

## On quiet afternoons and busy times: Darb 1718. A portrait of a cultural center

*By Sara-Duana Meyer*



We sit outside the office on the porch. It is quiet, the low buildings surrounding the spacious courtyard glow yellow in the light of a late afternoon. A soft clanging can be heard from one of the pottery workshops, next to us a cat stretches lazily for a zigzagging fly and Mohammed brings tea, smiling his sweet friendly smile. It is unusual to find the team at Darb 1718 with so much time on their hands, there is always something to do these days. But the power is down, it has been down for a few hours, and the team is waiting to get back to work. “This has happened a lot over the past few days,” says Moataz Nasr, founder, visual artist, and, most of all, cultural activist, as he prefers to be called. But then he waves the thought away like a fly and looks at the team. “In 2012 I started to really have a team,” he says proudly, and underlines this by pointing at Reem Hatem, his public relation manager, who joined only three months earlier, filled with ideas and energy. “They are a gift for Darb 1718. I’m happy that Darb attracts this kind of people, this quality.”

“So many things are coming up,” May Shehab added later. May is another fairly new member of the team, a project manager, and has the same commitment each member seems to be radiating. “Let me see, well, there is ART BEAT, a music and arts festival, then numerous exhibitions we are really looking forward to, a recycling fashion show with a designer from Sweden, a whole lot of workshops, performances, all of this in cooperation with different local and international partner institutions... actually we are running out of space!” And then she muses a little about expanding possibilities. The art and culture center has been growing over the years, bit by bit, according to means and circumstances: the exhibition space, that has so far hosted about 40 exhibitions, has been extended into other buildings and the office has moved to make space for workshops and artist talks. These movements and transformations somehow act as a metaphor for the avidness of the team to keep growing in every sense and to be open for change, which reflects part of Darb 1718’s philosophy.



The story of the beginnings of the cultural center and NGO is quickly told since, as Moataz likes to put it, the location actually chose him rather than the other way round. The long story, though, is a little more mired. Having had his studio since the early 90s in an undisciplined area mostly known for a specific and unique kind of pottery, Moataz and a handful of other artists were drawn into a small rebellion when the government tried to throw them out of their neighborhood. Together with an architect and friend, and literally overnight, they crafted a plan for a compound consisting of workshops, studios and communal spaces. The government, like the bad fairy in the tales, concurred – but granted only a few weeks to start building. Quickly, every friend in town was mobilized and the center with the atmosphere of a small village was constructed. A few years later, in 2008, Darb 1718 was founded. “Things developed,” says Moataz in a way that does not make it clear whether he means before or after the founding, but of course it

is both. Darb 1718 is his vision, his brainchild, which demanded that he pause his own artwork for a couple of years. The center has only recently started to stand on its own feet. After four years of stamina they are now managing to at least cover most of the expenses, a great success, as everyone who knows what it means to run an independent cultural institution will agree. But this achievement is mentioned only in passing. In fact, things have not only developed but are accelerating greatly, and local as well as international responses to Darb 1718’s recent activities indicate that the ambitious plans to turn it into a cultural hub might come to fruition sooner rather than later.

Knowing how hard the team has worked in the last months, it is astonishing to see them still so avid and energetic. But then Moataz says a sentence like “Darb 1718 is an artwork by itself, it is one of my pieces,” and his dedication and passion for the place and the project flashes brightly in the quiet afternoon.

A few days earlier the place was buzzing with music,



lights and people during the Mawaweel festival, co-organized by Darb 1718 and the Cairo Jazz Club Agency. There was a fair-like atmosphere with Egyptian volume, crafts market, food stalls and Sufi dancers, as well as popular singer Basheer and bands like Massar Egbari, “something enjoyable for everyone,” as the announcement said. It may seem a little random and a little unspecific, but where full-blown white cube lovers raise a skeptical eyebrow the ‘Darb-philosophy’ kicks in, namely to be, first and foremost, an open space and a cultural center that welcomes people from all walks of life. Located in the Fustat area of old Cairo, the center is surrounded by pottery workshops and archeological treasures – but also garbage piles, greasy traces of the omnipresent garages and slums that often puzzle newcomers. When being given directions from the metro station it is useful to be told by someone who has been to Darb 1718 before that you just need to continue walking even when you start to think that you really must have gone the wrong way. The ‘way’

then leads along a street lined with traditional street cafes, traditionally frequented exclusively by men who gaze curiously at the visitors and don’t shy away from commenting. It is not exactly where one would assume an internationally active art and culture center would be. But rather than trying to distance themselves from the neighborhood, the team makes it a point of interest to work with the community, and their engagement is yielding fruit. If a newcomer really gets lost, everyone in the area will point out the direction of Darb 1718. Development is a big part of Darb 1718’s mission as an NGO and luckily much of this is facilitated naturally by sheer vicinity. By-passers are welcome and now and then someone from the ‘hood’ drops in to take a curious look at an exhibition on display.

I fail to ask what those by-passers’ reactions to certain, maybe not so easy to grasp exhibitions are, for example on sexual harassment and other, less approachable, artistic positions. Later I will be told that being exposed to contemporary art and unfamiliar concepts, to raise



curiosity, is the first step towards the awareness and development the team has in mind. But, exactly at this point, a little boy wheezes by pushing a big wheelbarrow, his eyes bright from concentration and effort. I have seen him and a handful of other even smaller children before and was amazed and a little taken aback by how seriously they take their work. It is Reem who answers my unasked question by pointing out that in their community working is not an option, and I feel a little stupid. So they come after school to help out and earn money – and, says Reem, they get involved. They watch, randomly attend activities, and learn. And have perceptibly developed a lot. “We offer new perspectives to the community,” says Reem, and Moataz adds, “we are trying to motivate, to make them ask and come closer.” A few project ideas are in the pipeline that will involve the community more directly and the team is visibly getting excited as they mention this. A lot of the plans are waiting to be implemented at the right time with the right partners. But for now, Darb 1718 is still

in the post-proceedings of a very big, ambitious and likewise successful educational project they have been carrying out over the last few months, which is one of the reasons I am now sitting with them. For a moment, it sounds like the power is back and the air-condition inside sputters back to life. But no one moves yet. They have jumped before, eager to get at least some urgent tasks done, and then, like now, only a few moments later it is quiet again. A cicada can be heard. A bird dives low between the buildings. A mobile phone rings, the intern has a quick question, and casually other team members pass by.

Later on the team will move to somewhere with a slightly more secure power and Internet line for the rest of the day, but for now no one is in a hurry. A moment of rest is well deserved, the past few months have been busy enough. “Mashrou3 Hagar: Art Empowers!” was the first project of this size Darb 1718 carried out, dedicated to women’s empowerment and young visual artists’ education. Yet again it was another



new member of the team, May, who proved to be endowed with enough stamina and clear-sightedness to successfully dig through the endless pages of a European Union funding application that chipped in enough to carry the project through. For the project, women's empowerment associations and cultural centers came together and European artists, experts and curators were invited to hold workshops on specific topics for a chosen group of young Egyptian artists from all kinds of fields. The role of art in women's empowerment, gender equity and human rights, as well as the possibilities for artistic translation of burning issues regarding these themes, were discussed and practiced. Mostly, Darb 1718 wanted to provide the group with practical tools, knowledge and a platform to meet and exchange. It is this environment that they feel is lacking greatly in the educational landscape of Egypt. Hence the emphasis on educational projects is strong and determined and, having lived through it, both Moataz and Reem become agitated when they talk about art Education in Egypt,

which is usually horribly outdated, if not to say very poor. It is not the first time I've heard this and it is not the first time that I've encountered impressive, more or less self-educational, workshops and projects that take place outside the institutionalized system. However, a lot of the energy that has sprung up over the last years resulting in such initiatives is built on deep frustration. "Many artists in Egypt are simply depressed since they cannot depend on what they learn," says Reem – and now it is her time to become passionate and wave bothersome flies away, the real and imagined ones. Artists here depend on workshops, and these workshops they have to either create themselves or at least find. "We are offering an alternative – but it is still the responsibility of the artists to come, to work, and learn." One of the main things that is missing according to Darb 1718, and that they try to provide by means of their projects, is exposure to contemporary art and foreign artists. This opinion is certainly fueled by Moataz' adventurous past and personal ties all over the world,

and when he talks about the necessity to open up, to exchange concepts, to engage with the world outside Egypt as much as with the immediate surrounding, his own experiences as both a traveler and artist resonate. “I was so lucky that the world opened up to me,” he says, obviously reminiscent of the past, and goes on to explain his own philosophy that sees his brainchild and heart child (Darb 1718) as a gift to the next generation, a means to pass on his own experiences. The yellow glow has deepened on the white washed buildings with the rounded roofs that people sometimes compare to Hassan Fathy’s distinct style of architecture, lined up along a lane that leads to the main exhibition space and a green patch. During outdoor performances people sit on the grass and sprawl out on bean bags. Musingly, Moataz gazes towards the entrance of Darb 1718, the entrance to what he envisions to become a hub one day, a place where people come to hang out, learn, practice, where they come to find an art community that creates and exchanges. The entrance is still lacking a signpost since it has been impossible so far to find out who is in charge of allowing them to put one up. The municipalities are busy with other things these days. But these are minor issues and right now the team members are all still high on adrenaline and excitement about “Mashrou3 Hagar: Art Empowers” – the first project of its kind which has proven to be highly successful and gained extremely positive press coverage.

The outcome of the discussions and workshops will be presented as artworks exhibited in three Egyptian cities. However, for the people at Darb 1718, the biggest and most feasible result is the group of 15 mostly young, local artists itself.

Reem’s eyes light up when she uses the word “investment” to explain what it means to the team that the participants grew to be an actively connected collective, eager to expand the whole range of knowledge and experience they received via the workshops, and curious to continue. The participants could be seen meeting up at Darb 1718 even outside scheduled workshops and lectures and thus anticipating the vision of the centre as a cultural hub. “Actually we learned from them too,” adds Reem. Then, Mina Boktor, who handles Darb 1718’s participation in El-Fann Midan (Art is a Public Square), a monthly cultural street festival in Downtown

Cairo, and who has joined us on the porch, throws in that it added a lot to the feeling of sustainability for such kind of place.

I have several personal interests in this project, one of them is that I was one of the curators invited to give a workshop on public space, gender and street art and I remember vividly how impressed we were by the group – we had talked about the concept of gender, among other topics, and were surprised at how ready and willing the participants were to deal with and discuss concepts and theoretical approaches completely new to them. Judith Butler isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, to say the least. But we pride ourselves in thinking that we actually created a specific awareness and, at the same time, managed to provide practical artistic tools to help the many extremely talented participants to implement their ideas. There are workshops or seminars that leave you drained and exhausted, and there are others that excite you and replenish your energy supplies when the potential is, literally, exponentiated.

Talking about this project, however, it is easy to take the bait and be a little provocative. Gender and women’s empowerment, along with the continuously outrageous issue of harassment, is a hot topic nowadays in Egypt, and especially in Cairo. Did Darb 1718 just jump on the wagon? Of course, following what is up to date and engaging with social focal points seems obvious for an institution like Darb 1718.

But then, Moataz, usually the one who keeps a Buddha-like calm when everything around bubbles, holds a flaming speech on the porch about his profound respect and strong belief that the most important element of a healthy society is the wellbeing of women. He does it convincingly while we all watch the reflection of the setting sun on the houses. The speech is convincing because this attitude also ties in with Darb 1718’s already existing and future international exchange and collaboration programs with foreign artists and cultural operators, which aims to make people, especially local artists, who haven’t engaged a lot with the world abroad, realize that there are some issues that are key topics of interest all over the world.

The aim is also to learn about ‘the other’ outside of Egypt. The same goals obviously also apply to the

audience. “We need to open up,” says Moataz, again, and nods in affirmation.

There has been a noticeable trend in Cairo over the past few years of new spaces and projects that seem to see more possibilities, with horizons that open wider than before. There seems to be more ‘inter-disciplinary’ accompanying these more daring ideas.. This might often, but not always, be related to the revolution in 2011 and the boost of energy and creativity it entailed – the sudden awareness of the right to freedom of expression, for example. But, lest this should evolve into the often heard discussion of ‘before’ and ‘after’, it is the question of the local audience that might be especially interesting for a place like Darb 1718 and other spaces that are located, well, not even in the periphery, but simply outside of Downtown, to consider.

Downtown is where things happen, still, and Downtown brims with an energy that keeps attracting and holding up crowds. A usual, Thursday night sees about three different exhibition openings, film screenings and the odd concert happen, which can still be covered easily since most of it takes place in Downtown. Event hopping is something very common on these nights and whole crowds move from one place to the other, a few streets down, like crabs on the beach.

There are traceable decentralizing efforts and also numerous other attempts to establish art and culture places outside Downtown that still also target the very closed ‘Downtown’ community. However, for the usual audience based there, the idea of going a few stops by metro still seems a lot of a hassle apparently, especially when there is an opening in the gallery around the corner. The dream of an open space for art and artists faces the very tangible challenge that they first have to be brought to Darb 1718 And – Darb 1718 is difficult to ‘box’. Since they explicitly invite ‘everyone’ in an effort to avoid elitism and offer such a huge variety of events and projects, Darb 1718’s profile remains a little hazy for some.

Projects like “Mashrou3 Hagar: Art Empowers” helped in defining Darb 1718’s position and orientation, which makes it a lot easier for an audience to get a grasp on the place. Surely by choice more of a cultural center than a gallery and has a specific interest in art that deals with social issues. This adds to its unique and intriguing

character and makes it something that cannot easily be found elsewhere. “You know, the recent events and projects have seen thousands of people passing through,” says May, managing to sound only a tiny bit proud. But to set up the long term projects the team is working on right now, and to pull off a program like we have seen over the last few months at the same time, is something they certainly can be proud of. People have started to notice that there is something happening at Darb 1718. And they come. “And if you come once it’s easy to come again,” says Reem, and her eyes shine bright blue while she makes sure that my voice recorder is functioning so nothing is lost.

Without question there are still things to work on –the exhibitions, maybe? I have seen a few. Some of them could have been given more thought, some weren’t completely convincing. But then I have seen fantastic and highly unsettling works that deserved a bigger audience than the one they attracted –hopefully this will come soon. It is a huge challenge to build up a place like this from scratch. But as has been said before, “things develop” and right now developments have been speeding up immensely.

Beyond and besides the exchange with places and people outside Egypt, the place has an equal interest in collaborations with other art spaces in Cairo. But, to partner up with the established Downtown places in order to target a greater number of people generally interested in art itself is only one aspect. Mutual partnerships, they believe, would likewise allow others to reach out to different communities via Darb 1718. So far the crowd at is different for every event. And this, of course, is also an opportunity.

When asked about future plans, Reem, who is already plotting another big project to carry out at a later time, waves at Moataz. The plans are ambitious. To support the idea of the place we need a platform and meeting point hence a cafe will be built. The artist residency is currently being completed and Moataz dreams about a theater space that looks like an arena. Darb 1718 has a great interest in art in public space and they definitely also want to expand out of Cairo. The community projects in the immediate surrounding will be developed further, but future projects imply local, regional and international involvement.

The tea in our cups has been finished for a while, the power is still not back and the peaceful atmosphere makes it a little difficult to think of leaving. But where Goethe already failed to make the moment linger everyone has to go back to different tasks that range from preparing engagements to accounting. I ask my last question and it dawdles a little in the air before Moataz carefully plucks it and looks at it from different sides. Then he says: “Darb’s ideal audience – well, that is actually really easy to answer. We want to work with and attract the curious people, the ones who want to know and see and learn. That’s it, that’s all for now. And that is already a lot.”

***About the writer***

*Sara-Duana Meyer is a curator, writer, literary scholar and cultural producer currently based between Munich, Germany and Cairo, Egypt.*

*She has taught literature, cultural theory and visual studies at several universities in Germany and India, and has been conducting workshops on various topics. Sara-Duana has worked for and with several cultural institutions and festivals in Europe and the MENA region, most recently a theater festival in Kurdistan/Iraq. Among others she conceived and curated an interdisciplinary festival on freedom of expression in Munich and Cairo in 2011. She is intrigued by interdisciplinary approaches and fascinated by the oscillation of the inbetween. More specifically her work and research interests include art of resistance and art in public space, urbanism and urban culture, global city literature, postcolonialism, gender studies and visual culture. She is a member of the Arts Rights Justice network and Artistic Director of Spring Lessons, an initiative for socio-cultural projects and platform for artistic research which she co-founded in 2011.*