

Galleries Versus Supermarkets

By Omar Donia

This article is a continuation of an article published in Volume 8 of Contemporary Practices Art Journal about art market economics by the same author. This continuation is specifically focused on galleries in the Middle East and aims to critically explore the rise of the 'supermarket' gallery versus the 'true' gallery, which is increasingly becoming extinct in the Middle East where money, as opposed to talent, background and skill, can make anyone a gallerist overnight.

What is a supermarket gallery? In short, it is a gallery that is not run by arts professionals who have studied art history and art business (whether academically or via experience), but by non-specialist groups and individuals who are primarily motivated by economic reasons to start a gallery. Thus, they do not invest properly in the development of their represented artists and generally lack curatorial direction, in turn failing to add substantial worth and projects to the greater narrative of contemporary art.

Please note that this essay expresses my personal, frustrated opinions about many galleries in the region. Although I am the co-founder of Contemporary Practices Art Journal, any views expressed in this article are mine and are not representing the wider publication.

The various criteria mentioned hereunder should serve as a tool to measure the legitimacy of galleries and can be used as a self-test for gallery owners, directors and anyone interacting with a gallery. The goal of this tool is to measure whether a gallery is a 'real' gallery or a thoughtless 'supermarket'. Before moving forward, it is important to outline the key facts from the last decade (2001-2011) in relation to the Middle Eastern art scene and market:

- Regionally, art collecting has become more recognized as an asset class and a good investment, rather than as a primarily decorative object, which was the normal perspective in previous decades in the region.
- Prices can only be commented on in terms of the "wow prices" that pop up, especially every auction season (albeit, often inflated prices); prices of artworks have

grown exponentially more than any other investment tool has in the past decade. Art has increased in value at a similar rate to that of the precious commodities which have experienced over 500%.

- There is growing governmental support for art in the region with the initiation of respectable art fairs, private and public collections and museums (already built or in the pipeline).

What is a gallery?

Due to the growing interest in art in the region, numerous investors and amateur collectors have jumped on the opportunity to capitalize on this growing trend, which any savvy investor would do with a trendy, highly marketable product. But this is just the problem, while art is a commodity, it is undeniable that it is in a class unto itself as rarely is art produced by an artist (except the sellout artists!) with price and economic gain in mind. Generally, art has a breadth and depth to it that warrants its value, aesthetically and conceptually, which makes it unique and different to any other 'product' in the market. But this is another conversation entirely.

Going back to the rise in popularity of art collecting in the region and the economic value of art, which lures many investors into the business, nowadays, every "Jim, Jack and Joe", as aforementioned, with the right resources can become a gallery owner. Moreover, specifically in the Middle East, there is a new breed of uneducated individuals, many of them unnervingly young and without proper training in curatorial work, nor backgrounds in art history, who are self-proclaimed 'curators'. Lastly, given the unanimous support that artists of Middle Eastern origin seem to receive, whether from fellow countrymen or from Western institutions and curators who often neo-orientalize the Middle East, there are a plethora of individuals with ideas, who are experimenting in art, yet call themselves and claim the title of 'artist'.

Personal disclosure: I confess that I had an inclination to do some photography, yet I would never dare to classify

myself as an artist as I have never seriously committed to the art of photography or received any artistic training, whether formal or self-taught. I am just an individual with an idea. Just as one cannot wake up one day and claim that they are a medical physician without proper education, I feel the same should apply to the arts. Of course, in the arts there are some natural talents who do not operate in systems of formal education, earning BFAs and MFAs, but they are rare exceptions to the general rule and in these cases, these self-taught artists are committed and dedicate their time and daily existence to their artistic practice.

All this being said, I find it incredible irksome that most of the people in the regional art business—whether artist, curator, critic, gallery director or specialist in the region—lack even a base knowledge of art theory, have little to no background in art history and rarely visit museums or read publications about art.

Fifteen years ago when I started a banking career in a local bank in the United Arab Emirates, the CEO of the bank was/is a successful gentleman. Once I had the privilege of speaking to him on a friendly basis about his career and he told me that his first job in the bank (which is owned by his family), after earning a graduate degree from a prestigious university in the USA, was as a teller, counting cash. He explained, “like generals in war, they started as soldiers, I had to start from the bottom, to understand each and every process in the bank to ensure that when I am making my decision they are well informed. Generals who don’t feel the pulse of their soldiers are not worthy of commanding them.” Art is no different - whatever role you have in the art world, you need education, experience and dedication, other than, of course (especially in the case of the artist), real talent.

Moving back to galleries, the question remains, what makes a real gallery? In my opinion, there is a set of standards that each gallery should address, which serves as the measuring tool for a gallery’s credibility:

1. Artist they represent: since we are focusing on the art world, looking at the artists a gallery represents is the first criterion. As previously mentioned, there are a lot of artists/semi-artists out there. When choosing to exhibit or represent an artist, a gallery should look at the artist’s profile: what is his/her background, technique, vision

and methodology when choosing the approach to their practice? What international shows has he/she been in and where have they exhibited? Are they showing development over the years or producing carbon copies of the same work year after year? These rigid criteria should be used for mid-career and established artists. For emerging artists with little, if any, exhibition history, their visible talent, artistic training and ability to explain thoughtfully their artistic practice should be used in place of the aforementioned.

** Gallery Question: how many ‘real’ artists do you represent?*

2. Curatorial agenda: a gallery is about promoting art, and a gallery should have a clear vision of their long-term goals and objectives, planning exhibitions with substance, generally planning for at least two years in advance. A two-year timeline is advisable, while of course there may be leeway to make adjustments within the two-year plan. Running a gallery should not be treated as a regular business with a cash-flow process or asset conversion cycle, where you buy and sell merchandise like supermarkets! Nor should curatorial agendas lead them to show only what will sell, over-inflate the prices and pray on wealthy but uneducated collectors to make ends meet by selling artists who lack true substance and talent. Of course, it is clearly understood that at the end of the day, galleries need to pay their bills, yet they must not lose sight of the fact that art is an unusually profound object to consume in the consumption culture, and that selling art should not be merely about raking in a huge profit for the gallery.

** Gallery Question: do you have a two- years plan or you are just working to sell art for profit, without contributing to developing the art movement by showing good artist (not necessarily trendy) and thoughtful curation?*

3. Show write-up and catalogue: some galleries publish decent catalogues, while others just publish brochures, if anything at all, beyond the obligatory artist bio, CV and requisite price list. In my humble opinion, a brochure is good for promoting a take-away restaurant, not for art. Catalogues and substantial text are important to educate viewers about the concept of the show and the

process behind the work. The accompanying texts that should be part of any exhibit, whether in a museum or commercial gallery, should be written by professional art practitioners who have interviewed and/or studied the artist and are able to reflect his/her visual artwork in a clear written format. Some galleries, to save on cost, make their administrative assistant do the job, or even worse they cut and paste from previous catalogues.

*** Gallery Question: what kind of catalogue do you publish for every show? Who writes it? What are the efforts exerted to represent the visual and conceptual aspects behind the artworks in the written word?**

4. Publications: this is an extremely important issue, which differs from the previous point, as publications imply a book or monograph. Regionally, few galleries have the vision to invest in their artists producing strong publications in the shape of very decent books and retrospective publications. This adds to the gallery's credibility both regionally and internationally, and is also important for the artist. Selling the artworks makes a profit for galleries and part of this profit should be re-directed to invest in their artists, for example, via publications. Unfortunately, this practice remains a very sporadic initiative within the region at the moment.

*** Gallery Question: do you regularly publish books and monographs on your artists?**

5. Public collections: usually an artwork, once sold, goes to a private collection that can be seen/enjoyed by a small (exclusive) group of people. Public collections make the artwork accessible to a wider audience in addition to often adding to the reputation of the artist should their work be placed in prominent public collections.

*** Gallery Question: what efforts are you making to place your artists in public collections, especially in reputable museums and foundations?**

6. Art fairs as outreach: it is no secret that art fairs provide exposure for the gallery and the artworks they represent to a massive number of people who might not always have access to the gallery due to geographical constraints, all within a very short period. It is admirable

that some Middle Eastern galleries participate in art fairs internationally, besides the regional fairs. However, when talking to many galleries in the region, they often comment on how they refrain from participating in art fairs due to the cost. This is a very poor answer indeed as it indicates that they perceive art goods in the supermarket treating it as "asset conversion cycle" (buying at x and selling at y and making a margin) treating their galleries as profit & loss centers (a polite way of saying a supermarket).

*** Gallery Question: how many art fairs have you attended in the last five years? How many of them were international?**

7. Auctions: no one can deny the role of auction houses in the art cycle and the economics of the art world. However, it should not be looked at as the sole aim of a gallery to put artworks into auction to set new, higher prices for the artists they represent. Auctions have a value and are an integral part of the art world's infrastructure. Auctions are another vehicle for wide exposure, they serve as a way to document artwork and in theory, although in the Middle East auctions often lead to inflated prices, auctions establish prices and value based on market demand. However, one cannot deny that auctions can be part of the foul practices of galleries who can put forward artworks and inflate the prices exponentially. Such practice should be discouraged, especially when putting very young, emerging artists into auctions at ludicrous prices. As we see now in 2012, market economics are expelling such a bubble-effect in the long term. For example, an Iranian artist who had an artworks reach seven figures USD at auction in 2008, is now selling at a fraction of this price, with many of their works passed-by during the 2011 auctions. It is to be mentioned that this was not the gallery's fault as it was not them who placed the artwork in the auction; rather, it was inflated by a group of collectors who, over time, lost interest. Another very clear example is an Iraqi artist who sold one artwork in 2011 also at a 7 digit USD price, which I personally feel is neither justifiable nor sustainable.

*** Gallery Note: evaluate your efforts with regards to the above mentioned point and be ethical when putting artists you represent into auction.**

8. Open to showcasing experimental and conceptual

art: galleries should not only be focusing on making a profit through solo and group shows. Many art forms, whether installation, performance, film or new media, might not be as marketable as more traditional forms of art, such as painting and sculpture, yet all art ought to be supported by the artistic infrastructure of galleries, even commercial ones. We live in a community that is rapidly changing. The effect of revolutions can already be seen on the practice of many artists from the region, especially within the past year, who are producing work that is profound and full of socio-political commentary, but perhaps not the most 'marketable' in the traditional sense. Showcasing these kinds of works, especially in experimental mediums, which costs money to produce, but often does not have any return, should not dissuade galleries from showcasing these kinds of artworks. To date, very few art spaces have been showcasing experimental work and tackling heavier, critical issues in art. The ONLY good example in the region is "Traffic", which consistently shows experimental and highly charged, critical artworks. and which recently collaborated on a two-site show with another gallery, a surprising positive and highly important move from the side of the commercial gallery. Now we await more galleries to adopt such responsibility.

*** Gallery Question: what have you done with regards to the abovementioned point? If your answer is nothing then start considering an action plan.**

Final Note:

It is worth mentioning that some galleries turn themselves to non-for-profit to apply for grants. Utilizing their connections they usually land themselves with good grants that they claim are used in art. Utilizing my x-banker calculative mind to evaluate expenses versus grant value..... I can easily sense fowl play.

In the end, my opinion about the Middle Eastern region (excluding Turkey) is that there are only a handful of galleries that match the above criteria. I leave it to every gallery to look, evaluate and decide on where they stand. Also leave it those who really want to have longevity, regional and international credibility to never stop developing and improving themselves while remembering to treat artists with respect and integrity.

About the Writer

After many years in corporate finance and private banking, in 2007, Omar Donia co-founded Contemporary Practices Art Journal (www.contemporarypractices.com), a specialized semi-academic art journal concerned with contemporary art in the Middle East, Iran & Turkey, which he oversees the management of through a mandate while being supervised by an international advisory board. Contemporary Practices is the first journal dedicated to art from the Middle East, Iran and Turkey and is published twice a year.