrada, France

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Case studies for network models

1. Hassan El Geretly from Al Warsha Troupe spoke about how he has always tried to be involved in regional networks, even back before any recognised networks existed. One of the aims of these endeavours was to try to strengthen the independent sector. His most recent of several networking venues is the Tamasi Collective, which was established in 2008 to support the arts. The collective is made up of 11 performing arts organisations from Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan and aims to enhance their capacity as individual organisations to resist those who want to marginalise the arts and to counter isolation of artists in the region. "We're trying to be what you might call work nets, rather than networks. We're always stuck on the idea of working together and doing things and the net growing organically from our collaborations, with all the difficulties we know that are inherent to human nature. But it's always been part of our idea that like in love or food, being virtual is not enough. We really have to engage", he says.

   One of the problems they face is accepting foreign funding, which always creates suspicion from the state. Negotiating in this climate can be difficult, but it is easier and cheaper administratively for 12 organisations to work together on this than it is for them to negotiate individually. The challenge now is to ensure the longevity not only of the organisation itself, but of its vision and drive.

2. Iman Hammoudi is the head of a popular cultural centre and network for arts in Palestine. After the Palestinian Authority demanded that owners donate through them, in an attempt to weaken the organisation, they realised they needed more specialised networks. In 2000 they created a Palestinian cultural network but without much premeditation or long-term planning, and after two years it fell apart. In 2010 and 2011, donors threatened to stop funding for the cultural sector in Palestine so they realised they needed to organise a gathering of like-minded cultural organisations to lobby and work together for survival. A formal network of 12 members was registered in 2015 and the participating organisations felt a real sense of ownership and empowerment. Initially problems arose because of different visions and ways of thinking and working. Heated debates illustrated a lack of trust, but today trust is growing and out of the 12 members three quarters work in harmony.

   The purpose of the network has evolved over time. In the beginning, it was intended to serve its members, but now they are working on a five year place to see how the network could serve the cultural sector more widely, working with Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza, as well as 1948 Palestinians and those living in exile. As a united network, the organisations have increased power to lobby inside the country and to exert pressure on donors to improve the way they support the cultural sector. Now they are interested in meeting with other regional networks to see if there is a way that a broader collaboration could help them to have increased impact on funding policies from European and Arab donors.

3. Sofiane Ouissi spoke about his work with L'Art Rue. The organisation has spent years working to build connections with schools and the Ministry of Education to implement a cultural programme in schools all across Tunisia. Now they have a four-year contract with the ministry to carry out this plan. The aim is ensure that by the end of 2018, all primary schools for children aged between five and 12 will have a curriculum that includes lessons on the arts. In order to make the programme as effective as possible, rather than implementing a blanket national arts curriculum, they are tailoring programmes to each territory and community across the country.

   Ouissi emphasised the importance of establishing strong connections in the chaotic period following the popular uprising at the end of 2010. It is also essential to work closely with people, to establish trust and get to know the desires and dreams of the population so that they can propose beneficial, high-quality cultural projects.

4. Joris Janssens spoke about his work with the Flanders Arts Institute, which works to support art organisations in Belgium. He cites what happened in Flanders as a positive example of the power of networking, explaining that in the 1980s, when there was no international networking across Europe, there was no local policy for contemporary arts in Flanders and 98 percent of arts funding went to classical ballet companies. Artists working in other disciplines managed to develop their work thanks to local support networks and created their own organic networks for advocacy, support and funding. IETM also helped a lot in this regard. Since then the sector has grown a lot and today it's booming.

5. Stéphane Segreto-Aguilar works for the National Association for Circus Arts, Street Arts and Theatre in Paris. It was originally two organisations, street arts organisation Hors les Murs and circus arts organisation Circostrada, which joined together in June 2016. In 2003, Hors les Murs created a network of street artists who used to meet to discuss shared problems and how to solve them. The network began with 20 people from 10 countries, and has now expanded to 90 people from 27 countries. They produce work together, share information, enhance capacity building and use their combined power to develop the sector of circus and street arts. Forty percent of their funding comes from the French Ministry of Culture and 60 percent from the European Commission.

   Over the years, they have succeeded in having circus and street arts recognised as a serious artistic practice in several countries that used to have a very small scene. Their combined influence is exemplified in the fact that their planned three-day seminar in Portugal next May led to the Portuguese state adding a new category to their public funding, specifically supporting street arts. The next step is to organise conferences and get policy makers to attend so they can see what is happening and why it is important.

   The networking model has proved largely successful but it is still difficult. With a large network a democratic approach becomes very complicated, but decisions still have to be made. Everything has to be decided in partnership, not from the top down.

6. Sahar Assaf spoke about her work at the American University of Beirut, where she established the Theatre Initiative to make up for the fact that the university does not offer a theatre major. She also works with Tahweel, a Beirut-based theatre initiative who creates work on and off campus and shows it internationally. They work on three distinct areas – translating scripts from Arabic to English and English to Arabic, devising original work and staging historical re-enactments. She echoed Hassan El Geretly's words about work nets, explaining that her networks have all grown up organically around her work.

Discussion points and questions

There were several questions and ideas that deserve to be followed up.

1. How do we maintain our integrity and sincerity while networking?

2. We need to network to advance our careers and popularity, but do we need networks to advance our art?

3. Have we come to network saturation point? Or are they crucial to maintain openness and allow us to exchange ideas?

4. How do we prevent networks from eventually transforming into institutions? Is there a practical difference between institutions that create networks and organic networks?

5. More research is needed into networks and how they function. It would be useful to produce a book detailing success stories and effective structures and approaches, although they do tend to change and adapt quickly. Networks are fluid but there are certain models that have proved useful.

6. Is there a difference between networks born through governmental decisions, and those that are born because artists working in a similar domain decided that they needed to work together? Do top-down and bottom-up systems affect the way the network functions?

7. IETM was raised as an example of a place for networking, rather than a network as an institution. It was born in the field and consists of practitioners who want to serve the sector and help one another. How can other large networks maintain values of sharing and connections, without becoming organisations that want to promote their own work? IETM's model could prove a useful model, as it is the members who decide what is useful and maintain the informal approach that prevents it becoming an institution.

8. Why do we network? It's important to remember that a network is a tool to help us achieve our objectives, not an objective in its own right.

9. It's also necessary to emphasise the difference between networking and networks. In Europe, networks tend to be more formal and have state support. In the Middle East and North Africa people don't have the same ability to create formal networks, but are very good at informal networking. If we are not careful, formal networks can become too bureaucratic, with too many guidelines, rather than people coming together to exchange ideas and share their experiences.

10. It was suggested that a future meeting could look more closely at existing networks in Europe and the MENA region and how young people are weaving their nets. A pattern seems to be emerging where organic networks that build from the bottom up create their own internal rules, while those created from the top down have found it useful to become more institutionalised.

11. From the European perspective, transnational co-production systems have become commonplace, but at the same time they are reaching their limits. Lots of artists feel they need to search for international co-producers for every project because of the fight for funding. Governments are reducing funds for the arts, increasing competition for funding and placing lots of pressure on networking systems. How can networks really be drivers of change?

Artistic mobility in the Arab region: can networks break the deadlock?

Summary

The focus of today's political rhetoric and debate is Fortress Europe and its increasingly xenophobic attitudes. But in the Arab world, mobility for artists is becoming increasingly difficult. In many cases, in fact, it is easier for an artist from the Middle East or North Africa to obtain permission to travel outside the region than within. Mobility is increasingly limited, especially for artists coming from conflict zones. This panel chose to focus not on details of state bureaucracy and visa requirements, but movement as an abstract idea. What does the freedom to move signify for artists? And how does mobility or lack of it impact their work and their relationships with communities, audiences and other artists?

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Moderator:

Alma Salem - Independent curator and cultural advisor, Syria/Canada

With:

Eyad Houssami - Theatre maker / Masrah Ensemble, Syria/Lebanon/France/USA

Jumana Al-Yasiri - Sundance Institute, USA/France

Mary Ann De Vlieg - Independent strategist, facilitator and trainer, Italy

Mustafa Said - AMAR (Arab Music Archiving and Research Foundation), Egypt

Nedjma Hadj Banchelabi - Performing Arts Curator and Cultural Operator, Belgium/Algeria

Modes of mobility

At a time where national states are increasingly walling themselves off from one another, metaphorically and even literally, what does it mean to attempt to topple these walls? How can artists play a role in championing freedom of movement where needed? Is a lack of mobility preventing the development of regional networks ? What types of alliances are needed to cross these borders? How do travel restrictions influence cultural production in the Arab world?

Mobility is crucial to artists working in the 21st century, yet it remains a privilege enjoyed by some and not others. Mobility is much easier in the north Mediterranean than the south. Given these realities, maybe it is helpful to think about mobility differently, in terms of communities and isolation. It is up to those artists who can travel easily to make an effort to forge links with those who can't, to build support networks and communication channels that help to prevent the marginalisation of artists whose mobility is restricted.

Ninety years ago, an artist in Gaza could take a train to Aleppo and from there all the way to Istanbul or Baghdad. In the subsequent decades, we've witnessed the decimation of infrastructure in the region and the parcelling up of land, first with the occupation of Palestine, then Iraq, and soon potentially Syria. When discussing mobility, it's important to maintain a sense of history and geographic scale. Why do we prioritise presenting work in France or Asia over presenting it regionally? Perhaps it would be productive to consider mobilisation on a city level, and then on a national scale, before taking work overseas.

From a European perspective, a regression has also occurred when it comes to mobility. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was a sense of euphoria among artists. The independent sector was gaining strength, artists no longer needed the support of ministries, and they could meet as equals in lots of different countries for the first time, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Artists were discovering common ground and making use of unprecedented mobility, coming together to lobby for still greater freedom of movement. One of IETM's founders, Roberto Cimetta, died in 1989, and a fund was set up in his name to enable greater mobility for artists from Eastern Europe, and later the whole Mediterranean region. Today, Europe is increasingly fractured internally and plagued by rising xenophobia. The Fortress Europe mentality has made it harder for those coming from outside to find audiences and to feel welcome in a tense political climate.

When taking into account these problems with the mobility of artists, it's important to look at the mobility of audiences. What responsibility do we have to facilitate not only the movement of artists, but of viewers? One artist asked if they could use the Roberto Cimetta Fund to get people from the northern Mediterranean to come south to see a production, rather than the artist travelling to the audience. Why should this be such a surprising and unusual approach? Another artist asked if the fund could be used to go from Egypt to Morocco, or if it had to be used to go to northern Europe. Again, it seemed surprising for an artist to prioritise regional mobility over access to Europe, where it was assumed there would be greater access to equipment and experience. Why do these preconceptions exist and what do they say about mobility of artists and neo-colonialism?

In order to work towards overcoming mobility barriers long-term, it is not enough to focus on getting money, tickets and visas for individual artists, as many organisations do. What is needed is increased networking in order to create strong, unified bodies of artists, institutions and funders who can work on lobbying to make the acquisition of visas easier for all artists. If local institutions who have links to the Ministries of Culture across the region could work together to campaign for change, it would have a larger and more lasting impact than individual efforts.

The imperative to move

Although the overall consensus was that mobility is a human right worth fighting for, the panellists also acknowledged that mobility should not necessarily be the ultimate goal of artists and that too much emphasis on touring has its own drawbacks. When does mobility become a problem? If artists are increasingly expected to demonstrate that they have performed in multiple countries in order to be taken seriously, where does that leave local audiences? How can artists build connections with their communities while still being free to travel at will?

Mustafa Said recalled how when he was teenager studying music in Egypt, the prevailing attitude in cultural institutions was that no matter how talented the musician, he would only be acknowledged as a success if he had performed in Europe. Many local artists were left with a sense of inferiority. This compulsion to travel isn't necessarily conductive to creativity and artistic production.

A lot of artists today say that they feel mobility is no longer a choice but an imperative. If they want to get the interest of programmers and be taken seriously they are expected to have CVs filled with international performances. If artists are constantly travelling and performing overseas, how do they build strong ties with their local communities?

At the same time, this emphasis on mobility, and the festivals and funds that facilitate it, have become important forces in allowing artists to produce new work. Sometimes a grant to do a project internationally is the only thing that allows artists to produce a piece of work that they can later perform for free to local audiences at home.

One way to make the most of this system while trying to make up for its deficiencies is to make sure that the focus of artists remains on the quality and message of the work being produced, to take time to allow for a sophisticated creative process and not produce work quickly in the hope of having an end product that might facilitate grants and travel.

Ultimately, art allows us to share experiences, confront each other with new ideas and question the world around us. Mobility is a crucial factor in enabling cross-cultural exchange, but it does not always have to be physical. The internet has changed the way the relationship between artist and audience works, allowing for unprecedented digital dissemination of artwork and ideas.

Questions and conclusions

Eyad Houssami said that to promote mobility on both a local and international level, the first step is to create alliances between mobile citizens, such as Europeans and Americans, with non-mobile citizens, like migrant workers and refugees or artists living in exile. This can be done through forming long-term collaborations and working in translation. A second tactic is to integrate mobility into the creative development process, through residencies and long-term projects that help artists to create international links.

He added that in the past few years several Lebanese villages have placed curfews on Syrians, forbidding them from moving around after a certain time in the evening. Artists have a responsibility to put themselves in confrontation with these sorts of obstacles and insist that making their work requires moving those who cannot otherwise move.

Mary Ann De Vlieg spoke about her work with an organisation that helps artists who find themselves in exile or needing to flee their homeland as a result of their work. They have found it helpful to adopt the model of human rights defenders, moving artists into safe houses, often with other artists, where they can live without fear and force connections with their new communities. The most effective way to do this is to get them a place on an artist's residency or a scholarship to an educational institution, because that way they don't have to apply for asylum and find themselves unable to return home should the danger pass.

In the context of this programme, she mentioned the problematic focus on sending artists to Europe and America to seek safety, when it should be possible for them to remain in the MENA region. More work is needed to set up regional safety networks so that artists can remain closer to their own homes and communities.

Another topic worthy of follow-up was the issue of refugee artists who make a long-term home in a foreign country where they are unable to work in their native language. Programmes that enable refugees to be united with other artists from their community who might want to collaborate could be a welcome addition to existing support. It's also important to think about projects that might allow them to show work in their homelands, even if that is no longer their primary residence. There is an assumption that artists want to leave the MENA region and go to Europe, but no one thinks about trying to facilitate their return. How can we take a displaced artist and get them an audience and retain links with home?

Building alliances through the arts

Summary

A hostile political and socioeconomic environment used to cause some Arab artists to feel unrecognised, even isolated, in their own societies. In recent years, that has started to change. Interest in art from the region has increased globally and Arab artists have become at adept at creating discourses to empower their communities. In some cases, this has raised awareness at home, helping them to establish a productive dialogue with the societies they work in. What tools can serve artists to sustain this type of civic dialogue? How can we strengthen links with other sectors, while maintaining artistic independence and creative freedom?

The focus of this panel was the power artists and administrators have to effect change and chart their own futures. An imaginative approach to creating new working models will often pay off, but it may take a while for the established system to accept it. The system always rejects departures from the status quo, but successful alliances depend on finding different ways to work with different partners.

Each speaker gave an overview of the models they have used to build alliances through the arts, before opening up the floor for general discussion.

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Moderator:

Todd Lanier Lester - ArtistSafety.net / ArtsEverywhere, USA/Brazil

With:

Ahmed Hermassi - Prod'IT, Tunisia

Aurelien Zouki - Collectif Kahraba, Lebanon

Burcu Yilmaz - A Corner in the World Festival, Turkey

Mahmoud Othman - Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, Egypt

Nayla Geagea - Lawyer and activist, Lebanon

Zeina Deccache - Catharsis Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy, Lebanon

Case studies: building alliances

1. Ahmed Hermassi explained how he began working as a freelance audio-visual artist, but soon found that it was a job that required group work. He stumbled across a lot of talented artists working in the informal sector, but they were not recognised by the state and had no job security. Lots of them ended up giving up their work as artists and finding jobs with stable salaries.

   In the hope of combatting this problem, he stopped his own work as an artist and moved into management. Today, Prod'IT manages more than 1300 freelance artists in Tunisia, and has links to universities that produce more than 2000 art graduates a year, most of them hoping to work in the informal sector.

   Management is important because artists trying to work independently often lack an objective methodology. Artists who weren't paying taxes ran into problems with the state and social security, so Prod'IT began working with ministries and state officials to make things run smoothly. In the wake of the uprising, they found that ministers were open to new ideas, but it has been difficult to build relationships because government officials change roles so frequently. The process has been exhausting but worthwhile, helping to establish better conditions for freelance artists in Tunisia and enable them to make a stable living.

2. Aurelien Zouki co-founded Collectif Kahraba ten years ago with likeminded artists and performers. The aim of the collective was to take their work outside the existing cultural venues in Beirut and introduce it to new and varied audiences across Lebanon. He explained that the first and most important alliance for the collective is their alliance with the audience, from which all their projects grow. They have spent time touring the country and speaking to people from communities with vastly different social and economic realities. They develop their artistic productions based on dialogue with these communities.

   Zouki says that the key to their alliances is trust and that it has to be earned. To build trust, he suggests that artists need be open to being changed, as well as changing people. By gaining the support of their neighbours in Beirut, Collectif Kahraba were able to create a free arts festival that is open to everyone and encourages people to take part and express their own creativity and ideas.

3. Burcu Yilmaz spoke about A Corner in the World Festival, which was holding its second edition even as she chose to travel to Lebanon for the IETM panel. She situated the aims of the festival within the context of contemporary Turkey, where an increasingly oppressive state has shut down media outlets and arrested several artists in recent months. A Corner in the World Festival aims at building relationships between Turkey, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa and the Balkans, celebrating Turkey's position at the crossroads of these diverse regions. Yilmaz describes the festival as a platform for research, open to academics, artists and anyone interested in these regions.

4. Mahmoud Othman co-founded the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression two years ago to combat the state's exclusion of artists and cultural practitioners. The first step was to build alliances with cultural centres, which are often first in the line of attack and are unable to establish a legal status. They were able to gather them together and form a coalition to strengthen their positions and provide legal support. This is very important because it can help them to solve lots of problems, including

getting licences. But it's not always enough. Communication between associations and the state remains very important, as does keeping pace with new laws in order to anticipate and prevent any problems. They are currently trying to establish an alliance with trade unions to further define a vision and clarify the direction of their work.

5. Nayla Geagea works as an independent lawyer and activist to improve cultural policies. She has partnered with a number of Lebanese cultural associations to fight censorship, working on different law projects to help counter censorship in cinema, theatre, press and media. The day before speaking at the panel she had just completed the draft of a new censorship law with the Minister of Culture and hopes it will be activated when Lebanon's parliament resumes functioning.

   She noted that Lebanon has much better legal support and protection for artists than many countries in the MENA region, meaning that there is not much need to lobby for legislative changes, but added that artists need to fight for their implementation. Her suggestions for improving conditions for artists in Lebanon were twofold – first to try to build a positive relationship with the state and the Ministry of Culture, based on mutual interests and cooperation. If you want to talk about cultural policies, you have to build a dialogue with the public sector and push for the ministry to back implementation of the laws. At the same time, she advises artists to try to establish alliances outside the cultural sector with NGOs and trade unions, who might be able to help draft new cultural policies, protect their mutual interests and ensure sustainability that is not dependant on outside funding.

6. Prior to this panel discussion Zeina Deccache had just finished a screening of the play Johar… up in the air, a documentary about the making of a play performed by patients suffering from mental illnesses and inmates sentenced to life in prison. The play is part of a four-part, EU-funded project that aims to tell the stories of those forgotten behind bars. She has worked with lots of different Lebanese ministers in order to realise the project. When she initially proposed the project in 2008, the government repeatedly refused to allow her access to prisons and mental health facilities. She explained that having EU support helped a little bit, but that in the end she built up alliances with politician simply by knocking on doors and drinking coffee and talking about the project until they realised that it was not a political statement. Her advice to artists was to always try to emphasise what is in it for the other person and to show them what they will gain from the alliance. They don't care about the project, she said. You need to know how to play to game to give them what they want, while getting what you want and what your society needs.

Zeina Daccache's Johar… up in the air © Patrick Baz/ Catharsis-LCDT

Discussion points and questions

"Are alliances necessarily the things that happen when money isn't available? Are they things that happen for solidarity's sake? Are they things that happen without hierarchies?" Moderator Todd Lanier Lester opened up the general discussion with these questions, as well a final one. "Is a platform political?" He added that he uses the work platform to describe his work in Sao Paulo, and interprets an alliance as a political thing, something you do with or without funding.

Burcu Yilmaz responded by explaining that her work with the platform in Turkey is very political, because the world is labelling people and this festival is an attempt to break those labels. "What we do is already revolutionary, because in the current state of life in Turkey we are bringing all these people from different parts of the region and creating all these networks and alliances," she said. "For me an alliance is sustainable long-term collaboration." She added that breaking the current system of funding relationships is also very political (link to Report 5), as is challenging inequalities in mobility.

There was a lot of emphasis in this panel on the importance of trying to form alliances with ministries and state actors. Several speakers felt that artists can remain critical of the state and its policies while still attempting to forge mutually beneficially collaborations when possible. If artists want to demand that laws are implemented they need to work with policy makers and the politicians who can effect change to convince them to help.

An opposing viewpoint suggested that alliances should be formed only with people who share a similar vision and can provide long-term protection and support. An alliance with a ministry could potentially be helpful or harmful, whereas alliances with other artists are more likely to lead to long-term collaboration and solidarity. But this attitude doesn't take into account the subversive power that can be gained by working with governments. It's also worth noting that an alliance doesn't have to last forever. It can be maintained as long as it benefits both parties, and dissolved if it ceases to be beneficial.

Alliance are a way to create unity in an increasingly fragmented world. If cultural operators don't promote dialogue and collaboration, then who will? There is a need for people with long-term visions, who are able to plan ahead and think about the legacy they will leave for the next generation and how it will change society for the better.

Associations were also cited as useful when it comes to protecting artists who face arrest or harassment from the state. If a network of artists all protest and draw attention to the problem as soon as artist is arrested or mistreated, using traditional or social media to spread the word, they can place huge pressure on the government to release the artist quickly and without charge.

An alliance whose watchword is safety

This final panel session ended with a timely announcement from Todd Lanier Lester, who shared details of a new initiative that aims to provide protection for artists working in the Middle East and North Africa. Artists Safety Net is an alliance between several associations that provides safe spaces around the world for artists, as well as six-month online training courses. It provides different types of help for artists at risk – pre-emptive, immediate assistant in cases of acute danger and post-danger assistance. A worldwide network allows them to link artists with local art scenes and facilitate the continuation of their work as independent artists.

He stressed that alliance equals solidarity. We as individuals are under threat – maybe not now, but in the future. How can we protect others when we are at risk? The only solution is to establish alliances with stakeholders keen to support us. Artists Safety Net has for the first time established a fund specifically to help artists at risk and find them a safe haven. They cannot grant artists refugee status, but they can use their extensive network to find them safe spaces to live and work in peace.

They are also working to establish a programme to raise awareness of artists' legal rights, so that when they come under attack from the state they can defend themselves.

The announcement was a very positive conclusion to a series of talks that brought together over 150 cultural practitioners from all over the world to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing artists today. The conference left us with dozens of ideas, suggestions, solutions and questions that serve as useful reference points and fodder for talks to come.