

“A New Way to Look at Art” - Ikono TV

By Isabella Ellalah Hughes

IkonoTV, accessible online, free from commercial breaks and commentary, offers a purely visual experience to interact with art. Its partner, ikonoMenasa, is an innovative HDTV channel that broadcasts in the Middle East, North Africa and some parts of South Asia, presenting a variety of programs that encompasses the entire history of art-ancient through the present, with an emphasis on art from the MENASA region hence transforming the way we interact with art, using accessible mediums of the Internet and television to connect with viewers.

Ikono's main office is Berlin, founded by Elizabeth Markevitch (previously the head of “art fund Artemis”, founder and head of the art advisory department of “J. Henry Schröder” Bank, and senior manager of the paintings department at Sotheby's, Geneva). Markevitch was inspired to found ikonoMenasa after wondering why art was not as popular as music, explaining, “it occurred to me one day that a big difference is that for 100 years music has had the medium of radio to bring it out of the concert hall and into people's homes. I made the parallel that if the Museum is like the concert hall, then the television is like the radio.” A major goal of ikonoMenasa since its launch in November 2010, is to be available 24/7 and broadcasts to 16.5 million households via Arabsat (BADR-5), Etisalat & DU (UAE), and to make art accessible to as broad an audience as possible using the ever-popular and democratic medium of television. With plans to expand the reception to Europe by the end of 2011. Following is a brief Q&A with ikono staff:

IEH: You describe ikonoTV as “a new platform proposing an alternative to museums and galleries – as it goes beyond the limitations of space and time frames”. Can you please explain

ikonoTV: There are two ways of understanding this; First, there are numerous artists' projects remaining unrealized because of a lack of space for the actual size of their work. Second, it is more from a curatorial perspective; as a curator you often face the limitations

given by an institution of how many works you can include, what works can actually travel to which site, how to bring things into context with each other even though their size or content may not work visually when installed on the same wall. All these matters do not apply when you present art on a virtual TV-based medium. We are keenly aware though that TV or the Internet can never replace the actual physical experience of art. But it can serve as a first step – an invitation to learn and see more.

IEH: How do you deal with censorship and sensitive, controversial subjects with ikonoMenasa?

iTV: We strictly follow the guidelines given by our TV channel provider. Of course there is much more art out there than we can ever show. Our platform is for visual pleasure, introducing artists and artworks. And as most artists have a variety of works, we can show those that do not provoke politically. We provoke the eye to explore and we educate the eye, challenging and inspiring.

IEH: Numerous renowned artists have been featured on ikonoMenasa. What strides are you taking to support emerging regional and international artists?,

iTV: We have a team of art historians and artists, some with a background of being born or raised in the region. They are constantly looking for emerging artists and new grass-roots projects, etc. to feature on our channel. We also post an Open Call every few months, attracting younger, lesser-known artists, to submit their work on various themes. Mention that, not only we feature contemporary art, but also we explore old masters and more importantly the impressive collections of Islamic art in museums and collections around the world. On IkonoMenasa there is a heavy emphasis on this aspect- presenting cultural heritage. This we believe compliments the overall educational projects to be found in the museums throughout the region.

IEH: Your new program, “Museums of the World-Collection Highlights” on ikonoMenasa is a timely

topic, particularly with the rampant emphasis on art and culture in the GCC. Was this program designed as a response to the new and future museum projects in the region?

iTV: No it wasn't – but we are of course extremely interested in these developing projects and in collaborating with these institutions. For now we are introducing the major museums of the world featuring a selection of the highlights chosen by their respective directors or senior curators

IEH: “Hidden Treasures,” launching in the fall makes objects in public and private collections, which often are unavailable for public display, accessible. How do you choose the treasures to feature?

iTV: Whenever we produce films, we work closely with the artists and curators. In the case of our “Hidden Treasures” series, it will most likely be both. When showing old masters, it will be the curators and collection managers, for contemporary art, we most likely will talk to the artists as well. The idea behind the program is simple – we show the things, which are not usually on view and so easily accessible. In the case of museums, it is easy to demonstrate: the largest part of most of a museum's collection is in storage and rarely on view. This is where we sometimes unearth the biggest treasures, so we adding a virtual space to what's on view. And there are also a high number of museums with fabulous content, but with very low attendance, due to their collections not being widely known. Even in cities that are known for cultural tourism, for instance, Venice, you can find the most amazing museum collections that are still fairly unheard of to most visitors. In the case of private collections, many are not open to the public. Showing them on TV we hope to inspire other collectors to share and offer insight to others.

IEH: In the past few years there has been globally an influx of art made available online at affordable prices, particularly in the USA and Europe. Is there anything that sets ikonoTV's web-shop apart and makes it distinct?

iTV: There is one aspect which makes our web-shop different and which follows the underlying concept of all we do – making art accessible to the largest possible

audience. Our art is on-demand, which means that it is not exclusive or part of a limited edition. We perceive it as a first step for those that want to live with the art and we make it available to all at an affordable rate.

IEH: Do you have plans to expand ikonoTV with more regionally specific channels, such as Asia, South America?

iTV: We would love to see our channel spreading art films around the globe. We have an Ikono representative working out of Mexico and one in Italy. We are trying to locate digital channels that will pick up satellite signal and spread the content. The more the merrier. But in some cases it may be a case of franchising the films.

IEH: Do you think viewing art via ikonoTV provides for a different viewing experience than viewing art in real-life? How do these two experiences compare?

iTV: The best experience is always when you are face-to-face with an art piece of course, nothing can replace that. What we do can never be considered a replacement. What we do is first of all inviting people to go and look for themselves. And then there are certain aspects which we can offer: in a number of cases visitors to art spaces are often asked not to get too close to the works, in order to protect them. We have the opportunity to avoid this restriction, by focusing in on details, by showing the material and the making of the pieces in close-up. And as we don't do interviews and commentary, we don't tell the viewer what to think.

IEH: You bring up widely cited fact that visitors to the Louvre on average spend only 15 seconds in front of the Mona Lisa, and that there is “a gap between the spectator and the artwork,” explaining that what is missing “is a vital link connecting them and the discovery of the piece.” Isn't this what tour guides and audio guides provide for museum visitors?

iTV: Yes and no – guided tours explain, contextualize and interpret a work. They are informational, a valuable tool. With ikono, the view of the painting is visually curated, if we choose to show two elements contained within a work, edited side by side, we highlight a relationship. We leave the viewer to think about that without interpreting. We don't do that, as what

we do can be seen as an even earlier step: the purely visual exposure to art. Audio guides are confined by words, what we do is different- we take you on a visual exploration right down to the brush strokes. And not everything can be narrated: the material, the paint strokes, the impression of each piece on the spectator – much of what art is about after all.

IEH: Is ikonoTV aimed more towards visitors who can't walk through the doors of these museums and galleries due to time and geographical constraints?

iTV: ikonoTV is targeted to both a mobile audience who can travel to an exhibition, as well as to those who face mobility restrictions. We call it the inside out effect. Art from inside is taken outside, attracting people from outside to go see art inside. While we hope to entice some to go and see for themselves, for those who can't we can bring art to them. We share as much content as we can and leave the rest entirely to the viewer

IEH: In this increasingly digitalized world, where more experiences and life is lived out via an online, virtual experience, or alternately, through television, creating disconnected viewing experiences. Critics, particularly art critics, could argue that ikonoTV is doing a disservice to art, creating another screen barrier between the object and viewer. What is your response to such criticism?

iTV: Why another barrier? We could argue that we do the opposite: we make people aware of what is out there to be looked at and what to go to. It is a fact that a number of people are intimidated by museums, how to look at art and what to do in an art space. So by looking at the art before going to the space, people may feel more familiar, less estranged, as they know what to expect.

Do you see any competition between GoogleArts?

Well, we don't really see it as a competition. If you go on GoogleArts, you already know what you are looking for. You go, look at a piece and then surf elsewhere. On TV you can encounter ikonoTV by chance, when flipping through the channels, or if you look for it specifically, you never know what you are going to see. This is something the internet can't offer. There is a tendency

towards private viewing online – making art isolating and elitist. Ikono wants to achieve the opposite, a vision we share with many artists although they make their living from selling their work, the vision of spreading art into people's homes and becoming an intrinsic part of everyday life. We've had an incredibly positive response from the artists and the art world.

IEH: Where do you see ikonoTV and ikonoMenasa in 10 years from now?

iTV: Ideally in everybody's home, and a place in artists' minds as a platform for exchange and dialogue.

IEH: Are there any plans to go on air in Europe?

iTV: On December 1st of this year, we are launching ikonoTV in Germany, bringing a lot of our Arab content into the new program. We are excited to have this opportunity to bridge the Arab world and Europe through our content, at the moment we are working to find the adequate sponsors for this undertaking.

About Isabella Ellahesh Hughes

Isabella is a independent curator, critic and art and cultural projects consultant with international experience in both the commercial and non-profit art world. She has worked for a variety of museums, art fairs, galleries and cultural organizations in the US, United Arab Emirates and UK and contributes to the journal Contemporary Practices, Persanesque, Brownbook and is the Dubai Editor for ArtAsiaPacific. Hughes has curated exhibitions at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC, the Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, Transformer, Washington, DC. Hughes specializes in contemporary art with an academic interest in the rise of transculture and focus on art from the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific and their respective diaspora. Hughes has a BA in Art History from Boston University and an MA in Museum Studies from Johns Hopkins University. Hughes recently was the keynote speaker, speaking on the subject of contemporary art as an agent of cultural diplomacy for the International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in the USA in May 2011 and has spoken at the University of Hawai'i, Transformer, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, The Fridge and most recently in July 2011, at the Cafesjian Museum.