



european cultural foundation

Of Different Voice – Of Different Eye: Reciprocal Collaborative Gestures

Nat Muller

In her introductory essay “The Collaborative Turn” for the publication *Taking The Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, curator Maria Lind writes:

Often positive values such as loyalty, the ability to change, altruism and solidarity are baked into the concept of collaboration. At the same time, collaboration can stand for the opposite, for treachery and ethical irregularities. A collaborator can be a blackleg, a traitor, someone serving the enemy and who is therefore not trustworthy...That is why it is worth recalling that communication and collaboration can be just as efficient as smoke screens as they might be methods that generate generosity and solidarity. (29)ⁱ

If these tensions are at play within the contemporary art world, then the same power dynamics are heightened in the field of cross-Mediterranean cooperation. When the region is variously clumped together as the “Middle East”, “MENA” (Middle East and North Africa), the “Arab world”, “Mediterranean rim” – either for practical purposes or for ideological reasons not completely devoid of neo-orientalist premises – the question arises as to how one is to map the state of affairs in a region that defies rigid geographical, religious, ethnic and cultural categorisation. Moreover, how can meaningful and horizontal artistic exchange on equal footing take place when scars from colonial pasts still mark the political and emotional landscape. How is such cooperation hindered when mutual projections and prejudices can taint perspectives, when technical and financial infrastructure, education and professionalisation and reciprocal mobility (the capacity of both parties to travel to one another’s countries) might hamper projects, when a convoluted relationship with the state might become a straightjacket for censorship, when freedoms are curtailed or other agendas pushed to the forefront.

Following these concerns, it is useful to recall Egyptian filmmaker Yousri Nasrallah’s position, which advocates insight rather than mutual understanding. “Insight” forms a solid basis for artistic practice, while “mutual understanding” might steer the whole thing towards an exercise in semantics. Artistic collaborations should not proceed from some abstract (or concrete) post-modern curiosity to “know” the Other – which can result in one imagining knowing what’s best for the Other – or an effort to alleviate post-colonial guilt. The motor for fruitful artistic collaborations ought to be the premise “that it has to result in something that would otherwise not take place; it simply has to make possible

that which is otherwise impossible.”ⁱⁱⁱ (p.29). In this sense, a fruitful collaboration should be able to safeguard the singularity and autonomy of the artistic project, not always strive for consensus, but in its own way allow for a different voice to speak and a different eye to see – a voice that is not necessarily speaking our tongue, an eye that does not necessarily share our vision.

In the past few years, Europe has seen quite a few exhibitions focussing on contemporary art from the “Middle East”. The most well-known are Catherine David’s project “Contemporary Arab Representations” (1998-2006, covering Beirut/Lebanon, Cairo/Egypt, Iraq); “DisORIENTATION” (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2003); “Images of the Middle East” (Copenhagen, 2006); “Arabise Me” (V&A, London, 2006), and “In Focus” curated by Predrag Pajdic (London, 2007), and Catherine David’s recent “Di/Visions” (2007-2008). Like the large Balkan exhibitions held at the end of the 90’s and at the beginning of the Millennium, these large regional exhibitions serve to introduce the public to contemporary artistic production from the region, and aim to contextualise the work through lectures, debates, and film screenings. Unlike the Balkan exhibitions, though, is the reality of the post-9/11 world. With xenophobia and islamophobia steadily on the rise, the perceptual and representational stakes are higher and more charged.

While these projects have their merits, their very scale and points of departure encapsulate their flaws. Too big and comprehensive to make a strong artistic statement, they homogenise the region’s cultural production rather than representing its diversity. In addition, heavily curated exhibitions are easily perceived to be representative of artistic production of a particular scene, whilst in fact they merely show a selection, dependent on the curator’s personal contacts and tastes. Intentional or not, one by-product of a “representative” approach is the creation of a canon. In the context of collaboration, this means some cultural actors, disciplines and artists are privileged, while others are neglected.

These are not collaborative exhibitions. The gesture is unilateral, not reciprocal. Art from the region is brought to Europe and the point of departure – the pre-conditioned gaze, if you like – is one of Otherness. Often particular topics are stressed, such as the position of women, (the lack of) democracy, and Islamic iconography. Such shows can thus institutionalise what they aim to critique, and become neo-orientalist bazaars, where the goods become indistinguishable because they are all exotic. Such exhibitions do not necessarily reinforce individual subject positions, but tend to erase individuality in favour of an “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” collective identity. Perhaps these exhibitions are a necessary evil, yet if we want to lay out conditions for working together, we have to look beyond identitarian markers of ethnicity, politics and geography.

On the other side of the spectrum there are ventures operating more within an international art discourse, such as the Istanbul Biennial (TR), the Sharjah Biennial (UAE) – held since 1993 it has risen to international acclaim since 2005, under direction of Jerusalem-based curator Jack Persekian – and Art Dubai – launched in 2007 as the Gulf’s first contemporary art fair, including galleries from the Middle East, Asia, Europe, North and South America, North Africa and Australia. Of lesser fame, but deserving a mention, are the Cairo Biennial and Ramallah’s Riwaq Biennial. The biennial and art fair format is such that, in and of themselves, they become a new locus for art enclosed within the biennial exhibition grounds, not necessarily relating to their incidental geographical context. This is the so-called biennial bubble effect: by definition globalised art events catering to a steady stream of international art travellers. However, one

cannot deny that increased exposure of artists from MENA worldwide, and the fact that Istanbul, Sharjah and Dubai host these events, has an impact.ⁱⁱⁱ

Locality and situatedness also entails constraints. In the art world, and in cross-Mediterranean collaborations in particular, there have been many projects trying to grapple with the dynamics of space and territory. This is not unsurprising in a time and region where territory is so contested – whether under occupation, torn by war, exploited for resources, gentrified, zoned or commodified. Motley crews of artists, architects, urbanists and critical thinkers have become the new cartographers of the real, taking rural areas, cities, public spaces (or the lack thereof), active citizenship, and urban crisis as subjects. The German-Palestinian-Israeli partnership “Liminal Spaces”^{iv} (2006-2007) provides one example. In approaching the hard realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by “examining notions of urban spaces, borders, mental and physical segregation, cultural territories and the possibilities of art within political frameworks” the project has literally taken the fieldtrip as fieldwork. Israeli, Palestinian and international artists, academics and activists took part in two such trips – one in 2006, focusing on the area around the separation wall (Qalandia, Jerusalem, Ramallah), another in 2007, focusing on the mixed cities within the Israeli Green Line (Lod, Ramle, Jaffa). Apart from “generat[ing] active participation of the art sector in developing modes of expression against the political status quo of occupation, dehumanization and oppression”,^v, this project also raises interesting questions on the position of art vis-à-vis activism and politics. Exclusive because of the limited number of participants, these projects are important for the production of new critical discourses generated in their aftermath.

The Italian Cultural Lab aMAZE^{vi}, has for years been active in researching the socio-politics of territory, flows of migration and the intricacies of Mediterranean urban centres in various projects with partners in Turkey, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and Cyprus. Their latest project, “Communities & Territories/ Beirut” (November 2007), in collaboration with the American University in Beirut, Heinrich Boll Foundation and CLAC (Haret Hreik) was mainly directed towards young artists and students, setting out to examine how public space is made and used in a city like Beirut, by means of art, architecture and culture. This project is not unlike the “Unbuilt Beirut” project, conducted by 3 Dutch partners Archis, Partizan Publik, Pearl Foundation and Lebanon’s Studio Beirut. It addressed a similar audience but was more geared to Beirut’s reconstruction and visions for the future after Israel’s summer 2006 war on Lebanon. With all respect to the well-intentioned organisers, one does have to wonder at the heightened interest in Lebanon after the 2006 summer war. True, Beirut has been prominent on the regional and international art radar in the past few years, due to visionary artists like Akram Zaatari, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, Walid Raad, Khalil Joreige & Joanna Hadjithomas, Nadine Touma, and the efforts of the Lebanese Association of Plastic Arts Ashkal Alwan^{vii}, directed by Christine Tohme. In particular the Home Works forum (2002, 2003, 2005), has become an event of international stature, whilst keeping local interests close to heart. Still, I find it hard to shake the impression that the spectacle of war has made (post-)war zones sexy and intriguing to European cultural actors, and that European partners jump into projects too easily, or hopscotch from one conflict zone to the other.

This raises urgent questions about sustainability and long-term partnerships. Indeed, real reconstruction, and genuine vested interest, starts once the media attention has waned. Funders bear responsibility here, too. Although badly needed, it may be unwise to hastily and uncritically funnel finances towards projects producing “war art”. Reflection on trauma takes time, and forcing an immediate creative response does not necessarily

produce interesting content. For over a decade, Lebanese artists have been dealing with the ghosts of previous wars, stubborn to excavate personal and collective memory, to share narratives that are like sediment in the rubble of destroyed buildings. A cautious and investigative relationship with the medium is expressed in this work. However, Beirut has only recently become a hotspot. Palestinian artists are naturally dealing with the politics of dispossession, the hardships of occupation, issues of national identity and their desire for a Palestinian homeland. But a 60 year-old conflict is old news, which may be why we don't see a mass invasion of international curators into Palestine.

Critical reservations aside, collaboration is first and foremost a gesture – if not an act – of reciprocity. Unfortunately, in the era of Fortress Europe, such reciprocity is rare, and hospitality is not always returned. In past years, international artists have had the opportunity to travel and make temporary homes through residency programmes in the region. Cairo's Townhouse Gallery, Amman's Makan House of Expression and Darat al Funun, Jerusalem's Al Mamal Foundation, Istanbul's Platform Garanti and Santral Istanbul, Zico House in Beirut, and the International Artist Workshop (sponsored by Triangle Arts and held in Aley, Lebanon in 2004 and Shatana, Jordan in 2007) all provide prominent examples.

Residency programmes are integral to exchanging ideas, producing contextual and site-specific work, and finding peers with whom to work. There seems to be a great imbalance in mobility, however. There is a great deal of movement East, but very little West. Europe's closed-door policy and rigid immigration regulations are stifling fruitful cultural exchange. To my knowledge, Switzerland's Pro Helvetia is one of the few bodies actively and specifically offering residency opportunities to artists from the Middle East. It is my hope that other countries will follow suit, so that European cultural production, can be quizzed too, and momentarily produced with a different eye, expressed with a different voice.

ⁱ Lind, Maria. "The Collaborative Turn". *Taking The Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*. Eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, Lars Nilsson. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007. p.15-31.

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ The scope of this article does not allow me the space to elaborate, yet the impact and significance of a magazine like *Bidoun* deserves a mention. Founded in 2004 by German-Palestinian Alia Rayyan and American-Iranian Lisa Farjam, *Bidoun* has over the years become a very important resource and discursive platform tying arts and cultural in the Middle East to wider debates within contemporary art. With contributors and editors across the globe, they cater to an audience that goes well beyond the Anglophone, cosmopolitan, diasporic Middle East. In format as in content *Bidoun* is challenging, and has – yes! - become a printed space for various surprising collaborations. Cfr. www.bidoun.com

^{iv} Cfr. <http://www.liminalspaces.org>

^v Cfr. http://liminalspaces.org/?page_id=50/

^{vi} Cfr. <http://www.amaze.it/>

^{vii} Cfr. <http://www.ashkalalwan.org/>