



Infrastructure and Ideas: Contemporary Art in the Middle East

A two-day Symposium at the Tate Modern and Tate Britain

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Generating unprecedented interest, Infrastructure and Ideas: Contemporary Art in the Middle East brought together artists, curators and writers from across the Middle East and its diaspora in the first such extensive symposium of its kind to take place in the Western world 1. The two day event held at the Tate Britain (22nd January) and Tate Modern (23rd January), was part of an initiative established between six of the UK's major cultural institutions 2 with the aim of developing collections, expertise and partnerships with organisations in Asia and Africa.

The focus of the symposium was to address four challenging issues: How the Middle East is defined, how the interpretation and contextualisation of contemporary art from the region affects its understanding at home and abroad, the conditions under which contemporary art emerged in the Middle East and the impact of new and emerging spaces for the exhibition of modern and contemporary art in the area. This ambitious agenda reflects a growing call in the West for information and expertise in the field of contemporary art from the Middle East, due to shifting relationships post 9/11. The 'A-List' selection of panellists and keynote speakers, from Jack Persekian 3 to Catherine David 4, came together with the symposium's pioneering concept, creating

an environment in which demand and expectations were extremely high. The level of interest however, seemed to have taken the Tate by surprise, to the extent that they had to make use of one of the gallery spaces in lieu of the usual auditorium. Tickets sold out well in advance, leaving many curators and artists, who had travelled from as far as the United States and the UAE, quarrelling with staff for the few remaining seats once the ticketed delegates were ushered in.

Geographer Derek Gregory provided the symposium with an eloquent start. Discussing the geopolitical and Orientalist origins of

1-There have been smaller events, for example held by Canvas at Art Basel, Miami, 2007, as well as Art Dubai: Thinking Cloud, held at the Photographers Gallery, London, 2008 and a panel discussion at Phillips de Pury & Co. auction house, 2008.

2-These include institutions such as the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum (V & A), Natural History Museum, Kew Gardens and the Tate group.

3-Jack Persekian is a curator of art from the Middle East and the artistic director of the 9th Sharjah Biennial.

4-Catherine David is a European based curator whose work focuses on the Middle East.

the modern Middle East through cartographic and visual representations from the late eighteenth century onwards, the proceeding panel expounded upon the theme in relation to Middle Eastern artistic counter-cartography and identity debate. This opening deconstruction of the term 'Middle East', however enlightening, nonetheless overshadowed the following sessions as speakers were reluctant to define the area aloud. Just as Macbeth became Shakespeare's 'Scottish play', the Middle East became the region whose name must not be spoken, creating an ambiguity and invisibility that the symposium was supposedly trying to break down. This initial hurdle seemed to set the tone for the remainder of the event. Although delegates were hugely excited to have the symposium, collecting leading figures together and beginning to address the Western knowledge vacuum, there was a general feeling within the crowd that they were not quite getting what they had paid for.

It soon became apparent that there was significant disunity among the experts, and that the symposium would not be providing answers to the questions posed but instead would serve to highlight the problems involved in facilitating dialogue within the Middle East and between the Middle East and the West, on the artistic platform. The complexity of the between the Middle East and the West, on the artistic platform. The complexity of the debate was in fact a more useful agenda for the symposium. Preparing delegates for the challenges ahead, the current atmosphere of confusion was highlighted in the second session, Writing and Translation. Bringing the issue of cultural translation to the fore, keynote speaker Mourid Barghouti used the misinterpretation of his poem *It is also fine*, on a Western website, to channel the panel's discussion towards the problem of 'reading' artworks for those without the necessary expertise or cultural knowledge. Concern for the way in which this ignorance frequently manifests itself as a 'West and the rest' attitude was addressed by Bidoun's Senior Editor, Negar Azimi, and Editors-in-Chief of the online *NAFAS ART MAGAZINE*, Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, as they attempted to articulate the increased awareness and

promotion of a non-homogenised, non-essentialised Middle East and its art world in the West. Though this issue is certainly being addressed by practitioners in both the Middle East and the West, Beirut based curator Christine Tohme, stressed in a later animated session on day two, her belief that this lack of development and communication is due, in part, to the fact that the same artists and curators who were the 'headliners' fifteen years ago still dominate the field. Therefore, a great deal of work needs to take place, both within the Middle East and the West, if we are to move forward and build meaningful artistic relationships.

On day two the symposium moved to the Tate Modern. With this movement of people came a shift in focus from the theoretical groundwork to the more practical concerns of artists, curators and exhibition spaces themselves. The first session of the day, *Art Now: Recent Exhibitions*, provided a

platform for six artists and curators to discuss recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the Middle East, both at home and abroad. Rather than having a keynote speaker, followed by panel discussion, this session allowed each panellist to speak for fifteen minutes on various exhibitions and projects. This more focused format was well received, however, like the entire symposium,



it was let down by a lack of visuals. Both Room 9 at the Tate Britain and the Starr Auditorium at the Tate Modern were well provisioned with screens, but very few of the speakers chose to illustrate their comments. For example, when artist and curator Khalil Rabah spoke passionately about the unique, community based plans for the third *Riwaq Biennale*, Palestine, a significant contingent of the audience were unable to put the project into context without images of the villages and pieces involved. For an art symposium, consisting to a great extent of a less knowledgeable although eager to learn audience, this kind of visual absence was a significant failing.

Finding a balance between expert and enthusiast and between the Middle East and the West, were clearly difficult issues underlying the whole event. Many of the panellists



have spent the last fifteen years speaking about their work throughout the Middle East and may, therefore, have felt that it was ‘money for old rope’. Explaining the assumption of knowledge and lack of images, this nonetheless left a significant number of the Western audience feeling out of their depth. This is not to say that there were not numerous, highly trained, Western experts in attendance, but, combined with the complete lack of Arabic provision for the other fifty percent of the audience, the divisions in accessibility and understanding were clear. Highlighted again in session four, Tradition and Modernity, the dense content of art historian Salah Hassan’s theoretical discussion on theorizing modernity in the Middle East was in sharp contrast to the user-friendliness of the preceding practical discussion of exhibitions and the closing session, The Politics of Space, which brought to attention emerging exhibition spaces for contemporary art

5-Numerous Iranian galleries have participated in Art Dubai since the inauguration of the art fair in 2007.

from the region, most notably in the United Arab Emirates. The absence of Iran from the symposium’s agenda was also noted.

Given the meteoric rise in interest in contemporary art from Iran, due in no small part to the inroads made by auction houses and galleries into neighbouring Dubai 5, this oversight was somewhat surprising. Similarly lacking was any mention of Turkish art or a dialogue on the place of Israeli art in this arena, both of which would arguably have made for an extremely interesting debate.

I do not, however, wish to end on a negative tone. Although the symposium clearly had its problems, it was an admirable first step by a powerful Western institution to raise numerous key issues from which I hope many future events of this nature will develop and learn. The huge demand for symposia of this kind clearly reflects a cross-cultural willingness for knowledge and collaboration, and as Tate Director Sir Nicholas Serota noted in his closing speech, this was not a beginning or an ending but rather a means of moving the Tate and the West from a ‘safe place’ to the forefront, an essential goal if modern and contemporary art from the Middle East is to broker a meaningful role in the West.