



european cultural foundation

Report of the Mediterranean Reflection Group Meeting

held 3rd and 4th July 2006, ECF Amsterdam

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The arts field is a fruitful venue for any type of encounter, because it is the most difficult field in which to put closures. In the arts field unsettling processes take place, prompted by political and social developments, because artists are often IN, but not PART OF those developments. [Ayse Caglar - Turkey]

Introduction

- What are the main factors – both political and cultural – influencing the process of Euro-Mediterranean cultural cooperation in the field of contemporary arts?
 - How can we avoid the smoke-curtain made up of: political correctness, buzz words and the lack of knowledge (of the other and of the conditions in which the other operates)?
 - Which mechanisms could be developed to improve and increase cooperation in the field of artistic contemporary creation?

These were the main questions around which the discussions held in Amsterdam revolved. And after one and a half days of reflection, the recommendations proposed to counteract the problems hampering open and flexible cultural cooperation, were as lucid as they are practical.

This report is not the minutes of the meeting held at the ECF on 3 & 4 July, but rather highlights the main comments made and the recommendations which crossed the table. Not all comments raised by each participant are included here, to avoid a too exhaustive text and the danger of repetition. Neither have we chosen to link comments to speakers (who said what). Only a few participants are mentioned by name when they are specifically quoted.

The report is structured around thematic clusters. Because the discourse was so rich, yet several topics were revisited more than once, we have attempted to streamline somewhat and to gather all comments under appropriate headings.

A word on terminology: For the sake of simplicity we opted to use the term “cross-Mediterranean”, or “Euro-Med” cooperation, to denote cooperation between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Some participants preferred other denotations such as the Arab World, the Arab region, or MENA. Therefore the terminology used in this report reflects the diversity displayed during the meeting.

It remains to be seen, in the framework of the further development of the Reflection Group process and in the context of recent political developments in the Middle East, how and to what extent the European Cultural Foundation and the Reflection Group members can follow up on the concrete suggestions listed above. At any rate the meeting has provided us with enough food for thought to plan and realise further meetings and to explore possible funding lines for some of the actions that require attention.

We should constantly keep in mind that we are in a process of ongoing *change*, political (post 9/11) and societal. [Basma EL Hussein - Egypt]

Thematic clusters

1. Re-definitions and re-orientations
2. Perceptions of the other
3. The local context
4. Audiences and outreach
5. Culture, society and politics
6. Cultural policy
7. Tools and models

1. Re-definitions and re-orientations

Cultural cooperation between the countries of Europe and the countries of the Arab World, or the Mediterranean region, is often hampered by artificially defined policies, the use of artificial definitions, artificial demarcation lines and artificial (geographical) orientations.

It is necessary to redefine the way cooperation is organised. We need to find the themes that can inspire new patterns (geographical and other), to allow for new and additional **alternative orientations**. EU and member state funding should allow for other constellations that it does currently; e.g. European institutions should be open to fund projects in which Arab countries do not necessarily have to cooperate with European countries (why not with African, or Asian?). Western funders should better take the agendas of the organisations they want to fund into consideration. This would provide “air” in terms of collaboration.

Other infrastructural re-orientations are also required in this era of ongoing change. Exploring new, alternative ways of financing culture, for example, such as the Turkish model of private investment, could also be seen as a new orientation.

Furthermore, in the South, cultural operators tend to feel that they always have to defend themselves in the face of outsiders. Sometimes the Med region is seen to comprise one group – the Arab (Islamic) world - whereas the diversity inside each society is great. This can lead to a schizophrenic type of situation. The categories “Islam” or “Arab” can hijack whole conversations. What about what slips through the net? Defining entities can be artificial and people feel pressed between definitions that they cannot relate to. Using these definitions too often, in fact, canonizes them.

The prevalent dominance of stereotypes and preconceptions similarly requires a process of redefinition and re-orientation in the way both sides of the Mediterranean perceive each other.

2. Perceptions of the other

Are we encountering a new form of orientalism? [Odile Chenal - Netherlands]
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How can the Arab world limit being the “case in question”? Again and again cultural operators from the South are invited to describe their situation and discuss THE problem. There is a sense of fatigue here. To what extent is cultural cooperation affected by the actual current situation in the Mediterranean countries? Is there enough consciousness of the fact that the local contexts are (politically) different in each country and that the nature and pace of change is different also? If there were no Iraqi or Palestinian situations, would the Arab world be perceived differently? Would this affect the way the EU deals with the region? Would we see a different type of project being developed? More questions arise locally, such as: Are we interesting enough culturally? Are we loved for who we are, or just because we are the “case in question”?

What do audiences, curators and programmers actually expect when they look at contemporary art in the Arab world? Do they expect something different? What if it is not different? Are they looking for something exotic? Because we all know how ephemeral the exotic is in this media-driven age; orientalism can become 'en vogue' in a matter of no time.

Cultural operators from both sides should urgently **define common ground**. The chances are that one probably has more in common with someone from the same professional field from abroad, than one does with someone from the countryside in one's own country.

Now, in the age of globalisation, there is no "inside" and "outside" anymore. The space has changed. [Pierre Abi Saab – Lebanon]

Yet, unprepared curators still come, take artists away and put them, unprepared, into unprepared contexts, just because the Arab world has become fashionable. Curators use fashionable Arab arts to make the fashionable machine work in Europe. This situation highlights the dichotomy between *export* and real *cooperation*.

To the question, however, as to whether there is a difference in the way Western funded contemporary art from the Arab world is made and received when it is shown at home, or when it is shown abroad, it was not the "unprepared context" or the "unprepared curator" that determined the difference, but rather the aspect of censorship.

Artists have to start looking at themselves (internalising the Western gaze) and focusing on certain aspects of their identity, in the context of perceptions from inside and from outside. There is a field of tension here. Often an aspect of one's identity is exploited, if it can market one better. But to ensure that the Arab world does not become a shopping centre for Western curators, artists must become stronger and reflect on their identity and that of Arab contemporary art.

➤ **Possible theme for future reflection group meeting:** Discussion on the identity of Arab contemporary art. Does such an identity exist at all? Or would this be artificial? What are valid contemporary art practices in the region today?

3. The local context

Outsiders are unprepared when they come to the Arab world and therefore do not know the context. In some cases, they even disrespect the context. There are also misunderstandings in what one expects from the other. There are too many misinterpretations and clichés. A major task now lies ahead in helping to overcome these and to increase knowledge of the local context and to recognise the differences between individual countries. NGOs have a huge responsibility here. Local NGOs should develop a web of relations with their local communities and between themselves to point Western donors and partners in the right direction, so that the Western donors themselves do not have to reinvent the wheel and become "explorers" over and over again. All the more so, because international NGOs and donors are dependent on the agendas made by their own governing bodies and can sometimes be blind to reality because of this. They come and seek only what they are looking for.

The embassies of the EU member states could also play a more active role in leaving the capitals and seeking out what is going on in the country and with whom EU organisations could work.

Often cooperation is restricted to cooperation with the foreign institutes in the country. This leads to a dependency on them. What does cultural cooperation really mean? With whom do we cooperate? [Ola Khalidi – Jordan]

There tends to be a fear in the EU to work in the Arab world. European NGOs do not want to put their partners in difficult or compromising positions. EU organisations do not know how censorship works and are afraid to make mistakes.

Very often new contemporary art forms (e.g. installations) are imposed on local audiences when these are not at all prepared to receive them, or when the art forms do not “fit” into the local context. Intercultural cooperation should be *really* intercultural, so that production matches audience.

- **Recommendation:** Draw up a charter (or a regulation / code of good governance) for donors and operators from outside the Mediterranean region, listing the expectations of the local NGOs vis-à-vis donors and programmers;
- **Recommendation:** Make rigorous objective reports of the local contexts in which cultural operators have to work for every Mediterranean country;

4. Audiences and outreach

Who are we actually working for? Do we want to reach a wider audience? We are not communicating enough with new audiences. Cooperation usually takes place between the same communities on both sides (the usual suspects) and with the one same audience on the inside. This is OK, as long as they are valid, but we must keep the door open for newcomers, on both sides.

We have the responsibility to take 20-30% of our work to the wider audience, OR to integrate their culture into our work. [Adila Laidi - Palestine]

There is a current problem of content, style and codes. The content of much contemporary art presupposes a certain level of culture. Often it is too intellectual for the masses. The style is (aesthetically) too modern – reflective, ironic, post-modern, minimalist etc. Who prescribes to this? What we offer in terms of style is alien to the public. Arab contemporary artists tend to work in nice neighbourhoods for people who are able to buy tickets and know how to conduct themselves properly in the auditorium. Because the school system does not teach people how to question, contemporary artists should work on **validating the experience** of the uneducated, as well as validating their cultural codes and narrative in the art works. NB! We must not forget that much of the population in the Arab World is illiterate.

In a country as the Netherlands there are several modern, interesting models of reaching out and going to areas where the people are (cf *Cool politics*, or *Street Lab*). However, in the EU organisations have the necessary tools to do so. To connect to the masses you

need access to the media and this is not a given in much of the Arab world. You need to know how to engage with the other.

It is religion and not “citizenship” that is primarily defining groups and binding people. Therefore it is necessary to start engaging with organizations in other sectors to be able to reach hitherto closed and new groups. Youth clubs and societies, for example, need to be explored because they have large, faithful audiences; or the development NGOs in the region etc. These people may belong to the same elite, but they tackle different audiences (on the margins of the masses).

There are 4 major players in the cultural production process; the artist; the producer; the programmer/curator; the audience (and maybe a fifth - the buyer). A major responsibility to mediate between art and audience is the curator/programmer. He is the formulator of new trends and movements in cultural cooperation.

➤ **Possible theme for future reflection group meeting:** The relationship artists/curators/(international) donors/audiences and the responsibility of the curator to mediate in cultural cooperation.

5. Culture, society and politics

The rise of liberalism is one of the most important questions today, more so than the rise of other determining factors. [Sofyane Hadjadj – Algeria]

A major question is the *place* of culture in society. What is the role of the cultural actor? After times of war or change, a new social context emerges. There is a re-composition of societies. How should the cultural sector operate in this new context? What is the position of each individual country (social context) vis-à-vis the rest of the Arab world? Exploration is required here.

Another crucial question is how the Mediterranean countries are becoming “markets” (akin to the Gulf states). Culture does not seem to be a market to the same level as energy for example. But still Europe is buying up art in the same way as the American curators came and bought Picasso and Monet in Europe. Determining factors are those of supply and demand.

How is the older state/non-state dichotomy in the Arab world affected by the ongoing change (both environments are changing, in the North and in the South)? The cultural sector should consider the role of the state and define its position vis-à-vis state mechanisms. With this ongoing change and with liberalism, that which is non-state now requires **new legitimisation**. Non-state organisations are assuming a new “gate-keeper” function for cultural cooperation. In Turkey the state often works through the NGOs. This is the spirit of the times (a spirit of public/private partnerships) etc. Turkish NGOs are becoming the new gate-keepers. Yet in most Mediterranean counties (save in Palestine and Iraq) there is no legislation governing the set up, regulation and financing of NGOs. Such regulations are important for NGOs to be able to have some impact. What is their status now? Are they WAQF (state controlled)? This is unclear. Structures must be modernised so that a better equilibrium is reached between state and non state.

Foundations and NGOs should establish strong relationships now between themselves, and with their partners from the North, so that these alliances will be prepared when change comes. The artist has the responsibility to start preparing an alternative space in which NGOs and citizens can express themselves (like a citizens' forum). Very important is that artists need to be provocative.

Yet, however difficult the state may be to work with, the sector has a responsibility to preserve society's public services. Partners from the North can be allies in helping to get certain things done, which may not be possible locally. But, these partnerships should not exist to substitute, but to complement.

There is a responsibility of NGOs to open and maintain a dialogue with their Ministries of Culture. The near future should explore how to go about this.

➤ **Possible theme for future reflection group meeting:** Position of the cultural sector vis-à-vis the state and the market

6. Cultural policy

Cultural operators in the Arab world have not yet paid enough attention to developing “**influential cultural agendas**”, inside or outside the region, which influence funding programmes or cultural programming. They need to be given a platform for this. This is necessary when one considers that most countries in the Mediterranean region (save Palestine) do not have a transparently defined cultural policy in the conventional sense of the word. Furthermore, there is a problem of access to statistics.

For many it remains a mystery as to how EU or member state policies, and even foundations' policies on cultural cooperation with the Arab world are actually conceived, in the light of the above ignorance of the real situation / local context. This is even reflected in the contrasts in use of language. On the one hand we have the hard political language used for border and security issues. On the other hand we have the open, softer, family language of the “neighbourhood policy” (a nice relationship of trust and hospitality - at a distance, but not too close). But precisely because the EU has a clear political agenda (Barcelona agreement) that is translated into all cultural programmes, it is necessary to keep putting pressure on the EU to make this political agenda *relevant* (e.g. working on connecting lines between the Arab World and the Arab diaspora in Europe).

The relationship with the EU institutions and the Anna Lindh Foundation in particular, is particularly problematic for many cultural operators and the gap is ever growing between these institutions and the sector in the Arab world, but this does not mean that paths to cooperate should be avoided. The cultural sector must urge the larger policy making and funding platforms that the relationship with the sector should be an equal one.

- **Recommendation:** Draw up a feedback document to send to Anna Lindh Foundation
- **Recommendation:** Develop, not a manifesto, but an update for the sector on both sides of the Mediterranean, on pressing issues that need to be tackled and enumerating all the difficulties in which cultural operators have to work;

- **Recommendation:** Set up budget watches, monitoring what is spent on culture in each country.

7. Tools and models

Several tools were identified that would improve mutual understanding and facilitate cooperation. These ranged from mobility schemes and cultural policy and contextual comparisons to the creation of databases

In reality there is a selected, filtered mobility. The role of the gate-keepers is reinforced here. Who is allowed to move? Who controls this movement? EU neighbourhood policy revolves around the principle of 'we come to you. We keep you there in place. We cooperate with you but the borders will be closed ever tighter'.

What is the position of Turkey in cross-med cooperation? Could Turkey be an interesting model on various fronts? There are benefits in exploring other, and in particular - the Turkish model of private/NGO partnerships, and the system of private funding for culture and the arts.

If you valorise private funding of culture too much, you relieve the state from its responsibility, and they will be very much "relieved" by this. The two should be developed simultaneously. [Ayse Caglar - Turkey]

- **Possible theme for future reflection group meeting:** Turkey and its position in Euro-med cooperation

- **Recommendation:** Create a database, or liaise the already existing local and international databases of relevant players in the contemporary arts field;
- **Recommendation:** Develop a clearing house, or matchmaking function for partner search to facilitate knowledge of the other;
- **Recommendation:** Develop new mobility schemes (including residencies) that facilitate North-South movement (sending EU operators to the South to get to know the environment better);
- **Recommendation:** Increased capacity development projects for the region.